

Patreon (01/March/2025 - 04/April/2023)

[Questions from February](#)

[21 hours ago](#)

Hi, first of all, sorry, the revamp is not done yet. Also working on a website, so there is some overlap. Some goodish news, my mother has her surgery scheduled finally at the beginning of April. A 10 hour operation, so it's a huge thing. Here's to hoping it goes well, but at least we'll know more then. Right now I'm in a holding pattern trying not to spiral, because let's face it, I'm doing well compared to everyone around me. Seems like 2025 will be a year we all need to survive, rather than thrive in. My absolute gratitude to everyone, this too will pass, and I will be back to writing long and interesting updates and demos again. I'm still writing, it's just sticking things together in a coherent form that's tough, it's beginning to turn into the world's biggest pile of pages that just needs all the filler material in there.

...

What is the difference between a psychic and a telepath aside from what we know in game? I remember Heartbreak causing mental/physical pressure from vast distances so it esoteric like telepathy or are the lines blurred for the farm?

It is a bit of taxonomy where the lines blur. Technically, a psychic is a collective term for everyone who has some form of psychic abilities such as telepathy, empathy, clairvoyance, psychometry and so on. However, in practice, the term is used for people with low-grade and less specific abilities. If we use boost terms, they would be gamma and delta level boosts. If someone can read thoughts clearly enough, they would be called a telepath instead, while the person relying on hunches would be a psychic even if they would come to the same conclusion on, let's say the classical "what card am I looking at" test. Some dislike the term, as it says more about the appearance of function rather than the facts behind it. A bit like the "bird of prey" category makes it seem like falcons are related to hawks while in reality they are more related to parrots.

First off I hope everything is going well, life's been kicking the shit out of me for weeks now. You said that HG is a coward before, what would their reaction & opinion be of someone demonstrating how wildly outclassed they are in comparison mentally? For instance someone forcing them to kneel with a absent minded thought because they are annoyed.

Yeah, I feel like the world is out to kick the shit out of everyone this year. I hope things will ease up for you, I'm currently in a holding pattern, which is positive I suppose as there's nothing new. And hmmm interesting question about HG. How would they behave? I think above all they are a realist. If they are outnumbered/overpowered that's something they need to adapt to and plot revenge later. HG's powers are subtle, and I suppose one could say the same for their personality.

In a previous QnA, you implied that Sidestep was resistant/immune to having their mind scrubbed by the SD. Which sparked a few questions from me with followups of their own. So apologies in advance since this is probably going to be very long winded.

No worries! I like answering questions... as long as they aren't too spoilery.

Argent's nanovores are described to be biting and nipping at sidestep in respond to certain intrusion attempts. Is that something all nanovores do in response, or is that unique to Argent's?

I would say that is unique to Argent's. Sidestep didn't recognize that mental presence as nanovores, it felt quite different from the swarm they stopped.

If it's not unique, were the bots during the nanosurge eating and tearing away at Sidestep's mind, as well? Perhaps similar to what happened to Sidestep's mind when the farm left it in a worse state than their body?

No, the swarm felt more like an avalanche. That might in part be due to the sheer size of the swarm of course, but it was more unending pressure and Sidestep doing their best to hold it steady. Like stopping something heavy from sliding down a slope. In comparison, Argent's nanovores felt more like bees or nippy little chihuahuas. It is quite different from what happened at the swarm, at least in the way a turn off limb is different from a cut off one.

You also mentioned before that Steel noticed Sidestep was still off even months after the nanosurge. Would that be because Sidestep's mind was in the process of repairing itself from such an attack by the bots? Like the way it was able to repair itself after the farm destroyed their mind. Did Sidestep have such a protected mind before the nanosurge, or was that a result from the TBR?

Chen noticed the difference due to several things. The first was that Sidestep's mind was still healing, overly sensitive to stimulation, migraines, a bit like recovering after a bad concussion. I would say that this was the first time Sidestep's mind had been subjected to that particular pressure/damage/strain, and a lot of the techniques learned during that rehabilitation would come in useful later. That being said, Sidestep had an unusually "aware" mind from the moment the first memories were implanted, possibly because of telepathic connections during pre-decating meaning that the mind was not empty but already jumpstarted. So that awareness of a "mind" as an entity in itself helped developing strategies to protect against things like this. The Traumatic Boost Response from the nanosurge heightened the power and reach of Sidestep, it didn't fundamentally alter their powers or resilience of their mind. The main

reason Chen thought Sidestep felt "off" though was that their telepathic powers were more powerful now, and they hadn't got the shields up yet. So they were avoiding people even more than usual, answering to unsaid questions, and generally being strange and skittish.

When Sidestep is talking with Mortum about Shroud and what she can do to people's minds, a Ruthless Sidestep may believe they can do the same or something similar. However, so far, they haven't needed to go all out and attack a person telepathically at such a level. If a Ruthless Sidestep, at the end of Retribution, were to unleash their full telepathic power on someone's mind without holding back, solely aiming to cause maximum damage, how severe would the mental destruction be? Additionally, how would this compare to the level of damage Sidestep could inflict at the end of Rebirth?

If Sidestep tried to, they could wipe most people's minds to the point of causing amnesia and a coma, even death. They already use a variant of this if they try to "eat" Carter's memories during the opening chapters. All that's missing is practice, and the fact that Sidestep really doesn't want more memories that's not their own in there. A Sidestep at the end of Retribution could inflict more damage than at the end of Rebirth, but the difference wouldn't be huge. The "growth" of power in Rebirth is an artificial game-related thing to judge how Sidestep use their powers. Subtle? Forceful? Often? Rarely? So technically Sidestep has similar values at the start of Rebirth as they do at the end, it just doesn't show in the stats yet, hence the difficulty levels are also lower. I think the greatest change to the end of Retribution is scope. Number and distance.

One very important aspect of the romance with Argent is how much she enjoys fighting and the fun she has when facing Sidestep. This is evident in the lore post Bad Day. Good Day, which is from Argent's perspective. While fighting Sidestep, she admits to herself that she hasn't had this much fun in a long time and that she wants to continue that fight and experience those feelings again. Given how much she enjoys fighting with Sidestep, if a Soft Argent is allied with them, would they continue fighting each other for fun, such as through sparring and training together? Would Argent be the first to suggest it, or would Sidestep have to take the initiative?

Oh Argent would suggest it! It's really awkward to keep explaining how she is so bad at fighting the villain that she's not been able to capture them after this many fights. She doesn't want to come off as a chump. Besides, they'd both be better off for it.

I know we get to decide how was/is our relationship with tía Elena but can we pretty please have as an option "basically adopted child" ? I love the idea of mama Ortega being a enormous soft spot for Step since it's the closest they got to having a loving mother.

Oh yeah, in some paths that's essentially it.

About the motivations/endings, are there some routes where Steps accepted their death as part of their end goal or is this headcannon? Asking because it kinda makes sense for some Steps to have that "it would only end if I erase everything Farm related.. including me" mentality but I'm unsure if I'm leaping too far away with this. In the case I'm not, is it possible to change opinions midway? Like actually wanting to live at the end of book 3 or 4 ?

I don't think you're leaping too far ahead in this. I am sure there's not an insubstantial amount of Sidesteps that are convinced they won't come back for it. Maybe even don't want to. And one of the things I wanted with this book is to leave room for growth and change, and for spiraling and descent. You start out in Rebirth not even knowing what you are planning and why, because I wanted people to identify with the emotions, not whether they were justified or not. Sidestep can change. Sidestep can double down. There will be a lot of places to adjust and change in all directions. It won't be until the end where you really need to make the call. I don't lock people into fates, just like I don't lock them into or out of romances.

Lastly, which has my favorite angsty flavour, if Step one day in a nostalgic mood told the RO's with the calmest tone "you know.. In another life. Where I were human and not this broken, I would had loved to raise some children with you. Live a normal exciting life and grow old together. Unfortunately is not this one." what would their reaction be? A short answer is valid. Is just.. Papa I crave pain. ((Male Chargestep has a double angst flavour on this one))

Oh boy. Normally I don't answer questions like this because of the scope, but some character reactions just immediately jumped out to me. Ortega: "Okay. What are you planning now. You're not doing it without me, you know that. No going out in a blaze of glory on my watch. At least not alone." Daniel: "You say that with such determination. I know things are... complicated now, but they got to calm down eventually. That's what we're fighting for, right? To even get to have that option?" Chen: -a thoughtful nod as he pets Spoon- "Doesn't mean this life can't be pretty good." Argent: "Stop. No use rubbing my face into what we can't have. We're not normal. We can't ever be. Wistful dreams doesn't change that." (cue her bawling her eyes out to a romantic movie later, though she can't really cry...) Dove: "In another life we wouldn't live in this shithole, but we do the best with what we have." Sky-Raider: "I'd make a terrible father, I hope you realize that. Dunno if an alternate timeline would change that any." Dr. Mortum: "I don't plan to die just yet, and I hope neither do you." -the longest pause- "Children, though? Really? I never actually considered..." -drifts off in thought-

In Argent's POV, how do the machines around Ortega feel? On edge that they might short circuit in their presence?

Running hot. Not exactly on the verge of breaking down, but a well-tuned machine just barely in control.

In a previous QnA, Chen can keep a secret relationship with Sidestep for roughly five years before someone finds out: but is there a turning point for him to want to tell others he's in a relationship? 🙄 If he got engaged, would he tell others? If so, who? His family?

At this point, Chen is very distant to his family. Perfunctory phonecalls on holidays, and the occasional letter. He hasn't forgiven. He would inform them if he got engaged though, for spite if nothing else. I think he'd tell his friends a lot sooner, as long as Sidestep also agreed to do so.

If, within the context of Sidestep's metaphorical narrative, Ortega is choosing to hold onto the past and Mortum is choosing to embrace the future, what thematic allegory do the other ROs bring to Sidestep's overall character arc?

I would say that Herald is the path not taken, what life might have been like if Sidestep was human, handsome and popular. While Argent is a mirror, the monster remaining a hero, saving people, while also risking their lives every day just by being close.

Is Vitruvian meant to be a meta critique of eugenicist ideology and, if so, do you ever find that his powers (having an intelligence boost) are at odds with that critique or make it difficult to more effectively make the critique?

I don't really do meta commentary but I can see how Vitruvian could be seen as a comment about those things, I feel like it's impossible to talk about superheroes without thinking about how eugenicist thoughts about the übermensch factor into it. I did pick the name connecting back to the Vitruvian man illustration and the allusions of perfection. Hmmm. Maybe eugenicist is not exactly the right term I am interacting with here, because for me that is more connected with breeding the perfect, pure race and all that bullshit. This is more connected to the whole "self improvement" deal so prevalent in the tech sphere and certain parts of the health movement. The whole using blood from the young to rejuvenate yourself, wanting to live forever, perfect diet, sleep x number of hours to be the most effective, thinking you are the smartest and most perfect being just because you have money. Human augmentation. A bit of the "chosen one" syndrome that Void also has, that if you survived the boost drug you are one of the 1%, the chosen, the powerful, the future. One of the big conflicts we will learn more off from Mortum in this book is that Vitruvian was devastated when he learned that Mortum wasn't boosted, they were just smart. It shook all of Vitruvian's convictions.

Has Mortum fallen out of the category of Main Cast due to the complications that arose from bisecting Retribution, or is it because their narrative is less involved in the story you'd currently like to tell vs the one you wanted to when you first started?

I blame the added ROs and the growth of Retribution and splitting it in two. With the adding of 3 Ranger RO's, much more of Retribution was taken up by interactions with them than I had originally planned. It was a scope creep I had not foreseen due to inexperience and hubris. I felt that the added RO's could be used to showcase parts of Sidestep I hadn't had opportunity to touch on otherwise, and thus added more than just the ability to tick off a notch. However, this also put the crash at the end of the book instead of in the middle, like it was planned. And, since a lot of the Mortum content was post crash, that means much of the content was pushed to the next book. Adding to this, there was a lot of discussions during the demo/writing stage that many didn't play Mortum's romance because it was through the puppet. Understandable, but it also meant there wasn't as much pressure from playtesters to add more content leading it to be easier to overlook in an already sprawling book. If I had been going back and done things differently I would have moved the possible puppet reveal earlier, but it wasn't in Sidestep's character to do it without cause, and the cause was tied to the Auction, which was middle-late in the book. Hindsight is 2020, I did not foresee the effects enough. Mortum was always as important to the narrative for me as Ortega, in the original book the "Ortega equivalent (Rick)" went out of the narrative around halfway as the reveal had happened and he turned antagonist for real, and Mortum was the main other character after that. I hope this book will make up for lost time for Mortum lovers.

I dont know if this has been asked before but previously you mentioned that the Rangers become at some point aware that Step was muzzled in the farm and how none of them like that but... How exactly do they know that? Will the ROs find some videotapes of the farm or do they become aware of that through Step?

I... can't remember that. Sorry. I'm not saying I haven't said it, just that I don't remember it or the context. Right now the Rangers are not aware of more about the Farm than has been shown in game. Chen has a smidgeon more information, but not much.

Also, without much spoilers... Will at some point some ROs be in the same room as Regina? Will we get to see the ROs reaction to Regina's obsesión? because I would do anything just to be a fly in those walls..

RO's will be able to meet Regina in some paths. I want to write those scenes so badly!

Less spoilery but how is Regina's relationship with Step's previous handlers?

Cold. She feels they were bad at their job.

First, we currently have a major outbreak of H5N1 (bird flu) in the United States and my epidemiology brain was wondering how that would work for Dove? Given that bird flu could pass from bird to human, could she get infected in bird form and remain infected in human form? Also how would she feel about a deadly virus infecting her birds?

Oh I am going to have to say semi-spoilers there even though I would love to talk about H5N1 at length. I will say this. If she gets infected in bird form it won't pass to her human form. She would be devastated if it infected her birds. Absolutely gutted.

Second, I've been on a A24 movie kick, how much would Argent like A24 movies such as Midsommar, Hereditary, the Witch, and others??

I mean she'd say they're fine, but would secretly judge them against the seventies and early eighties stuff. She just likes the cinematography and lightning better.

Along that vein how would Argent feel about the Oscars? Or even any of the best picture nominated movies from this year?

Ahaha the Oscars are a joke. She despises them.

Def some tonal whiplash with these questions sorry!

This game is about tonal whiplash!

Will there be an option in Book 3 and 4 to take a more active role in kill decisions?

Not exactly sure what you mean here. Is it decisions where the text states "I intend to kill this person" rather than only implying it from what is done, such as throwing someone out a window? If so, yes.

In Book 1 and Book 2, your decisions to kill have largely been indirect. Book 1 requires you to explicitly set the charges to hurt people and Book 2 has you set a "nokill/kill" variable. My Sidestep doesn't see the point in killing random people, so I've ended up as nokill not because my Step is unwilling to take lives but because the nokill variable kicks in (for example, my Sidestep does not care about who someone is if they are trying to kill me, I would have 100% had Sidestep kill Larry but the nokill kicks in and just leaves him severely injured). Similarly, they don't get the option to kill Blaze as a "prepare them" hero hunter. My Step considers "culling the herd" a possible solution to shaping up the heroes.

Hmmm. Good points. That is a weakness of my more "step back" approach when it comes to choices, and use stats to try to predict what text will show, and whether people will live or die by carelessness, which is part of what I use the nokill variable for now. There really is no way of separating Sidesteps such as yours from the conscientious nokill variants right now. You're right. Perhaps when I bugfix retribution I should add conscious choices there. It is an oversight on my part, not a conscious choice.

I know there's a chance it may take people out of the flow to specify constantly, but I wanted to bring it up to see if there might be a way to integrate it!

That was one of the reasons I didn't add all choices, because I felt like some things might feel like nudging and handholding. You know like "are you sure you want to kill this guy? Really?" or "Do you want to kill this guy?" I think I could work it in of I think about it a bit. At least at certain points.

Do you have an easy way for us to do code reporting and would you be okay with us doing that for already published books or limiting to the books that aren't out yet? One thing I noticed while code diving is that the fight against Ortega in Book 1 raises "ortega_clue" instead of "oc" like it should when you monologue, but I know it's been out so long it may not be worth fixing 😊

I have a massive backlog of bugs, yes! A lot of them have been reported, it is just up to me to finish the update, but as you will see later in the QnA, the Rebirth update has been delayed for reasons. I have bug reporting in the patreon discord, but if you find any in already published books, feel free to DM me and I will add them to my bug list! No need for the demos yet, that will be caught in playtesting.

Back in Book 1, I would originally always do Ortega content with the puppet, but after doing a playthrough with Mortum, I've realized that the 2nd book gives a lot more payoff to that choice. Even if dating, we really only get the 1 diner scene. Do you anything set up in Book 3 that may push us towards that choice again? It feels like the only way it'll have payoff is in some instances of the puppetstuck path.

One of my weaknesses as a game designer is that my paths are written on vibes, not pre-planned equal content. Some paths have been added later, and not all have equal payoffs. The book has also grown in scope, and much content has been added, and things I wrote for other purposes early on have become useful as payoffs later even though it wasn't planned when I wrote them. The Original book path was with Mortum, and I agree, it is better integrated in the plot. However, not all Sidesteps wants to go with Mortum, and some wants to go with Ortega, thus that path exists. I don't know if there are going to be any callbacks, but you're not wrong in pointing out that it only have some lasting consequences for the puppetstuck path.

What do each of the 4 Hero ROs dislike the most about Sidestep being a villain (if you ignore the kill variable, I mean)? We know that Argent doesn't really have an issue with it, only hates that Sidestep's villainy resulted in them possessing her, but what about the others?

For Chen it is that Sidestep adds more chaos to an already volatile situation. This city needs more law and order, not less. For Daniel it is that Sidestep is hurting people. Even nokill Sidestep does that. For Ortega it is the breach of trust, and at least half of it is that they feel it's somehow directed at them.

Can you explain the Sidestep crashed puppetstuck path to me regarding Ortega? From my understanding, all the rangers know that Sidestep is a Regene because the operating room people do the surgery. Why does Ortega still think that Sidestep is Hollow Ground's sibling (considering the scene in which puppet and Ortega meet after kidnapping we kidnap our body?) Its also implied in Daniel's ending romanced scene where he panics and mentions that "no one else knows". I guess I'm just confused how our secret of being a regene is still in the box when all the doctors in the surgery room saw our tattoos.

Well, it will come out soon enough so. Not all the Rangers knows Sidestep is a Regene in the puppetstuck path if you got your body out fast enough. Ortega was on the operating table as well (though for less serious injuries), so they didn't catch up for a while. There is, in fact, a coverup going on. Chen, who already knew/suspected went in with full Ranger authority and basically told the staff involved that this was top secret, and if they talk to anybody, they're prosecuted. It wasn't as many people who were witnesses, and those who saw the tattoos most had no idea what it was. Ortega got a glimpse of the tattoos as they were giving Sidestep CPR (basically), but just a bit, and at the time they did not add things up at all. Ortega doesn't know Cuckoos exist. If Argent is romanced, this is even more tightly locked down as she will make sure any security footage Chen has missed will be deleted, hence the lowering of the SD clue. So, in a way, Chen is trying to make up for the guilt he feels about not acting on the photographs. He wanted to think about things before talking to the others. In the puppetstuck path, he never got the chance to approach the subject gently. In the one where you end up in the hospital as Sidestep, it's already been a few days and he has briefed everyone in good time.

In a similar vein, you've mentioned that all the puppetstuck paths result in having villain!Sidestep be a knowntelepath. How/why is villain!Sidestep revealed as a telepath in both puppetstuck paths? I understand why the puppetcrash puppetstuck path results in villain!Sidestep being known as a telepath (all the petty crime) but in the the ending where Mortum agrees to pick up your body at the hospital, villain!Sidestep has just gone missing. Does this mean that all paths in which the imposter is in Sidestep's body will all have the ending pathway line up with an escape and recovery to pettycrime pipeline/pathway?

I don't think this will be in all paths, and all the paths are not yet written. Like you say, in some, Sidesteps body won't have had a chance to be revealed as a telepath yet. I might have expressed myself too vaguely, as often happens when answering a million questions in a row.

Can you explain Ortega's thought processes in Book 1 regarding the puppet and Sidestep since we now have Book 2 context? I never bought into the idea that Ortega was stupid (I was actually one of the ones who 100% thought that Ortega was lying about the extent in which they cared about us), and it wasn't until I read Book 2 AND a lot of the Patreon content that it really made me realize how low-key/high-key fucked up Ortega is over Sidestep. Despite this (or maybe even because of this), a bunch of their behavior in Book 1 with flirting/dating puppet and hadathing!Sidestep comes off as utterly bizarre to me (with Book 2 and Patreon context). I need to like, explain this, to really get to the heart of my confusion:

Ortega decided to use the puppet, who they believe to be involved in organized crime, to get over their ex. Their ex that they were so fucked up over that they had hallucinations about them for 7 years, all the way up to the point until they saw them in the diner. A meeting that they 100% thought they were hallucinating for 80% of the conversation. And then, they decide that now that Sidestep is back after 7 years, NOW is the time to get over their ex??? NOW? Even though even Ortega doesn't plan on having the puppet relationship lasting and is manipulating them? What in the 4D chess is going on with this idiot's head?? Like what 😞

I know you love keeping us in the dark about Ortega's head, but can we have like... anything??? This is why people think Ortega has rocks for brains, their entire Book 1 behavior is absolutely crazy. I think it's also super jarring for me because Ortega seems to 100% be over that whole weird 4D chess plan to get over Sidestep at the start of Book 2 where they ask to kiss you if you've had any sort of past relationship or complicated status. Can we have something, any sort of explanation? Obviously not asking for spoilers if some of the reason why they're acting nuts in Book 1 is spoilers, but anything? Is it trauma Malin? Inability to separate the 7 year hallucination of Sidestep from actual Sidestep? Them not realizing they're not over Sidestep?

Ahaha I love seeing it described as that. No, Ortega is not using the puppet as a main mean to get over their ex. This was 100% a spying mission from the start. The fact that in some paths Ortega falls for the puppet could be seen several ways. For example, for some Ortegas, meeting Sidestep again might have shocked them out of their self-destructive loop. Maybe they realized that the person they had idealized wasn't exactly who they remembered. Maybe that was the push needed to try to move on. For other Ortegas maybe meeting Sidestep again would be a wonderful and terrifying thing. Spiraling further. Maybe even becoming afraid of the intensity of their own emotions. Shit. Not good. Maybe have an affair with someone else? That will surely fix everything.

For other Ortega's it's a desperation to try to reconnect and have something they've been missing. And yet Sidestep isn't the same. And neither are they. And they have replayed these scenes again and again but now it is real and how do you even act around someone you care about? Maybe flirting with the puppet is an act of self-sabotage to make things blow up? Maybe Ortega isn't even sure what they want? Maybe all the instincts that scream that this is so deeply suspicious and wrong and something is going on is warring with feelings that just wants everything like it used to be. But without talking about it. How do you second-guess trauma? How do you tell someone you think they're a criminal? Or from a criminal family? How, without sounding horribly invasive and like if you've been spying on them? Especially if you have? Are you the bad guy here? Ortega is deeply fucked up on so many levels, wrapped in a smile and a quip and some increasingly madcap plans. Ortega needs therapy. Ortega runs from their problems by causing more problems. On purpose. Some Sidesteps are probably better adjusted than Ortega. Yeah. Ortega's behavior seems increasingly unhinged for any unbiased observer, tough luck that Sidestep is biased, Chen is loyal, and Argent is her own variant of fucked up. Poor Herald is just shaking his head. This won't end well.

How would each of the rangers deal with a supervillain that's never brought to justice because they are simply too powerful?, like in an all powerful dark lord kind of way.

Oh there are some like that. It's something they have to accept. Pick the fights you can win. Sometimes damage mitigation is the only option.

Would they keep trying to defeat them even if it kills them?, decide to try to save as many innocents as possible and contain the damage the villain deals?, desperately decide to try talking them down cause clearly force isn't working ?, eventually have a heroic breakdown and give up trying?

Spoilers. Some Sidesteps might go down that dark lord path.

We know that Ortega's had multiple Sidestep hallucinations but did they ever truly stopped or it was only after finding Step again that they poof out of existence?

Ahaha see now THAT is the REALLY interesting question. One I will not answer. Yet.

Did they ever happen like in those dramatic movies where the character sees them more clearly after sleeping around with other / doing dangerous almos suicidal things? Pretty sure the second might be a yes but did Ortega had them also after sleeping around?

Yeah, the Sidestep hallucination picked dramatically appropriate moments.

Previously you mentioned that only Sidestep has seen Ortega afraid (outside of their family ofc) could we know the reason why Ortega was afraid?

Catastrofiend. Post-Void flashbacks.

Also what exactly goes through Ortega's mind if a normally ruthless/ironic Sidestep becomes soft whenever Ortega has a crisis, specially considering how unstable they became after all those years grieving. Like for example, Step holding their face or caressing their hand to grab their attention whenever Ortega goes into a bad state of mind which I know is most likely the other way around but hush.

Look. Ortega's got a soft and goey center. And they like being made to feel special in that way.

Would Chen ever be petty enough to threaten us with no more spoon time? Asking because that would be hilarious and... want to know how suicidal he is.

Spoon likes Sidestep. That would be a punishment to Spoon just as much, and Chen is not that cruel.

Would a Mob-boss Sidestep that doesn't kill civilians or innocents but everyone else is fair game, be able to become Herald's mentor again? If yes, then what kind of Villain wouldn't Herald accept back as his mentor?

I can't say for sure, it would depend on the circumstances and choices. It's not impossible, I'll say that.

I might be misreading this but do Argent's nanobots (forgot the name sorry) are more lets say "empathetic" than Sidesteps because of her power to directly talk to them? Idk why but it just feels like Step's are more hungry/desperate 🙄

You have the right feeling, Sidesteps are a lot more hungry and desperate.

How are you holding up? I hope you're getting good rest in the crazy new year.

I am in a holding pattern, hard to focus on anything complicated until my mom's operation in a few weeks. Trying to stay off social media since I am bad at regulating right now, but trying to do a lot of the stuff that doesn't require deep intense creativity, like proofreading and such. Spring is here now, so some garden time will help my brain a lot, I need to get offline more. 2025 is just... ugh. And I don't even live in the US, I just have family there. And close friends in the UK. Not a great year for the queer/trans community so far.

Which of the villain RO have the most arrest warrants? Been known to have committed the most crimes by the authorities?

Oh Sky-Raider! Too flashy and brags about it.

Argent and Chen are aware of Ortega's Sidestep hallucinations but how many other people knew?

Nobody. Especially not Ortega's therapist.

How many variables are going to affect which imposter we get? (you don't need to say which ones if that's too much spoiler but just a number would be nice)

It is not finalized, but I would say I have 6 so far, and will add a few more. Some are more important than others.

There's a few instances where you can establish the puppet has a attraction or lack of attraction that differs to Sidestep; is this a case of giving players more opportunities to define the dynamics between characters or something we should be worried about with the imposters?

It is more for the players to define differences and having the body be its own thing. I'm not going to have the puppet/impostor steal your RO or initiate romances.

If the HB incident had gone differently and one of the others, Chen, Themmy or Ortega had been injured and picked up by the SD; would any of them gone the route Sidestep has, come back and become a villain (factoring in the broad spectrum of different kinds of villainy)?

I would say that Ortega might have. Not the others.

How would Steel feel if a previously heinous/villainous Step admitted to changing their ways because of Spoon?

"You're joking, right?" And then he'd consider that a therapy dog worked on him, so who is he to judge?

Of the villains, the HG trio and the ROs who would Spoon like the most? And who would he like the least?

Spoon would like them all.

If the imposter is in Sidestep's body are they looking after the Ratking? I need to know the girls are ok.

The girls are okay!

In the past you've said Ortega would be more interested and amused if Step introduced them to the Rat King and said they were their best friends. But how would the other Rangers and Mortum, who have strong friendly relationships with Step, feel if they were told 5 rat brains in a jar ranked higher than them in terms of Step's friendship?

Honestly? Hmmm. I don't know. But I don't think any of them would judge. Sidestep needs friends.

If we do get the option to give the girls their own body will we be given the option to arm them? Even if it's as simple as taping a knife a la stabby the roomba, the idea of Step giving the girls a knife and saying "go, do crime" lives rent free in my head

Stabby is a legend. Of course this will happen.

TW: why is it that so far only Ortega can have the 'know suicidal' tag; because it seems like there are a few instances where the other Rangers might have picked up on this, like Argent and Chen but there is no flag for it. Have they not figured it out yet or is it that it's more a revelation to Ortega because of their perspeption of Step doesn't always match up with reality?

I think because at this point Ortega is the only one that actually believes it. While both Argent and Chen has caught glimpses of self destructive behavior and made some deductions, Ortega is the one who understands that this is something real. Not just talk.

Are regenes more closer to cyborg or human? For instance, dead human basically brought to life or actually artificial (made and grown)

Made and grown flesh from genetic samples taken and remixed from humans. So yeah, they would be closer to humans. Genetically there is no difference between an unboosted regene and a human.

I know Ortega said they don't find sidestep disgusting but is that just a sidestep exception? What are their true opinions on other regenes or regenes in general? Out of all the ros he seemed to be the most creeped out and wary of regenes based on my impression

We are seeing this through Sidestep's eyes, and Sidestep expects Ortega to be the most disgusted since their comment was one of the reasons they never even thought about revealing. I will say that Ortega (and Chen) is also one of the few Rangers that has met Re-Genes deployed in the field.

Know this is spoilers but for book 4, will sidestep and other characters actually go to the farm? (Since you mentioned it was farm focused)

Yes, it's back to the Farm!

I know regenes usually worked in groups. Is it possible for sidestep to have had close friends back in the past? Or were they usually more isolated?

They were more isolated, but that doesn't mean they didn't have a friend or two.

Sidestep keeps mentioning there is something big coming (and also those abnormal things shown in their dreams with the gates). If sidestep possibly dies (through suicide or accidentally) will this "something big coming" still occur? (Basically is it something happening in the FH world in general or is it directly related to sidestep)

It is something happening in the FH world in general. Not directly related to Sidestep.

Kind of related to my first question but since regenes are copies and made through references of people, are the actual person that was referenced turned into a regene (and mind wiped) or are regenes made from something else and people are only used for organ donations and other things?

Regenes are made from a mix of gene and memories. I am sure there exist regenes that are from single donors for classified purposes, but even then it's just from genetic material taken. The original person remains alive and well.

What was sidesteps reason for becoming a vigilante? Does it depend on the sidestep or was it sidestep just wanting to make a difference?

It depends on the Sidestep. We will get into that in game, and there will be choices.

Is it possible for Ortega to still retire at the end of the series? Live a peaceful life?

I would say yes. As peaceful as Ortega can ever live.

Will we still continue with our villain persona even if we are exposed?

Yeah, at least for the present.

Just kind of confused on lore here. Is project stars about creating superhumans and project stripes more about regenes?

You are right about project stars, but wrong about project stripes. I don't think I have told in the open exactly what that purpose is yet, so you are right to be confused.

For touch averse steps (and if this was a recent development) what does Ortega think of this? How did they think it happened? Also why are most touch averse scenes with Ortega and not the other ros? Is it because sidestep can't read Ortega's mind?

It is because Sidestep can't read Ortega's mind. With everyone else, it comes as no surprise. Danny broadcasts his intent and emotions strongly, and Chen actually goes through the trouble of moving slow enough and think about things to give Sidestep the time to react. Argent is not that touchy herself due to her friends. Ortega is the surprise, and the one that provokes the stronger reaction. Ortega has ideas of why and how this happened, but hasn't dared to ask.

Will it somehow be possible in the future for Ortega or sidestep to read each others minds somehow

There is one book four path that is dependent on that at least.

If Regina ordered the Farm to treat Sidestep like a person how much resistance would there be to that?

A lot. You can't just tell people to do something like that and expect them to overcome years of training and prejudice.

If Sidestep told her a scientist treated them badly would Regina punish that person?

No. That would show she valued a re-gene over a human. She might have a talk with the scientist without Sidestep knowing though.

Does Chen have any feelings about unintentionally usurping the "Sidestep's protector" role from Ortega? Ortega doesn't even know what they need to be protected from.

Chen has too many complicated feelings about that. They need to talk. All three of them.

Even if HG thinks their older brother's power was more powerful than theirs, at least they can console themselves with the fact their powers are very different. Is HG the type of person who might get a complex that their little sibling's power is basically 'anything you can do I can do better'?

Hmmm. Hmmm. Actually you know what? I don't think so. I think HG would be proud. Nocturne however....

If Hood had died in a way that couldn't have been connected to Hollow Ground, would Ortega have still become obsessed with them post-Heartbreak? Would they still have been obsessed with Sidestep? On that note, have they ever wished they weren't so obsessed (with either HG or Sidestep)? How would they feel about someone (both in general and Regina specifically) being as obsessed with Sidestep as they are?

No, Hood's death is the reason why Ortega became so obsessed with HG, other than that they're just another villain. As for how that would have affected their feelings about Sidestep... I honestly don't know. I really don't. I can see it going both ways. Ortega and Regina are spoilers.

You mentioned that the Rangers (except Daniel) would have a good first impression of Regina if they didn't know anything about the Farm. How much knowledge would be needed to sour their impression of her? Would simply knowing that Sidestep is a Re-Gene be enough for any of them? If so, would how they found out (voluntary reveal vs. Stepcrash) factor in?

Not sure yet.

How would the past Psychopathor fight have gone if he had had current Rat King? How would Psychopathor fight round 2(3?) go if he somehow reobtained the Rat King (i.e., would the girls hesitate at all, or still see it as tag)?

Oh that is an interesting possibility, but Psychopathor couldn't connect to them in the same way. Psychially sensitive, not a true telepath.

What does it look like to the outside observer when Sidestep opens a gate? What would Ortega see, if anything?

No specific effect, it varies depending the occasion.

What do villain/henchman contracts entail? Are they legally recognized? Are they enforceable? If so, how are they enforced? What happens if one party breaks the contract?

That is a good question. Are there henchman advocates and unions? You know what, I need to think about this. This is good stuff.

Did Sidestep work with any other vigilantes before they met Ortega and the Rangers?

Not closely.

And the most important question, did Herald ever dress up as Sidestep for Halloween or a costume party?

I can imagine once. Probably was made fun of too.

Are steel's non-civilian hands capable of checking for a pulse?

Yes. But it's most likely more of a function than a feeling if that makes sense. Registering a beat but not sensing a beat.

Were there any villains who considered themselves Sidestep's nemesis back when they were active?

No. Sadly Sidestep got the Ortega bleedover. Lord Ember was the closest, but he wouldn't stoop so low to such a sucky nemesis.

Is there some kind of story behind Sidestep's aversion to seagulls?

Just my own vibes from growing up near harbors and interacting with them in larger numbers. I don't fear swans or canada geese. Seagulls though... they know no fear.

Has Sidestep ever connected to cats? What would that be like, even if they haven't?

Yeah. Cats are nice and relaxed. Really hard to make them do anything though, and if they don't like you they don't like you. However, Sidestep's naturally aloof behavior is something cats get.

Does the Farm have any type of protocol in place for if a cuckoo & the handler die while on a mission? And if so does it vary a lot based on the location & the status of possible witnesses?

There is a recovery regiment in place, which basically focuses on retrieving the cuckoo body (the handler is secondary) and making sure to deal with possible witnesses. Note that this doesn't mean killing them, most of the time it is enough to wave the "military secrets, nothing to see here" in the face of people. Local law enforcement is usually all too eager to lean on any curious locals, and most people wouldn't know what they are looking at. The important thing is to make sure any physical proof is removed, if there's no recordings or a body, the witness testimonies aren't worth much, and if someone starts digging they can be easily dealt with. Last year I would have said to remember that the US is still not back to full democracy and the government is quicker to do skeevy shit, but honestly, I think at this point everyone knows what's going on. Not to make a current politics post, but this is what a ruthless government can do without invoking a state of emergency, and the FH world US was living under that for two decades. The new normal is... ruthless in the name of stability.

Could Jake make himself dense enough such that the nanovores couldn't eat him? Could the nanovores sense him if he was phased in various materials?

I would say that Jake probably could make himself dense enough that he'd be immune. But that's a terrible risk to take, and not one he would want to do unless it was an emergency. The nanovores would have a harder time to sense him phased, but like with all things, it's a question of scale. If he was the ONLY thing available to eat they would work harder.

Is there anything physically unique about Argent's nanovore swarm? Like do they have any adaptations that "wild" ones don't? Or is the distinction purely behavioral / "mental"?

They have mutated slightly, yes. They are not the same as the "wild ones" but what the difference is I will keep as spoilers for now. What I can say is that they are a lot more attuned to her and her physical needs, and several strains have evolved to perform more specialized functions. Like, the support structures/skeleton/skin layers are distinctively different, as are the ways the different strains work together.

Is the Seattle Greater Polycule still a thing / growing in this timeline?

Ahahaha you know what? Why not.

What kind of clothing does hollow ground wear around the house?

Light. Loose. Soft. Luxurious fabrics. Silk. Linen. High threadcount cotton. Bare feet or sandals. Informal. Still lots of jewelry. Open shirts. Layers. Looks like they're on vacation.

Did Mortum pick the University of Florida because of the large Haitian diaspora in Florida?

Yes. It was through them that they got the contacts to go there in the first place.

You've said in the past Nocturne's mother was busy working two jobs to keep food on the table for the three kids; what happened to Nocturne's dad?

Her parents divorced when young, he was never a part of her life.

Does Mortum have a sport they're interested in (that isn't cars)? If they do, it is serious or casual? Or it is just for fun? What's their exercise routine for keeping in shape, if at all?

Mortum has the saddest looking peleton and some weights in their lab complex. They do their best to keep somewhat in shape, but really doesn't do enough. They were a lot more in shape when they were still active, but a lot of the time they just forget. When they remember, they like to go to their favorite gym, and do a lot of swimming. It's just not a regular occurrence, hence the lab equipment because sometimes you have an hour before you need to check your readings and you might as well work out a bit. They are not a good runner.

Would Mortum like if a Sidestep they were dating lifted/carried them? Especially in the suit, with the strength mod? 🙄

You know what? I think yes. Mortum approves.

Did Sidestep have a seizure during the second/final encounter with the Void, right before they're stuck in the ground?

At least close enough to one it might as well be the same thing. No that is not cryptic at all, nothing to see here.

Given Mortum's interest in telepathic communication, how would they respond to a Sidestep that's willing to help them study this as a telepathic subject (after Mortum's gotten over their issues with telepathic intrusion and mental privacy of course)?

Love love LOVE that. Mortum would be so appreciative about a volunteer guinea pig.

Would Mortum give up information about the puppet/Sidestep to HG if asked?

Depend on the relationships involved.

Was there a limit to how much of a volume of acid Anathema could produce? Did the volume scale inversely with potency of acidity?

Yes, there was a limit. Anathema could run dry, it was never vast quantities that could be produced. They didn't spray acid or anything like that, it was secreted from their skin. I think a few liters wouldn't be an issue, but then it would be effort. Remember to hydrate! The potency would remain about the same, no major difference. Anathema had never been able to control the strength of the acid, though they tried.

So, since only Merle/Julia and Mirlene/Ricardo combinations have Ortega flirt with Mortum, do only those two versions have Sky-Raider drop the Lamborghini in the ocean, or is the watery fate of the Lambo Ricardo/Mirlene-continuity specific?

Lambo takes a swim no matter what. Flirting is not necessary for Sky-Raider to want to mess with Ortega.

A little meta; what kind of questions about the games/books do you enjoy answering the most/find the most interesting?

It is hard to say, since in part it depends on mood. I like questions that are about one thing, let's say "did X ever..." and not sprawling like "how does all the ro's/major characters feel about x." I also like questions that are grounded in the story/world, or is asking about it. Something that gives my brain a starting point, and makes me go "huh, yeah, how does that work?" I don't have a big data sheet with all the facts about the characters and the world just ready to pick from, I only have what is needed for the story. So, a lot of time when a question is asked, it is things I might never even have considered before. At those times I will only have an answer if my brain decides to manufacture a new fact. And that depends on the day. I also like questions about why I made certain writing/story/coding choices, or things about the history and science of the world.

How do you determine what counts as streetwise step knowledge? Tech-savvy's more clear cut on what it covers, but streetwise seems to have a pretty broad array of things they know about by the recent puppetstuck demo path and the past two books

I go by what I feel is right at the moment. I don't have a strict list of things, it is mostly like "would a streetwise Sidestep have more info here than a more insular one?" None of the skills here are separate and straight, every Sidestep is somewhat good at tech and somewhat Streetwise, and somewhat of a fighter and somewhat of a tactician. It's not either/or. It's a game-specific thing to make different Sidesteps feel different when you play them.

does us citizenship still apply retroactively even after the FEZ was formed (ie if you were born a year before the Big One in LA, do you still have US citizenship)? And did argent have to be given citizenship to operate as a ranger, considering she seems the only one who wouldn't have citizenship by default?

The biggest issue would be to prove your citizenship. Remember, most paperwork is gone. People normally don't have birth certificates or passports. What are they going to do, take your word for it? Rangers don't have to have citizenship to serve, just like people in the US army doesn't need to.

What would happen if someone got Boosted at the exact moment a mosquito was sucking their blood?

Itching? The drug doesn't work on insects, but it is possible that it might trigger some sort of skin-protective boost, but that's theory only.

If Argent "talked" to Sidesteps cellphone what kind of information could she get from it? (Ex. Villainy? Regene? Favorite pizza topping?)

Nothing. Sidestep is too paranoid to use one consistently and for long. The exception would be the phone they use for Ortega, which would pretty much only contain info for the contacts with Ortega and the other Rangers if Sidestep had any. No notes. No pizza orders. No saved numbers. No downloaded ring tones. Nothing.

Is Sidestep powerful enough to make Telepathic Suggestions to micro organisms similarly to Nanovores?

No. And not fish or insects. Mammals and birds (somewhat) so far.

Like could Sidestep "suggest" to diseases not to make them sick?

Oh they wish!

Did Nocturne and HG meet in person before Nocturne moved to Los Diablos? Has HG been to Chicago?

Hollow Ground has been to Chicago for tax reasons when Nocturne's investigation was going. That's when they met for the first time.

What was the Kinetik before Herald like? What about the Kinetik that came after him?

The first Kinetic was handsome, brash, loud and charismatic. Also prone to getting drunk and descending into a barely hidden drug habit. Hence the replacement. The one after him was more experienced, slicker, and more of a trained actor but not as powerful a boost at all. Just enough to fake it for the cameras.

For mortum. do they have a particular book they like (and if it is hard, what books would they read based on your book knowledge/preference!)

Mortum reads non-fiction. There is an ever growing pile of books, research papers, science magazines and related news that they try to keep up with. There is no time for anything else really. For relaxation, it's science books in unrelated fields like history or archaeology.

How ruthless are the Boss Crew as individuals? And just for fun what about Marcia (Base Co-Worker), Savannah (Base Receptionist), & Clair (Ranger Receptionist)?

Most ruthless to least: ZaZa, Pelayo, Marcia, Ward, Nehal, Clair, Savannah.

Are there any security contingencies for known technopaths or technopathy in general, or is there none because it being a rare power/generally difficult to counter?

It is a VERY rare power compared to telepathy. In fact, there is no recorded instance of it to the level that Argent has it. The heroes/villains who have had similar powers have needed direct interfacing with cables or the like, or have had limited powers like being able to shut things off or cause blackouts. So what defenses there are (not unlike what you would use for electronic/hacking attacks) doesn't really work against Argent.

Would the Rangers have assessed Argent differently if they knew of her technopathy?

Oh absolutely! It is unlikely she would have become a Ranger, they would have tried to recruit her to far more important and secretive things.

What does Chen mean by "not [being] sure if [Vincent Marino] was his real name" when telling Sidestep Blaze's civilian identity?

A lot of people have remade themselves and got new identities on the coast. The reason why Chen is hesitant is that he always got the feeling that Vincent was afraid of being perceived as anything but straight and normal. It made Chen wonder if maybe he had a strict upbringing and now went by a different name not to be recognized.

Is it intentional that Sidestep killing the Re-Gene at the warehouse has a separate variable and doesn't set the kill variable to true which toggles dialogue relating to Sidestep killing people? If so, is this because they consider killing Re-Genes different to killing non Re-Genes?

Exactly. This is a tag which will come into it in the future, where Sidestep might have to confront how much they have internalized the Farm's teachings in everything from insults and thoughts, to feeling that Re-Genes/themselves is not human and doesn't really matter in the same ways.

Also, if Sidestep ignored the Re-Gene entirely to focus on their mission/get the hench, since Halabi says one operative died (if Sidestep didn't save them), was it Psychopathor who killed them, or did the Wolfpack get a few lucky hits in?

Psychopathor. The Wolfpack would have fled by then, and the operative tasked with keeping them busy would have moved in to help with Psychopathor. It did not end well.

are there any traits of sidestep (arrogance/anonymity, empathy/ruthless, cautious/daring) that the rangers particularly notice? in the vein of how ortega references sidesteps' daring in the dinner date.

It varies. Ortega notices the daring/cautious most, Chen and Daniel the empathy/ruthless, and Argent the arrogance/anonymity since she is the one privy to both sides.

How does Mortum find out about selfcrash and revealed to the Rangers/guilty Sidestep? Via Halabi?

Yes.

What kind of confidentiality agreements is Halabi under as someone who works with the Rangers, and how does that conflict with her feeding intel to Mortum? Does she feel conflicted about this?

Oh she is conflicted, but have above all decided to act according to her own conscience and what she feels is best for her patients. It's not always an easy choice.

Does sidestep seize during the livestock dream (expansion) or the car crash dream? When they're seeing Anathema?

No, they are unconscious or close enough.

Furthermore, if sidestep does seize during the livestock dream, you've stated before that someone witnessed it. Is the seizure recorded in some way?

Spoilers.

How does Herald feel if a villain named Sidestep amasses a larger fan club following than the original?

Angry.

What was the fan following like for Anathema & does "Heartbreak" (as in the terrorist coverup story) have one or even just people that are weird about them like copy cats/cults/etc.?

Hmmm I think Anathema was moderately popular. Not one of the big followings, but the people who had them as a favorite weren't exactly normal about it. Probably arguing the limits of invulnerability and such, very active in the "who would win" debates. Heartbreak is the subject of a lot of conspiracy theories, and I think there probably was a copycat group or two early on who got taken down fast.

Is Daniel aware of his influence on a sidestep with "oh no, he's hot" relationship?

Oh absolutely.

bundling in all the operating costs associated with the heartbreak experiment and whatever the hell they did to the core, is Sidestep finally more expensive than Ortega?

Oh Sidestep is just a side effect there. They're not the expensive one.

Is it possible at all for telepathy to affect things like radio or light waves? Seeing as dampeners are able to turn energy into a telepathic jumble and can affect other radio-based things, I was curious if anything could happen other way around.

So far, no.

How do the distinctions between being seen as Charge's sidekick vs a vigilante and independent hero work (not mechanically, in setting) and were there any differences in how much they each achieved or was it mostly a matter of perception? If so, is this more to do with how the media perceived them, how publically their heroic acts were attributed to them vs other people taking credit/being more lowkey about it or something else?

It was a sliding scale, I just condensed it to three simple settings in game for some text variables. Basically, at the lower end (sidekick) Sidestep is seen as an appendix to Charge. That's only where they get mentioned. At the upper end (hero), it is acknowledged that Sidestep was an unregistered hero who often worked with Charge, and many felt like they might get offered Ranger membership in the future if a spot opened up. It is more about public perception, how forward/driving Sidestep was in taking the initiative, and being seen taking it. Spotlight, not anybody taking more credit.

What's Nazars & Luis' style presentations like in Sidestep Presentability terms? Have they changed since Naz became a Ranger & Luis retired?

Hmmm I think they both started in the lower middle, neither of them being too into clothes. Functional stuff. Nazar has stepped up his game since joining the Rangers, he's got a personal shopper now and is going for authority and style. Luis has gone full casual lumberjack.

Is Regina fashionable?

I would say somewhat, she takes care of her presentation.

Would Armadillo's use of ASL be typical for most combat Re-Genes if they were in situations where they could communicate normally? Can they not use audible language because of physiological reasons (damaged throats/tongue/etc) or is it more of a mental block or comfort level issue?

Most Re-Genes are able to speak, but the training to speak only when spoken to makes words a function of orders and missions. Speaking with your hands is private and personal, and the preferable thing.

Are you going to standardize the capitalisation of mods, boosts, norms and the Wolfpack in the Rebirth update to match how they are in Retribution? Any other minor continuity details/scene expansions or is this a "if i keep editing I'll never get this done" situation?

I do plan to standarize it. It's not a big thing, basically a search and replace. The big reason why I have not gotten the Rebirth update done yet is due to life issues, and the step of learning how to implement the save system there feels like an insurmountable step right now. It is mental, nothing else. I am also hit by the wish to rewrite/expand every time I look too closely at it, since it was my first IF book, and I could do it a lot better now. That urge is dangerous, but there. I don't know what about it, thus it is sitting half-finished for the moment.

Are there any known boosts that resulted in the subject becoming/fusing with the environment? Like that scene in Annihilation for example or even maintaining some type of sapience like Danny the Street? Would HGs powers be able to work on them?

I think there are many examples of boosts becoming/fusing the environment, but almost none of them surviving it. There are some really gruesome things I might get into one day, since I love that kind of horror.

It delights me endlessly how many of the cast are aspec (Chen, Argent, HG, Regina, Mortum). Speaking of which, did you intend for Ortega to be read as potentially arospec what with their interest in intimacy more than romance, lack of jealousy or issues with polyamory, and their commitment issues with long term-relationships aside from with Sidestep?

I didn't intend for Ortega to be read that way, but I can absolutely see it. So many labels are just that, labels. How people see themselves. Some people puts names on it, some people put other names.

There's a lot of questions directred towards the Rangers or the new RO's, I hope you don't mind if ask again but directed towards our dearly beloved scientist: How would Mortum react to Sidestep's true age?

Mortum would be more interested if Sidestep could pinpoint which memories/training comes from the implants and which ones was acquired later, and if there is a different feeling depending on who donated the memory. The physical age would be far less important than the implications on brain development.

Is Dr Mortum a good dancer? Would they teach a Sidestep with two left feet? Are they open to lazy dancing in the middle of the night?

I would say Mortum is a good, but not excellent dancer. Got good rhythm, knows some moves, but is not exactly a professional. They would love to teach Sidestep, whatever else are late nights in the lab for? That sounds romantic as hell.

Is Dr Mortum obsessive about the puppet/Sidestep? It feels really different when reading from how they treat Sky Raider and the puppet (but it could be lack of info on my side + Sidestep's skewed pov)

I don't see Mortum as obsessive. More fascinated with the concept and/or disturbed by what they went through. However, that could easily be taken the wrong way by a Sidestep used to scientists. Sidestep's views are very colored by the Farm.

Would Mortum pick up on how Sidestep being emotionally distant during intimacy? Would they bring it up?

I dunno yet. We'll see.

Do they bring up/notice Sidestep avoiding touch/intimacy vs as their puppet being able to accept affection?

That one will probably be brought up.

What is Dr Mortum's reaction to learning about low presentation, tunnel base Sidestep having a ton of funds? Especially if they steal tech for Mortum?

"Why do you live like that?" Thus opening themselves up to being teased for microwaving pizza in the lab.

Does Dr Mortum have a greatest fear?

Yes. Not gonna tell you.

In the kidnapped ending in Retri, will Sidestep instantly run away, will we stay to talk? Would Dr Mortum give Sidestep space if they end up freaking out and running away, or would they look for Sidestep?

That is something you will have to find out!

If Mortum had a thought they need to right down immediately, but Sidestep fell asleep on them, would they endure or immediately shove Sidestep off to go write it down?

"Siri, take this down." I think Dr. Mortum probably has a voice activated dictaphone or something, because sometimes you have thoughts while your hands are busy.

Does Dr Mortum think anything on Sidestep's medical skills on themselves?

That takes a lot of self-discipline. Gruesome.

Would Dr Mortum be open about their feelings to a previously friendly Puppet to a revealed Sidestep further down the line?

I don't know yet, it's one of the things I will only know when I write it.

Will Doctor Mortum ever call Sidestep by their Puppet's name by accident or on purpose? Would they be immune to the kicked puppy eyes Sidestep would give them?

Most likely. And Mortum is very much not immune to emotional fallout/blackmail. They want to be, they really do, but they are soft.

Does Dr Mortum have a comfort food?

Chocolate pralines. The good kind.

Would Mortum consider projecting/using their own thoughts to (playfully) mess with Sidestep? Perhaps NSFW-related or ... telepathic sex?

Maybe along the line? They are protective of their thoughts.

What would be Mortum's personal nightmare loop if they were caught in one by a telepath?

The Vitruvian confrontation.

What's Mortum's wealth like (comfortable, wealthy, rich)? How much of this is cash vs accounts vs Dark Script and assets?

I would say rich in assets, poor in cash. Lots of expensive machines and systems, but most of the cash is used to keep them running. Free wealth would be comfortable.

Is Halabi the friend of theirs Mortum mentions during the auction that would love to take a look at the regenerator?

Oh yes.

Does Mortum have music playing in the background while they're working?

Yeah, a lot of the time.

Between Mortum and Ortega, who is/would be the most interested in Sidestep's tattoos?

Mortum.

Does Mortum have a memory they consider that happiest?

First day at university.

Is there anything physical they appreciate about someone?

Hmmm. I would say more about the mental bits. I think they probably have a physical type, but I haven't decided on it. I never specify it for the ro's, because it inevitably shuts out some of the Sidesteps.

How would Mortum deal with a drunk Sidestep confessing feelings about them and their relationship?

"Fine, fine, mon cour, let's do this again when you're sober."

How does Mortum feel about kids in general? Not around their lab work of course.

They don't. It's one of the parts of their life that's very distant. They rarely interact, and I think they wouldn't know what to do with one. Teach them welding?

We know Mortum doesn't shirk their health, but what kind of patient are they?

Backseat driver. Trying to teach the doctor to do their job. Which doesn't work, because it's most often Halabi and they know each other.

Was Mortum in any sort of school group? Clubs?

I can see drama.

If Mortum was forced to watch a marathon of all the LOTR films, how would they react?

"That's a surprising amount of background detail on the sets, good job."

If they were given the choice, with no health consequences, would Mortum prefer to never need to sleep again, or never need to eat again?

Oh boy. Wow. That is hard. Never eat I think. Sleep gives rise to good ideas.

Is the Alvarez in Chapter 2 of Bones of the Land Teresa Alvarez' father, or related to her in some way?

You might be on to something there...

What do The Villains (Dove, Mortum, & Sky) miss the most about their pre-villainy lives? Also it is reasonable to refer to them as The Villains for shorthand like we do for The Rangers?

It's as reasonable as anything I think. Hmmm. I think Mortum miss academic conferences, Dove misses trusting others to take care of her and not having to look over her shoulder, and Sky-Raider misses planning for retirement.

Doctor to Not Doctor, what does Mortum think of Viktor Frankenstein & Frankenstein Jr.?

You can't let your own shortcomings get in the way of your work, otherwise things will get out of hand fast.

Is the San Francisco mayor Landis part of the delegation at the Westin that Blaze is being a bodyguard at?

No. But people connected to him are.

Ortega can be told sidestep has enemies (HG in their mind) and was under their "care" for a period of time. How long does Ortega assume that was? Do they have any sense at all of sidesteps captivity lasting as long as it did?

Ortega has like five different timelines and possibilities, all they need are a few more answers.

Was Shroud's choice of the "undead bride" aesthetic inspired by The Bride of Frankenstein or did she just like it?

Partly that and the Mummy yes, but it is mostly because she likes the drama.

Was the person who distributed the Boost drug to Sentinel a member of the Green Sky Cult?

Nope.

For the original form of the diet pill that would become the boost drug—how the fuck did that get out of the testing stage without anyone noticing that it killed people instantly? was there a bad batch that triggered the first Boosts. simultaneously, amongst that first set of people to have taken the drug, was there any similarity of power set studied amongst them? considering they were perhaps the closest thing to a "control" group, having all taken the drug for the purpose of dieting/health?

The first thing to realize is that at the start, the active ingredient of the boost drug was present only in trace amounts. Only a fraction of a fraction of people were affected. Also, when it comes to "nutritional supplements" and "herbal remedies" and the like, the testing regiment is really thin even today, even more back in the day. The original idea is based on the Thalidomid scandal, where a tranquilizer used for anxiety, trouble sleeping, tension, and morning sickness led to 10 000+ babies born with severe birth defects. Took 8 years before it was recalled. It had never been tested on pregnant women. Even today, if you look at possible side effects of many common medications, many of them can lead to death. And that is for medicine... a diet drug? Nowhere near that kind of testing.

As it was a diet drug, and the active compound technically was as much an impurity as anything else, the concentration varied per batch. Some were stronger. Some weaker. There were mysterious deaths, but many people using it were already in poor health, on other drugs, or on severe dieting regiments so it didn't raise too many eyebrows. Especially as some deaths were more like accidents (the house burned down) or murders (did they blow up?). In fact, many people were open with their new, strange powers before anybody connected it to the diet drug. Only then did real research start to try to isolate what compound caused the change, and it was during this work that the increased efficiency also increased lethality. There was no similarity in power sets at the time, but the level of the powers were a lot lower and more limited.

Is dairy more expensive in the FWT the same way beef is? If so, are there more milk and dairy alternatives to compensate?

Dairy is more expensive, but not as much. It is easier and more efficient to have milk cows indoors and then slaughter them when they get too old. For cheap beef you need large grazing lands. Most beef in LD is from ex-milk cows, and young bulls. Not the highest quality. Powdered milk and milk fats is one of the big imports from Canada.

Where does Temerain's name come from?

Liked the sound of it.

At the Farm, are Regenes allowed to operate heavy machinery? Does the Farm train them how to drive?

Hmmm. I would say operate heavy machinery, there might be some Farm-locked Re-Genes where that might be useful. But I don't think most Re-Genes are not taught how to drive, that would give them more possible avenues of escape. Some do though, and honestly, I think a lot more of them 'know' it by instinct even if they never practiced it and might not be good. Just a residual bleedover from the memory seeds, as most of the people harvested for memories knows how to drive.

Are cuckoos a relatively newer subcategory of Re-Genes compared to the standard blue ones?

Yes, they are. Not super new, but it is a very specialized subcategory. Controversial too, I think there was a lot of internal resistance against starting that program.

How did Argent make her way to San Francisco after the Nanosurge? (Also I'd love to see a story about her time post-Nanosurge/pre Rangers if that's something you'd ever be interested in writing. And also Hollow Ground and Nocturne's mail correspondence stuff when she was an IRS tax agent following HG's work in Chicago!)

She hid at the back of a truck. She just wanted to get as far away as she could, that she ended up in San Francisco was a coincidence. And thank you for the ideas!

As employees of the US gov, do the rangers have to pay taxes? do they have a Guy for that, or do they have to do it themselves? which of them, if they had to do their own taxes, would do the best and the worst?

Oh yes they pay taxes. They have accountants that handles all that though, someone employed by the Rangers to handle all that stuff. Perks of the team.

What would a telepathically-unaffected onlooker have seen during the gate opening choice outside of Rangers HQ?

Most likely think someone was having a bad trip.

How long had Sentinel and Hood known each other by the first chapter of Bones of the Land set in 1992?

A couple of months, haven't decided exactly.

What's it like to live in an independent community? Are there any shared experiences that are common no matter where or is it too varied?

I would say it is quite varied. Some are very patriotic, seeing themselves as a separate entity in Los Diablos, others only see it as an administrative union for garbage, schools and so on, while others never notice. It's a bit like in the US today, cities and townships bleed into each other, like New Jersey is not a part of New York, but most people see it that way.

Do people call Los Diablos "Hell-A"? Especially when The Cat & Mr. Raptor are on their newest rampage

Technically the Los Diablos name drawing on the same inspiration as Hell-A, but since most of the people living there doesn't call their city LA, I doubt that Hell-A is a thing these days.

Has Ben ever dyed his hair fun colors?

Not voluntarily.

Does Lord Ember think A Lot about the time he first-degree burned Sidestep and they simply clocked him in his jaw about it? did he rationalize it by assuming sidestep wore something flame-resistant, or is he one of those villains who has more of an inkling of sidestep's capabilities?

He would have assumed fire resistant clothes, or some sort of heat resistant boost.

If the Void had survived their encounter with Sidestep, what would've been their next move?

I genuinely have no idea! Void is out of the story so...

Also, what would the Void's reaction have been upon learning Sidestep and Ortega were a thing (for instances where that applies)?

Void did assume that might have been the thing even back then, hence using Sidestep as a catalyst.

does the US flag still have fifty stars on it?

Oh yes.

Was there ever a significant point in Blaze & Zephyr lives where they considered themselves/would be considered punks, hippies, or some other counter culture associated with surfing? How would their past selves feel about who they are now?

Hmmm I would say the closest things would be hippies/beach bums. A distinct countercultural feel, trying to reclaim that lost part of past whimsy. I think Blaze feels it is embarrassing, while Zephyr wants it back in a way.

What do Nocturne's instincts tell her about Danny? Similarly: what does Daniel perceive about her?

Spoilers.

How are Hollow Ground's table manners in a formal setting? Can they pass in a fine dining environment, or will they need to work overtime making people forget whatever etiquette crimes they'll commit?

I think they can pass alright. At least in west coast fine dining, not a super formal setting like east coast old money or similar things.

If a villain turned the rangers into animals what kind of animals would they be?

The kind of animal least likely to ruin the villain's plot. Of course, that would only mean that they'd ruin it either way in hilarious ways. For some reason the team setup that jumped into my brain was: Charge cattle, Argent otter, Steel rooster and Herald snake.

Have any of the characters considered having a service animal?

Chen has one, Spoon. Other than that, no.

What are hollow ground and crews thoughts on regenes? Will we be able to tell HG our secret?

Well, that is spoilers! Try and find out.

did nocturne bring HG any malört from chicago? Does she offer it to people she doesn't like because malört fucking sucks?

Of course she does.

Are Re-Genes taught to swim and if so, do they have a swimming pool at the Farm?

Yes, that is seen as an essential skill. And yes they do.

Are cuckoos given weapons training like how to use firearms? What weapons in particular are they trained to use?

Yes they are. Even the ones with boosts of similar function gets basic training. I would say it is similar to the military, you learn rifles and pistols, and if your position needs it, you learn heavier weapons.

What does the physical media situation currently look like since the internet is more like the 90s?

Thumb drives and memory sticks.

Has Ortega witnessed Sidestep having seizures (aside from if they had one during the Void raid)? Have the other Rangers and associated (Chen, Sentinel, Anathema, Pyrocblast)?

You know what, I am going to plead the fifth on that one.

Is Sidestep's 'don't notice me' field an offshoot of their thought-void (mentioned during the auction chapter). Also, how is a Re-Gene's thought-void made/achieved? Is it through the AI chip, modding, training/conditioning, drugs, something else?

I would say it is related in a way? But not the same. Sidestep's don't notice me thingy is an ACTIVE thing, they are using their telepathy to turn people's attention elsewhere. At this point it is nearly subconscious, a bit like you don't have to think about driving, but it is still an active thing. A thought-void is a PASSIVE thing. It is a way to silence your inner thoughts and give telepathy or empathy less things to pick up on. A bit like meditation. Empty your mind. Feel no fear or elation. Be in the moment, don't think too hard about things. React. A bit like sneaking but for the mind. Be quiet. This is helped by drugs, similar to the ones Dr. Mortum takes but in a lighter dose to lessen the side-effects.

Does Chen have any hearing loss?

Yeah. The explosion that list him his hands affected his hearing badly as well. He's been wearing a cochlear implant for decades, with increasingly good results and upgrades. He doesn't even think about it anymore, it's just another part of his body that needs special aid.

I'm sure theres a lot of fun planned in regards to ortega's rose-colored glasses coming off in regard to sidestep and their flaws, and obviously reckoning with the fact they're a villain and has done terrible things. I'm just curious if you have other things planned in the opposite direction— aka sidestep able to acknowledge that ortega's view of them is not entirely artificial/sentimental, and that they could have been/are still in some ways the kind of person ortega thinks they were?

Oh yeah. One of the reasons why I am writing this is to be able to explore change, not just in people around you, but also inside you. So absolutely!

Was Sunstream recruited before or after Hood's death? What did she think of Hood?

She was recruited just before Hood's death, I think she might have been with the team for a couple of months. I think she saw Hood as a respectable hero and good team leader, but they hadn't got close personally before he was killed.

Do you have any details about the other founding Los Diablos Rangers (aside from Connors) who worked with Hood and Sentinel? Did Chen and Ortega work with them?

I haven't detailed the first Los Diablos Ranger team yet, there's a story in there somewhere, but I don't have the cast yet.

Back in April 2021 you said Argent's favourite enemy to fight was the Crack, and that it was a 'big fight' and 'a massive brawl', is that still true? Does the Crack have hand to hand fighting capabilities?

One of the things Argent liked about the Crack was that they were hard to pin down. Most of the time they were what she would consider "a runner" and the whole thing was a chase more than anything. She always loved chases, the whole cat and mouse deal. But the times when she managed to corner them, the fight was always unpredictable. The Crack had very varied tactics, fast, but occasionally hard hitting. A fight or two escalated quite badly, mostly because the Crack had brought allies, which made everything even more chaotic. Argent likes being surprised.

Going off of that if it's still true. What does/did The Crack think about that fight?

Argent is TERRIFYING to fight! Keep her off them!

Was Psychopathor active as a villain before the Big One, or only after? (if it's the former, his dob in his Mitchell entry for 1971 seems way too early!)

He wasn't active before the Big One.

Would spoon sit still for his nails being painted? If Chen came home to find Step painted Spoon's nails is he exasperated, amused, or sappy? Would Chen let step paint his nails, and if yes, what color would he want or is it not his thing?

I mean if you catch Spoon when he's sleepy, no issue. Could paint his claws alright. Chen would think that Sidestep was going stir crazy, and as weird stuff to do while trapped inside he suppose it could be worse. He'd let Sidestep paint his nails too. He would NOT pick a color.

Since there's a Re-Gene with orange and white tattoos in the warehouse fight in Rebirth (he has green fire), how typical is it for Re-Genes to have tattoos of multiple colours?

I would say that about 25% of Re-Genes have dual colors. No three colors yet.

Have there been any instances of cuckoos being re-assigned to regular blugene teams (and given the appropriate colloidal silver additive)? Have any staff at the Farm fucked up and accidentally given a cuckoo colloidal silver? Or they realize that a blugene might've had powers better suited to be a cuckoo?

Cuckoos have been reassigned, but it is a rare thing, and most often done early in their career and combined with some sort of reset/mindwipe. The Farm is aware that there is a real danger of letting cuckoos who has experienced the world interact with normal re-genes.

What is going on in Chen's head during the reunion in rebirth?

"I don't even know half the pieces on this chessboard anymore. The only thing I do know is that everything has changed, and most likely not for the better."

What's some of Mortum's other food crimes aside from microwaving frozen pizzas, or slapping extra cheese on them, or the waffles with extra cheese and butter (from the old mortumstep story on tumblr)? Have they ever eaten icing/frosting directly from a tub?

Mortum is less of a sweet stuff food crimes person, and more of a fried/grease/cheese food crimes person. However I would say that they are very likely to be "Huh. Not much left in the freezer, how can I combine these things to get some food without having to go shopping because I've got work to do." So lots of odd combinations.

The relationship the Rangers & HG trio have with violence has been spoken about some but what's it like for Dove, Mortum, & Raider?

Dove is not a violent person. She can throw down, but rarely do. It's not in her interest. She's got a soft spot that she tries to hide. Mortum thinks violence is barbaric. They are not very good at it, though when they do they are quite ruthless. Sky-Raider is very used to violence, being ex-military. Sees it as a means to an end, not something he does for the fun of it. Though sometimes it is rather fun....

Did Owl ever have any other names in her vigilante career or was she always Owl?

She was always Owl.

Does Mortum ever visit their apartment or are they basically living full time in their lab since they fired their assistant?

I would say that it varies. 50% in their lab, they have an experiment now that demands quite a bit of attention.

If sidestep had not been a regene but the telepathy/heartbreak/capture scenario as in canon had still happened, would the farm have had to fight for "custody" of sidestep/had to contend with other institutions who might have wanted a look into heartbreak? Or did the farm have sole jurisdiction/awareness?

If the Farm had got there first, which they did, they wouldn't have told anybody. There are a lot of secrets at the Farm.

When Argent's nanovores intentionally kill someone does she try & make sure they're unconscious first or does she not care?

If she lets her nanovores intentionally kill someone, they are a bad enough person that they deserve to be awake for the experience. Argent has a quite ruthless streak.

Since we already have Jake's & Mortum's, what are the rest of The HG Trios+Villains birthdates/ages?

I don't know yet, I will finalize it when they get their Mitchell files.

Was it a deliberate choice for all 3 of the named regenes so far to have similarities with common horror villains (The Bodysnatcher, The Pallid Vampire, & The Bug Person) or is it just a coincidence?

That's just coincidence, I didn't even know that was a thing. I love horror, but I have never seen it systematized as that before. But then again I am pretty ignorant about tropes and stuff.

Would ortega's feelings be more hurt that Sidestep became a villain in part due to them, or the idea that when Sidestep became a villain they didn't think of Ortega at all?

The latter. Gotta remember Ortega's ego here.

So since argent bakes, does she use kitchen utensils or does she just turn her hands into a spoon/dough hook/whatever she needs at the time?

Gross! She uses utensils. She doesn't mix with her hands...

A kinda sport-y but very mundane question as someone who had been biking lately... Do any of the RO can bike? ...Exception is obviously Ortega who, we knew, had biked and had a motorcycle.

Ortega, Sky-Raider and Owl can and enjoys biking. (Owl and Ortega also likes actual bikes, the pedal kind). Dr. Mortum and Chen could drive a motorcycle, but it's not something they do often or by choice. Daniel and Argent has no idea. Argent kinda wants to learn though.

So the Special Directive was (officially) formed in 2005; up to then, were Re-Genes just deployed with handlers alongside the military before then? What's the purpose of having the Special Directive as opposed to the setup before - is it a response to the Panama human rights abuses scandal, or making 'official', so to speak, having entirely Re-Gene teams/cells? More black-ops leaning than outright warfare?

The Special Directive was indeed an attempt to create more organization, and better oversight. It was partly a response to Panama, though work had already begun before that. There had been several events of Re-Genes escaping/going out of control when deployed under ad hoc circumstances working with the military, and the current army leadership didn't like the idea of officially bringing them into their organization instead of as plausible deniability conflict firms. So the Special Directive was a compromise. Black ops, connected to the military, but not a part of it and under as much official oversight.

Does Sidestep's telepathy help with learning things (like languages, being tech-savvy, etc.)? & if so how does it compare to the normal people methods of learning?

It can. It speeds things up slightly since you don't have to ask questions and try to interpret answers. You can look under the hood, so to speak. Get a feel for things by observing and reading minds.

Is Sky-Raider's last name a reference to the default male Hawke's name from Dragon Age II?

Yep. My favorite DA protagonist.

Was Sky-Raider part of Chen's Trident team, or Task Force Arc?

Arc.

What did Sentinel get Chen tickets for in the Truths story?

Oh I don't remember, sorry to say. Most likely I never decided.

Considering underground structures tend to fare better against earthquakes & probably supervillain rampages too are earthscrapers an actual thing, at least on the west coast? A conceptual example of one: <http://www.bunkerarquitectura.com/the-earthscraper>

Oh I looove that idea. There is more underground structures in Los Diablos than LA, including the former subway. However, I think so far the underground structures are mostly by companies. Headquarters, laboratories and the like. As you say, good for security and stability.

Also, are arcologies an actual thing?

I think there are several projects like that dotted around the west coast, especially up in Washington state and Oregon, as part of trying to rebuild in a more ecological manner. Though the west coast prides itself on the lack of regulation, it also draws a lot of people and organizations who want to build back better and work with nature and not against it.

Would HG's obsession with their dead youngest sibling be more heavily fixated or less if their youngest sibling died younger? What about if they died older?

I literally have no idea.

Is there any particular reason why Mortum uses Jay as their cover name? I noticed while logging the forums that there used to be a distinction of Jaylen for Merle and Jayla for Mirlene

I liked the name, and I realized that the base stem of Jay would work for both male and female Mortum, no need to do two variants.

Additionally, how did Merle and Mirlene settle on their respective names? Did they go through a few first before deciding they liked Merle/Mirlene best? And when deciding on Dr. Mortum as their villain name, was that also to match their name? (more directly for authorial intent: did you pick M names for them to match Mortum?)

I did not intentionally pick M names. Mortum is one of the character who has been going through the most name changes, in the end I literally was sitting with a list of regional names scrolling down until I found something that felt right. I rarely have a plan with my names, it's just vibes.

How about for Sentinel with his name? How did he end up deciding on Luis?

His grandfather's name. He felt that was fitting.

Mortum's lab is pretty advanced and sprawling - can I ask, did they, or Vitruvian, take it over from a company? Perhaps one that came in the 90s when the FEZ was established? Seems unlikely that it was built relatively recently, especially since it's underground - I'd assume it's reinforced like a bunker for earthquakes too?

Oh yeah, the lab is not bespoke. The core is from the late nineties, and the majority of the space it has sprawled into now was originally underground storage space. Mortum wasn't even the first "private" owner, there was another villain who had it as a base before. Haven't detailed them, but Mortum worked with them on occasion, and when they were killed Mortum decided to take over the base while it was free.

Was Dr. Mortum's gender (not about them being trans, but in general) known when they were active as a villain? And since female villains are less common, did this affect things for Mirlene compared to Merle?

Mortum's gender was known, though not exactly something they drew attention to. I think Mirlene did feel more exposed, and was often typecast as Vitruvian's girlfriend to her chagrin.

What determines a thought's telepathic volume? Can you concentrate harder to make a thought louder?

You can absolutely focus on making them louder. Generally, the intensity of focus, and emotional level makes it louder. Earworms, intrusive thoughts, internal monologues, people who talk to themselves in their head are louder than others. But just like voice volume, it is rather personal.

If herald had to sit on someone to keep them down, would it be more or less effective than average due to his powers?

Less efficient. Would be smarter to lift them instead.

Has Halabi met Vitruvian? Has she worked with him?

She did meet him, but they never worked together.

Was Halabi and Mortum's falling out that they mention in the selfcrash puppetstuck route over Re-Genes specifically, or more generally over morals and the Re-Genes coming up in the middle of it?

Nope. Over a different thing you might find out.

What led Halabi to working on the wrong side of the law before going legit as a regular doctor for enhanced at the Memorial Hospital?

Money. She started at the legit side, and moonlighted for the wrong side of the law for quite some time. She tried not to do too nasty things, but at heart the money was too good to ignore. That and the option to work with things she wouldn't have encountered otherwise. In the end, that expertise led her to getting a better position at the memorial hospital.

Aside from their pain gates do Armadillo & Shroud have any mods? & would it be too much of a spoiler to know what they are?

Not really.

Do you have an approximate map of the various locations in Los Diablos are/what parts were changed like the coastline shape to keep track of where things are?

Nothing I am sharing yet, but there is a really fun thing I am working on that will get into that.

Whereabouts in the California countryside is the ranch if it's south east, in the desert and a few hours drive after getting clear of the LD traffic? There was also the mention of distant brown hills in the 1.1.4 preview

I have not specified a spot. I try not to do that, because then I can get people to tell me that things I write are wrong ;).

Does Ortega effectively have their own permanent room at the Memorial Hospital with how often they get injured and their mods being complicated/requiring regular specialist upkeep?

Not permanent, but there has been joke that they should get some sort of frequent visitor card.

If the Rangers turned villain who is most likely to change their suit/armor vs least likely from their Rangers gear?

They would all change!

Will we be able to completely cut off the rangers?

Not sure. It is a question of content, cutting out that completely would either mean writing the same amount of content for other things, or accept that the path is way shorter. I aim to try as much as possible, but I hope you realize that I need to pull the paths together a bit now.

How exactly does the boost drug work and what is the fluid it's made out of?

Look. It is science fiction drugs, I have no idea. It works because it needs to work for the story. The laws of physics and nature are not the same in that world as they are in ours.

Do Argent, Blaze, Zephyr, or any other characters that surf wear those stereotypical surfer necklaces? (Shark teeth, shells, etc.)

Zephyr. Absolutely.

Is downtown Los Diablos about the same area/location as it was/is for Los Angeles?

Not exactly, I am working on a proper map.

Was there a particular reason you chose to cut nuclear power from the FHR universe? Was it because the real world nuclear reactor sites on the West Coast and possible interactions with the Mammoth Lake supervolcanic explosion from the Big One possibly causing a nuclear winter if nuclear power was widespread like it is in our world?

It was mostly a consequence of deciding not to have any nuclear weapons, and essentially exchanging flight/missile/space/nuclear for mods/robots/humanoid armors/boosts. Since civilian nuclear power was so closely tied to the atomic weapons, I removed that as well. I'd love to add some nuclear disasters as well, but so far there is one single user of "atomic powers," and that's a boost.

[Questions for the month!](#)

[March 1](#)

Sorry I am a day late, please ask your questions for the month!

I'm getting ready to do a bit of a revamp of my patreon page to bring it up to day, I've overlooked it for too long. But real life... yeah 2025 doesn't let up.

[Memory Lane](#)

[February 23](#)

[Pending approval]

Transcript of an interview with Sentinel, formerly of the Los Diablos Rangers. Interviewer is Maria Falk of the Memorial Foundation. Prompt: Tell me in your own words what you remember from the Big One and what came after.

...

So how do you know when things are about to fall apart? The answer is, you don't. I don't even remember the before, not very well. It was same old same old, when I think back it feels like watching television. Seems so unreal. Like things were ever that easy. I know it wasn't, but it was carefree in a way I suppose? More predictable? Or maybe that was just because I hadn't needed to think about the future. Still in school. Had a job lined up during the holidays, so I was always busy. Nothing fancy, mind you. Just at a store my uncle owned, but it meant I didn't have to worry. Didn't have to think.

I was in school when it happened. I think. It's strange how I remember some things with absolute clarity and others are just gone. I remember the shaking first. A small jolt. Did the fire alarm go off? No. I think that came later. But I remember being ordered under the benches. One of the light covers came off, I remember that. Smashed into the floor. Someone screamed. I don't think it was me. A bench isn't big, you know. But there had been other quakes in the months leading up to this. Small ones. Ceiling tiles falling. Books. Rattling windows. So everyone waited for it to stop. And then it didn't.

Have you ever been on a boat? My dad fished. On the weekends. I came with him more often than not. The sea was great back then, the wind on your face. My grandfather used to run fishing tours back in Loíza... never mind. My point is that the ground felt like the ocean. When you get your boat stuck sideways, not facing the waves. The slow rolling, growing more intense. And it didn't stop. Just kept moving. And moving. There was a distant roar. People were screaming. Not sure if it was in our classroom or outside. Ceiling tiles rained down. Some of the lights. I remember seeing wires, wondering if the power had gone out. I don't remember, but I think it must have. It felt like it kept going for minutes. Maybe it did. Maybe it just felt like that. The walls made this terrible groaning sound. We were in one of the temporary buildings, just cheap wooden barracks because they were refurbishing our classroom. I can't remember if it was mold. But it saved my life.

The next thing I remember is being outside. I don't remember leaving, just the confusion of looking at the sky. Everyone was covered in pale, gray dust. My eyes itched. The sun looked strange. The world looked strange. I don't think I understood what had happened. Why everything looked different. Was so bright. It took me a moment. Sorry. It's... I don't mean to let this get to me, it's stupid considering everything I saw later, but this was the first time, you know? Seeing the world break in front of me knowing nothing would ever be the same again.

I don't remember screams. I know there must have been. I remember everything sounding muted. Maybe my hearing had been damaged. I remember the initial roar, but then nothing. Maybe it was shock. I remember looking at the pile that had been our four-story schoolhouse and not understanding what I was looking at. It felt like a book. Like walking through a magical portal and ending up somewhere else. I don't think I really got it back then. I do now. Our schoolhouse had been concrete. Built in the sixties maybe? It wasn't new. But it wasn't old. One of those big, ugly concrete buildings. All square and practical. It had shaken apart at the seams. Pancaked. Slabs on slabs on slabs. I remember seeing... sorry. It took me a moment. To. The concrete dust covered everyone you see. The bodies were as gray as the concrete. What you could see. I. I remember. Blood is shockingly red and wet when everything is gray. It was... I suppose it doesn't matter.

Everything was confused after that. I remember being ushered around. Doing what I was told. I don't know if it was a teacher. Or rescue services. I just don't know. There's been a lot of blame thrown around in the aftermath, but I think everyone did their best. It was just so much. The quake had been massive. The Big One. Everything was broken. Power. Pipes. Roads. Buildings. What could anybody do? When the fires started, the firetrucks didn't even have water. Nothing was whole. People were trapped. More buildings came down in the aftershocks, but most people had escaped by then. The car alarms were everywhere. Screaming. People. Machines. Buildings. The inside of my head. Sorry. It's been a while since I thought about this.

We were far enough from the ocean that I never even knew there had been a tsunami. It wasn't as bad here as in other places further north, but it still demolished everything down there. Our main fear was the fires. That's the thing. Fires need to be put out. You need water. And hoses. Or rain. This was late in the year. Everything was dry. It all went up... I don't even know... It was chaos. I don't know who took charge. If anyone did. A crowd of people have a life of its own. Moves. Someone says they spotted help, and people move there. Others say the see fire, and people run. Some were trampled. Some were left behind. I don't remember. I remember wanting to survive. I didn't know where anybody was. Friends. Family. Gone. The quake wasn't the worst part, that really was the fire that came afterward. How can you help a city? How can you help a coastline? It was everywhere. Everyone was on their own.

I don't know how I survived that first week. Los Angeles really got a raw deal. Trapped between the oceans and the hills. Between the fires and the waves. What one didn't take, the other did. And the earthquake and aftershocks brought down the middle. And still a lot of people survived. Most. I never knew there so many people in the city. Everyone used to stay inside, you know. And now everyone was in the street. In improvised tents in parking lots. Afraid of the buildings still standing. The nights were bright, I remember that. In the daytime you only saw smoke and dust, but at night you could see the fires. All the nice little neighborhoods. Wooden houses who had survived the quake. On fire. Gone. I couldn't go home. I knew that. I'm sorry. It must sound confusing. Because it was. I think some people took charge. Looted stores. Distributed food and water. I don't think it was the police. Not that it mattered.

It was around the time the army moved in when the sky turned gray. There had been helicopters. Rumors of setting up camps, or evacuations. I don't know what was the truth, at that point people were speaking wishes out loud hoping they'd turn true. I had hit a grown man in the balls because he tried to take my water bottle, I'd lost my illusions that people knew what was going on by then. Survive. I had a knife. A baseball bat. There were some girls I was with at the time. Women. Keeping an eye on each other when we slept. I don't even remember their names now. Not sure if I want to. There comes a time when you stop seeing the people you lose. Keep moving forward and eventually everything gets left behind. Everyone looks the same covered in ash.

I don't know if I heard the eruption. Or if it was thunder. I probably did, but it's strange. I remember details. Sights. Not sounds. It really did look like the end of the world. This massive shape towering to the skies. Clouds billowing upwards wreathed in lightning. I remember the awe. The stark beauty of it all. Seeing something that dwarfs you. Makes you insignificant. It was like looking at God, waiting to be swept from the face of the earth. For people back there I suppose it was. We were far away enough. Or maybe I didn't see it. I'm honestly not sure. You hear enough people telling you about it. See it enough on the television later. I know you want to hear my story, but at this point I'm not even sure it's mine anymore.

Let me explain. When I look back I remember seeing things from afar. Up high. Good views. Nice shots. An overview. Calculated. I can't have seen all those things, I was in the middle of it. Down on the street. Dust and bodies and crowds and panic. I have no grand story to tell. No striking visuals. No heroic escapes or rescues. I didn't dig people out from buildings. I didn't carry babies for miles to be evacuated. And yet it's there now. In me. Because of what I was told. Documentaries. Pictures. Things I saw and could remember properly. Where I could think "here I was at the end of the world." Maybe that's why I don't remember sounds. I wish the smells would go away too. Most of them came later. Humans. Dead humans smell. It's not something you can mistake. So I can't trust my memories. They're not just mine anymore. They're everyone's.

What I am sure of is that I tried to get to the evacuation points. I don't think I wanted to run, but I had this feeling that was the target. The goal. If we got there the nightmare would end. But the ash was falling thicker. They set up boats. Got a lot of people out that way. The helicopters couldn't fly for long. But the ships could. That's when I saw what had happened to the shoreline. I didn't recognize anything. Or anybody. Underwater landslides had caused the tsunami. I didn't learn that until later. Landslides. I never thought the land under the surface was as steep as above it. Water. Shaking. Things come down. It feels like that was me. A landslide. On the inside. Moving slowly, wiping away everything.

You know, to this day I'm not sure why I didn't panic. Or looked for my parents. It felt like there was a me that existed before the disaster, with parents and friends and a future. And then another one after it, who was alone. It was like I didn't have it in me to worry about others. I assumed they were dead. I assumed I would be soon too. Find food. Find water. Walk. I didn't have room in me to care. Like something had been shut off in order to keep me moving. Everything I did felt logical at the time. And now? I don't know. How can I blame the person I was? I remember looking at the crowds assembled, the coughs, the injuries, the panic. So many people. So few ships. And the smell...

I'm sorry. I suppose you'd want more details but I don't remember. I think everyone did their best, but there was just so many people. And Los Angeles was just one city. Where would help come from? The odds were not in my favor, so I left. I know it sounds stupid. Suicidal. And maybe I was. But I think I just wasn't feeling anything. It was logic. Finding food and water for one person was doable. I needed clothes. And equipment. And a weapon. Not everyone would be able to be evacuated, and it would be hell on earth for those that remained. Better to be prepared. It made sense. God help me, it really did. Still does.

I found air filters. Masks. Some goggles, because let me tell you, ash hurts. It's not soft, like it looks. It's sharp and stings, and will cut your lungs and eyes. The eruption was distant enough I didn't fear any lava, the ash was bad but I could deal. Found a knife. Found a gun. Found some people I thought I could trust. I was wrong. Then I was alone again. It felt safer. Sooner or later the ash would stop. I think I still was under the impression things would blow over by then. That I could hike south, walk myself out of this mess. I didn't know the whole coastline was affected. I had no idea how bad it was. How the eruptions affected air traffic. The emergency declaration. The order to shelter in place.

Shelter in place. It still pisses me off. It was a death sentence, that's what it was. Admitting that people could not be rescued. That they would die. How many were trapped in houses with caved-in roofs from the ash once the rain came? How many stayed too long? That bastard could have leveled with us and told the truth. That we had to rescue ourselves. Try to walk out of there. Not my president. Never my president. I was too young to have voted, and now we can't, you know? No presidents here. They abandoned us. Shelter in place. Asshole.

No, I don't know how many died. I know the official numbers are too low. A lot of people weren't registered. A lot of bodies were never found. I don't think the population numbers for Los Angeles before the quake were correct either. That's just the official ones. We all know there's a world of people out there under the radar. The earthquake didn't care. Neither did the fire. Or the ash. I think more people left than died. I think less people stayed than died. I didn't get very far. Made decisions I weren't proud of. Survived. Somehow.

That's the story you really want, isn't it? What made me do it? Take the boost drug? I wish there was a story there. Some grand plan. Desperate circumstance. The truth is that I got the option offered to me. A man dispensing it for free, talking about some grand plan. The future of humanity. I was just one of many. Hundreds. I think he was raising an army. I didn't really listen, he was just another guy with a mission, who'd be dead soon enough. Why I wasn't yet I had no idea. Maybe because I never panicked. Thought before I acted. Didn't care. Yeah. I really didn't. Just enough to keep going. I remember looking at the ampule. Not a pill. I've always heard it was a pill you took. This looked... professional I suppose is the word. Not something cooked up in a backyard lab. It even had a needle injector attached. I think you were supposed to slam it against your thigh and it would inject the drug.

I never learned who the man was. If he had stolen a shipment or something. It felt like army stuff. Maybe. I hear many army bases were evacuated too. But what would the army be doing with boost drugs? Back then it didn't make sense, but now it does. Too much. Not that it matters. I remember heading back to my squat, it was three floors up in an old building. It had tilted in the quake but not fallen, but it looked rickety enough that nobody bothered to look for people there. I figured that if I had survived the aftershocks it'd survive everything. Or maybe I was hoping it would collapse on me in my sleep. Maybe that's why I injected the drug on the balcony. The view was breathtaking. You have no idea how glorious the sunsets were back then, the sky painted black, red, and orange.

It wasn't a suicide attempt, I need to make that clear. And I need to say that nobody should take that drug. Ever. Most people don't survive a gunshot to the head. Some do. I did. And the strange thing is... I was sure I would. I wasn't afraid when I injected myself, it felt natural. Like this was what I had waited for since the quake. A new path. A new world. A new me. It felt like I had pressed pause when the quake happened, my life on hold, my emotions buried. And now I pressed the button again letting everything flood back.

It hurt. Not in a way I could describe. Not a pain from the outside, like when you hit your elbow wrong. Not a pain from the inside, like a headache or a stomach ache. It was inside, yes, but more... in a strange place. Like the inside of my skin. Like I was suddenly aware that there was a barrier there, between muscles and skin. I don't know how to find the right words. I was aware of parts of my body I had never realized I had. And all of them hurt. It felt like I was coming apart at the seams, as if any sudden moment would cause me to split open like a rotten fruit. I didn't dare to move. I didn't dare to breath. I sure as hell didn't scream.

It lasted longer than the earthquake. Everything had turned dark outside. The ash had started falling again. I couldn't see anything. I could feel the moisture of my own breath through the mask. I didn't dare to move. You've ever had bad cramps? It was like that moment when you know that if you tense a muscle it will cramp. And hurt. So all you can do is relax despite the pain and wait until it passes. I'd been doing that for over a year at that point. Wait until it pass. And it never did. It kept on. I think I was feverish. I was seeing things. Nothing that made sense. Colors. Waves. Patterns. Like sunlight on water, blinding, not making sense. I remember focusing on my breaths. The one thing I had control of.

I don't know if it was the next day I came to my senses. Or if it had been more than one. I was parched. Filthy. My body had lost control of... well, everything. My stomach felt empty. Hollow. Everything hurt. I had to crawl back inside. Drink some water. Puke. Drink some more. Eventually I kept it down. Could shed my clothes. Wipe myself down. I remember laughing. Hysterical. Probably. Everything hurt. I don't know why I was so focused on the fact that I didn't have a tail. If I was disappointed or grateful. Maybe both. I ate some peanut butter and fell asleep.

Some say being boosted is some grand revelation. It wasn't for me. It was pain and grossness, weeks of returning fevers. I thought I was dying. But I didn't mind. I must have lost a lot of weight. Didn't have much to start with. Felt like a strong wind could blow me away. Yeah. I can laugh about that now. I don't even know when I noticed. How often do you notice the wind when it doesn't fight you? It's just there. And it was for me. Took a few months of the wind at my back and the ashes being kept at bay. Strong gusts blowing ash to hide me. Cool winds on a hot day. No winds on chilly ones.

It sounds petty, and I suppose it was. And yet, here I am. Powers are like any muscle. You need to train it to get better. And I did. The first time I flew it was like magic. Like falling. I couldn't hear anything over the roar, but through the goggles I saw the ground. Saw the city. Saw the coast. I had this kite I had built. It helped keep me aloft. I could glide. Rise higher. Learn to sail the wind. I think that's when I realized the scale of the disaster. From above. The ruins... and yet. There was smoke there. Not wildfires but cooking fires. There were people. Traveling by road had been hazardous and slow, but now that I had the skies? I could go anywhere. Anywhere but there. The city of devils.

I'd return, of course. Years later. Not alone. But I've talked enough for now. Do your transcript and let's see if you have any more questions later. It's important to preserve history. I get that. That's why I agreed to an interview now that I was back in town on business.

[December and January fused QnA!](#)

[February 9](#)

Slowly catching up on things! Here are the answers to your questions.

If Sidestep uses their "Don't notice me" to make someone not detect them, but someone with telepathic immunity was present would that person be able to weaken that aura? Example, step did it to Danial and Ortega was there and called attention to it, would Danny be able to see/notice step again?

It would all depend on how strong or obvious the various interactions are. Let's say it's an unfocused general don't notice me aura aimed to just have a cup of coffee in peace. Daniel and Ortega walks by. Daniel doesn't notice, fooled by the aura. Ortega notices and says "hey, there's Sidestep, let's go over and say hello." At that point Daniel might go "huh? Where?" If Ortega points out Sidestep, then Daniel will most likely see them, though there might be a moment of "are you sure it's just not someone who looks like them." If, on the other hand, it is a more active thing focused on not being seen, let's say hiding as a villain while being chased by Herald and Charge. Then Herald would not be able to see them, and might start to worry that Charge is seeing things, or worse, fighting thin air. As this might collapse the illusion eventually it would be smarter at that point to change the impression that Herald sees so it looks Ortega might be attacking an innocent civilian or something.

Since Hollow Ground is about the Art Of Coffee, on a scale of 1 to "hunt you down with a broom" angry would they be if Sidestep replaced their coffee water with hotdog water?

Oh it would be hunt you down with a broom levels of wrath! That is cruel! Blow up the house instead why don't you, instead of making me taste that atrocity.

How would the Rangers react to a Sidestep having a completely different side they never knew about to people like their family? Possibly even the direct opposite to how they know them? Put-off? Convinced Step is lying? How would Ortega feel, since they believe they know Step best?

I don't think anybody would react in a weird way. A lot of people have different faces they only show to certain people, most of the cast have similar things going on. It's not a lie to have more sides. Ortega might be delighted or horrified depending on what they see...

If Sidestep has a fondness for taking care of Ortega, or otherwise seeing them (emotionally) vulnerable, letting down their guard/be emotionally intimate in return: would Ortega be encouraged to take those opportunities to get closer again to them? Or would they struggle to take it, given how averse they are to dropping their mask?

If Ortega will be dropping their mask, it would be for Sidestep. Being emotionally vulnerable is hard, but sometimes you need to be brave.

Would they be above using a wounded gazelle gambit to try and get more of Sidestep's attention/affection if so?

I would like to be able to say no, believe me, I would. But it is Ortega... so they might play things up a little with a glint in their eye.

What do Re-Genes in general know about their Re-Gene nature (being stem-cell clones, how they're created, etc.)? How is this information obtained?

They are told exactly what they are (in the crudest possible way), organic copies grown for combat and implanted with the memories of real people. Most have seen the growing facility in passing, it is part of where they are assessed and inducted. The Farm wants them to know they are products, not people.

How does the Farm determine each Re-Gene's special dietary needs?

They have a basic nutritious diet, and each Re-Gene's health is continually assessed to see if they need more vitamins and trace elements, proteins for muscle building, carbohydrates for power consumption, allergy restrictions, and so on. It starts out all the same for everyone, and eventually gets very specialized depending on their needs. A meal is still a similar base meal for most, the individual requirements added as a side dish style thing, or pills whether is simpler.

How fast is Zephyr?

As fast as they need to be in the book, I haven't specified. Faster than Herald's top speed is all I know for sure.

Does Zephyr have any opinion over Blaze's choices in partners? Namely his insecurities around his sexuality?

Zephyr doesn't know about that, but would have a laugh about it if he did. Imagine getting hung up over something like that.

Does Blaze ever sass back at Zephyr when they're being a little shit, and he's *not* on the clock?

On occasion, but he's not as good at it. It's often amounts to nothing more than throwing gasoline on the fire, so it's easier to be stoic about it.

Has Blaze ever saved people from being devoured by the nanovores by burning them mid-feeding, or did he have to mercy kill them when they latched on? If it's the former: is that where his fine control of his power came from?

He certainly saved himself that way. I think he attempted to save people, but most ended up being mercy killings instead. This was partly due to control issues, but mostly because for many the nanovores went through the mouth and nose into the lungs early on, and for the others trying to burn them off would cause third degree burns, and unless they were right at the edge of the swarm and could run or be carried away it would only be a stopgap measure as more would swarm in. I think he and Zephyr saved one or two as a tag team, with Blaze burning off the nanovores and Zephyr immediately carrying the victim away with bad burns.

Before the nanosurge, what did Blaze primarily use his boost for?

He was a member of the Long Beach heroes. I would say it was often used for intimidating, melting things, setting things on fire, and so on. It would get many to back down and make a run for it. He also had what he called his "bulletproof aura" which was basically high level heat close to his body which would melt and soften bullets. Lead melts fast. Of course being splattered with molten lead is not nice either, but his heat-resistant skinsuit had an easier time dealing with that than the bruise and possible penetration of an impact. In a more gentle way he often used it to keep people warm, especially after rescuing or helping people who had been in the water. He was also very popular in the surfing community, hanging out near him on a cold day after having gone in the water was very comfortable.

Since Zephyr got to be a hero for money and fame, how do they feel about their fan club value being at 10?

Zephyr wants to be at the top. But you need to do some cool spectacular shit for that. They hope the Guardians will get the chance.

Which rangers feel the easiest to hardest to write?

It depends on my mood. They are all very easy to write for me, I just need to slip into the mindset.

We are aware that while possessive Ortega doesn't equivalent to jealous, we can kinda make them be a little jealous with Dani if we push the date topic. So, is there a particular order of which Ranger Ortega would be more "jealous" of if Sidestep spend more time with them than Ortega?

Hmmm. I think Daniel is at the top of that list because of Ortega's insecurities, and the fact that they can see that Daniel might be set up to be the the next cool thing, much like they were in the past. Also, there is a slight tension between them that's not there with Argent. She's just a little gremlin, Ortega gets that. Daniel... they doesn't. Not yet. Chen would be in the middle, mostly baffled surprise that it happened.

And what would Ortega feel realizing that Sidestep doesn't exactly dislike Ortega being jealous or possessive? Besides annoyingly smug. Just to clarify, I mean Jealousy as in the fun non-toxic "puppy" version.

Ortega would like it. That would mean Sidestep appreciated and wanted their attentions.

How adept were the old rangers and hood in hand-to-hand combat? compared to maybe tech + fighter step?

Oh boy, I am not sure entirely. I haven't thought about those comparisons. I would say that the ones I have thought about, Hood and Sentinel, would be matching a Fighter Sidestep but in different ways. Hood would be worse technically, but his powers was so integrated in how he fought that gives him a big boost. Sentinel was also technically worse but very good at spotting openings and exploiting them ruthlessly.

What was the general opinion among villains about Sidestep before their "death",

It varied greatly. Many laughed them off as a sidekick, while others swore they were dangerous as hell and never to underestimate them. Probably one of the more divisive vigilantes when it came to that. In general, villains who had encountered Sidestep understood they were dangerous, while the others made fun of them.

What martial arts would a fighter sidestep know?

I leave that up to headcanon! They would have been taught a mixture of things at the farm, not pure forms, more akin to things taught in the army.

Does Chen feel a kinship of sorts with lesbian Sidesteps? And when they're in a relationship with Julia does that ever make him reconsider being more open about his own sexuality?

I think Chen would. Especially if said Sidestep would have pined after Ortega with the Hidden Crush variable (which he might have spotted) or admitted to that after becoming friends on Rebirth. He has pined after enough straight men in the past to understand the nervousness and hesitation to bring things up in the open. It is likely he might start to open up about things at this point, as worry about Ortega's reaction is one of the reasons he hasn't brought it up before.

Is there anything else like Epilepsy that acts as a natural block against telepathy?

Not to the same extent, but there are other brain-related things that can influence things. We will be getting into one of them in game (there are already clues there).

Is there a level of infantilization that happens at the farm, like towards cuckoos perhaps? If so, would Regina have ever treated Sidestep in that way?

Not in that way. Treating cuckoos as children might give the wrong impression. If anything they are treated as functional adults/machines early on, and assumed to be competent even when they are not.

Will it be possible to work together with the imposter, such as in a fight?

Yep.

Will there be an opportunity in the puppet stuck route to embrace the role of Ace? I.e. deciding that they don't want to be Sidestep anymore, and wish to stay inside of the puppets body?

I know some Sidesteps will definitely feel that, but I am not sure how I will play it. I fear it will introduce escalating variables on a scale that will dwarf retribution so we will see. But rest assured, I get it.

How are intersex cuckoos handled at the Farm given that there's a very rigid gender binary cuckoos are meant to ascribe to?

Like in our real world (sadly) they are prescribed a gender to act as, regardless of what might be in their pants. No operations or anything (unless medically necessary) because nobody is expected to see a cuckoo without clothes.

In true typical younger sibling style, how does Hollow Ground deal with getting called ugly by their sibling who's an exact mirror of them?

Oh Hollow Ground has too much ego to be affected by that.

Hood was Ortega's mentor, right? did step know him too? what was their relationship like?

Sidestep never met Hood. But they have heard a lot of stories, and have a good impression of him as a sort of father figure to Ortega (and Anathema).

Following up on the "Rangers finding out Sidesteps true age" (no I am not obsessed, of course not) who would be team "You never had a childhood, I will show you a good one!" and who would be "Hah at least you never had a shit childhood!"

I think most of them would be "okay, good to know, let's never talk about this again because I have no way to talk about this without everything start sounding creepy. If you ever want to talk, cool, otherwise let's just pretend this never happened."

Let's say the main cast, including the non psycho murdering villian sidestep, is forced to watch a movie marathon, every single lord of the rings movie, including the Hobbit trilogy, who suffers, who enjoys?

Chen suffers but has Spoon in his lap so he is trapped. Daniel admires the physical props. Ortega snores loudly at many points during the Hobbit movies. Argent argues movie trivia with everyone, to her surprise mostly with Daniel. A small bonding moment there. Where Sidestep will fall on that scale is entirely dependent on character.

If the catfiend was sane right now, what would they think, say, do besides just munching boosts?

Spoiler.

What's the general outlook on heroes killing villains or criminals? I know most hero universes consider it evil, and Charge took the blame for killing void I wanted to know what the whole look in killing badguys is.

It is frowned on, but also recognized as sometimes necessary. It always leads to an investigation, but just like with cops, there's rarely even a slap on the wrist. Still, the Rangers in particular is supposed to be an example of the rule of law. The biggest risk seen with heroes killing villains is that it might be an early sign of heroes snapping, it has happened before. If it happens more than once, or during not life-threatening circumstances, the sponsor of the hero might make a move to get them help. What happened with Five Pennies was a wakeup call, the line between villain and annoying civilian can be thin...

Hi!, I wanted to ask is there any point for a sidestep who's gone on the "villain route" as in bombing the museum in book 1, killed captain blaze and basically been as murky as possible in trying to "redeem" themselves or are they permanently public enemy number 1?

What is redemption? What is public enemy number 1? For a Sidestep like that, they won't ever win any popularity contests or be trusted as a hero no matter how good their cause might have been. Will it stop people working with them against a greater threat? Probably not, at least for some. You can't turn back the clock, but it is possible to move forward.

Oh and also how would the others react to finding out sidestep is actually this murky villain?, especially a romanced Herald or Ortega?

That you will have to find out in game!

How high up Ortega's shit list would Sky-raider be if Ortega knew what happened to their Lambo?

Not as high as you'd think, but he'd certainly be on there. Ortega would admire his balls though, but material possessions like that are not the way to really piss them off.

Has there ever been any significant push to have Los Diablos go back to being Los Angeles? And what's the demonym for people that live in LD?

I think there has been a lot back east, may of the people who were evacuated from there in the days after the Big One still calls it Los Angeles, and lobbies for it to be returned to that name. But, as it is currently not under US control, there is no way to do so. In fact, the name has become sort of a symbol of the free western territories, a way to show that they are now independent and no longer part of the country that they (rightfully or not) felt abandoned them. There are movements in some of the other cities to rename them too, but it hasn't gained enough traction to make it happen. I do not speak enough Spanish to make up a good demonym, feel free to suggest one!

when sidestep checked finch's office for bugs, did finch charge the standard hourly rates while she's standing there watching them scour the entire room top to bottom? or was this a "breaks into the office after-hours and checks" sort of deal?

Ahaha oh that is the funniest visual yet. Sadly, Sidestep did it after hours. While they were certain they could have manipulated Dr. Finch into not remembering anything strange, if there really had been cameras they would have picked them out, and Sidestep couldn't risk being spotted on a live feed. This was a simple break-in and scan operation, not in armor, but masked. As they didn't find anything, they didn't have to stage a burglary as cover.

At this point, would it be possible to remove all of Ortega's mods with him being able to live afterwards (even if paralytic)? Or has he been so modded that the only option would be to turn off his generator and hope he makes it through?

I mean... most likely yes. But it's complicated and the quality of life might be debatable. Downgrading the mods to simpler, safer ones would probably be the best option, and most likely what has come up with the Ranger's medical staff if retiring has been discussed. The spine is manageable, but at this point there's a lot of neural integration to control the generator which still has unknown long-term effects.

Alcatraz island is somewhat infamous for its history as an island prison and it's supposed hauntedness. What is it's current status in FHR's more esoteric setting and after Big One devastated the West Coast? Is it still in use as a prison? Did Lord Ember add a fake volcano and uses it as his secret base?

Oh it is the "official" Lord Ember base! Not with a fake volcano though, and in reality it is not his real base. He just uses it for vibes, and as a magnet for heroes out to prove themselves. It is heavily fortified and home to some of his lieutenants who have problems fitting into normal society due to eyecatching mods or boosts.

Does Spoon try to eat birds? Like pigeons for example?

Eat? No. Chase? YES!

How long was Heartbreak boosted for before they escaped?

Not sure exactly, I would say maybe a year or two?

Is the Mortum gun vacation the most damaged the Catfiend has ever been?

Yes. That damage went deep.

Would Mortum's Gun have ever killed the Catastrofiend, on a long enough timescale?

Yes. Hmmm. Shit. Maybe? No. I would still say yes, but with an asterisk because honestly... maybe I am just hoping that would work.

What would happen if Mortum's Gun was just shot at the ground?

As part of the "aiming system" for the gun includes a "focus," it would depend. Let me explain. As you activate the gun and aims it at something there is an "autofocus" function that locks onto the object it is aimed at before pulling the trigger. This is to determine the outline of the object it should "remove." This is generally controlled by an algorithm able to guesstimate things like whether it is a human, what is a car and what is the ground and so on. If needed, one can go into the settings and control this manually. Dr. Mortum had it hooked up to their visor at the time so they had full control of the teleporting parameters, but the gun does a decent job on its own. The big issue is that, just like with autofocus, objects which as not easy to discern or focus on will be hard to pick out. Aiming it at a safe in the wall might remove either the door or the safe, it's a coin toss which. That's when the manual setting comes in. So, to get back to your question, it would depend. If there is an object on the ground it can pick out and focus on, like a rock, an ice-cream wrapper, it might just pick up on that and remove the object. If you set the focus manually you can remove parts of the ground. In general, the wider the area, the more shallow the depth.

Alright, in the spirit of Christmas, if I forced the ROs to choose between a sexy Christmas sweater or ugly Christmas sweater, which would they pick?

Oh this is surely a trick question, whether a Christmas sweater is sexy or ugly depends on the wearer, not the sweater. Sorry, Ortega took over the keyboard to answer that question.

What are the most common powers people gain from boosting?

Generally heightened physical abilities. Faster, stronger, more durable. They are the least likely to kill someone during the change, and as many who take the boost drugs suffer from various ailments where they feel it's worth a shot to try something as risky as this, that also heightens the odds.

Can Hollow Ground thread animals? If so, what kinds?

No. Animals don't understand them. Not even dogs.

Does Elena's ranch have a name?

Probably but I have not come up with one yet!

Did Catastrofiend ever hire henchman or was it always a one (iron) man band? And if yes how badly did the henchmen regret their life choices?

I think it didn't hire henchmen, but it did work with others early in its career. It wasn't known as bad to work with then, but things have escalated since then.

Would HG fixate as heavily on Sidestep if their younger siblings was still alive, but Sidestep was still cloned from their sibling's genes? How would they treat Sidestep who is clearly their blood, but without the hole in the family that their sibling left?

No. Not as heavily. There would be markedly less trauma of being the only one left. However, they would still see Sidestep as family, even to the point of arguing with their younger sibling "Look, it's not bad a deal having an evil twin. Why not try to get along?"

Does skyraider dye his hair at home or get it professionally done? If at home does he do it himself or have a friend help him

Oh this is a home job. He does it himself.

Was Mortum trans in the original book, or was this a change made when Fallen Hero became an IF?

As there was no romance with Dr. Mortum in the book, I had not even thought about that. But since writing the book made me run headfirst into my own gender issues to the point of going oh fuck, I don't think so. However, just like with Ortega, the Dr. Mortum in the book was a different person than the one I discovered as I wrote the game. If I remember correctly his name was Eric Arsenaux, and that might give you a hint of what the rest of that character was

used for. Unlike Ortega our current Dr. Mortum was not taken from another book in progress. Fun unrelated fact, my partner's unpublished comic script which originally was the inspiration for the writing experiment that became Fallen Hero had a trans woman being the love interest of the main character, so in a vague way those vibes have been there from the start.

Sidestep says in chapter 24 that the nanovores' original function was as medical units, was this something they found out during their second Farm stay given you said sidestep interfaced with the nanovores back in the june qna?

No, this wasn't something unknown. I wouldn't say well known, but the Rangers certainly had access to that information. Sidestep most likely learned about it during the first briefing of the Nanosurge, if they didn't know it before.

Based off the epilogue scene between Blaze and Zephyr, is Temerain the Celia he's telling Zephyr to bother, or is it a different person? And if it's the latter, what's Temerain's name?

Yeah, that is Celia!

Was the mayor before Alvarez called Lehmann, or Geoff Hansen?

I don't think I have ever decided on an official line of mayors and their names, but you might get one eventually.

Would Mortum's powers fall under Delta or Gamma classification?

Is getting a TBR more or less mandatory to reach Alpha level, or are there exceptions to this where you can immediately start out with Alpha level powers/train them up?

Mortum would be a very low Delta class or a high Gamma class. It could go either way. I'd say low Delta. I would say that in 60% of the cases a Traumatic Boost Reaction is needed to get to Alpha level. Boosts can immediately start with them, but at that level the chances of survival is a lot lower due to their powerful nature. Some can train their powers to Alpha level, but it would depend on the nature of the powers. You can train control and refinement, but you can't train raw power. So if you are close to Alpha level it might work.

Is telepathy in this setting mutually exclusive with telekinesis?

No. But neither are they connected. I don't think I have a classic telepathy/telekinesis boost yet, but there's no guarantee they can't exist.

Does the Farm have a different name for the Heartbreak Incident? Or do they call it that?

That has become the official name.

How did Sentinel come to realize he was trans?

Through years of living it. The line between butch lesbian and trans man was something he lingered on for quite a while before settling on what felt the most natural. He would have transitioned earlier if he hadn't been in the public eye as much, but there came a point when he just was 'fuck it' and decided to go for it. I think the tipping point was when he realized how good it felt when people didn't recognize him and called him "sir." That it felt right.

So what happens if Ortega gets a really hard punch to the gut with that reactor of his?

It is one of Ortega's weaker point, but the reactor is in no danger of being damaged. However, it is a hard object in a soft body, and getting it jostled will hurt. In their skinsuit there's no issue as it hardens with impact, but out of it that's a vulnerability.

How many times has Anathema had Void blood? I think you've said they've taken the boost drug several times after they got their invulnerability powers, so was getting the acid powers before or after they escaped the cult with Hood?

Anathema was given the Void blood sacrament on the regular. Most of the time it did nothing, but eventually the acid started working. That was during the stay with the cult, and many of the underground tunnels in the compound were carved by Anathema with their acid powers.

Has non secret identity boss Sidestep edited their crew's memories to make them think they've seen their boss and the puppet in a room at the same time?

I will leave that to how ruthless of a Sidestep you have, but I can say that they have definitely dissuaded stray thoughts on the subject.

After Heartbreak, did Ortega start seeing ghosts of Sidestep before their generator upgrade or only after?

Before.

Is Owl a boost? If so, what are her powers, and why did she take the boost drug?

Owl is a boost! It's mostly heightened senses based, but there might be other things too I won't detail just yet. She has not let anybody know why she took the boost drugs.

Have you ever read Parahumans/Worm or at least know about it? Nest in the July 2022 qna seems like a reference to Wildbow's Skitter

I have no idea what that is! But looking it up, I am intrigued! Looks like it was written around the same time I did my Supervillain Writing Experiment in the good old Livejournal days.

What were Sentinel's thoughts on Ortega replacing Hood as Marshal? Whatever they were, did he keep those opinions to himself or did Ortega know/suspect?

Sentinel understood why Ortega was picked, and did not oppose it. However, he did not promote it, and was one of the people warning that it might be a good idea. At the time he didn't think Ortega was mature enough to handle it, and had a few very open arguments with Ortega about it. This was no secret, one of the reasons why Sentinel was not picked was that he tended to speak his opinions a bit too loudly and caustically for most people. After a year or so, Sentinel admitted that he had misjudged Ortega and that they'd been the right choice.

After learning that Sidestep had survived the Heartbreak Incident, did Mortum have any theories about their faked death and why it was covered up so thoroughly?

Oh yes. Oh my yes. You will most likely learn about them in game.

How would Mortum describe their sexuality and how does their gender identity interact with it, if at all? When did they realize they were trans?

Mortum knew they were bisexual before they transitioned. They had never seen a love life as a priority, and while I am not sure they'd see themselves as demisexual, that fits pretty good. Work comes first, but when they fall, they fall hard. Mortum realized they were trans during their college years. A new setting. Living among strangers. All sorts of new things to explore. Seeing lived examples. University support groups. All things to make them aware that it was an option, and once they had thought the thought that was it. It took years from realizing to transitioning though, like most personal matters it was less of a priority than work. It was only when they had an (in their eyes) stable job as a researcher that they dared to start explore those parts, which led to a collapse of their romantic relationship at the time and a lot of nasty fallout.

When did Mortum start medically transitioning? And presumably since they're using implants for their HRT, are these implants of their own make, since they're used to modwork?

In their early twenties. The implants are not of their own make, there are much more skilled people for that.

Was there strange psychic/haunted vibes at the Heartbreak site *before* Project Stripes began?

I mean... a whole lot of people died during the Big One. The whole city has haunted vibes.

Could Anathema eat a bomb?

Technically they could melt it in acid and drink it. They can't bite through or chew metal. They could eat C4 though.

Could Anathema have eaten the nanovores and stopped them that way?

I mean... Huh. I think the issue would be catching them. You'd need some sort of Anathema filter-feeding whale or something for that.

Herald hasn't even figured out his own fighting style, how do the other rangers expect him to fit into a ranger team fight with a villain? Does Herald expect to go along with other's plans or does he have his own idea of what he should be doing?

A lot of Herald's team utility comes from being a flier. Argent and Charge are the main hand-to-hand combatants, while Steel manages long-range combat and communications. Herald tend to focus on civilian rescue and scouting/aerial observation. He's a good shot though, and can do long-range combat if needed. A lot of the talk of "not having figured out his combat style" is more like "have not figured out how his combat style would fit in with Charge and Argent." Charge and Argent work very well together, function on the same wavelength and are able to make each other better in a fight. Both Herald and Steel are outside that dynamic, bringing other things to the team than the ability to throw a punch.

Can Dove lay eggs in pigeon mode? Are they edible? Is it cannibalism to eat them?

It is best for everyone concerned if Dove does not lay eggs in pigeon form. But it would be no more cannibalism to eat them than it is cannibalism to [insert very nsfw analogy here, use your imagination.]

If dove gets sick with something that only infects pigeons and turns human, does the bacteria/virus transform with her to adapt to humans or is it just 'cured'? What about the reverse? If she has a cold, will her pigeon have a that same strain of cold?

Dove can cure herself of most things by shifting shapes. It does not travel with her. However, some things will still be infecting here as she turns back.

Where did you get the avocado emote from? I added some trivia about it in your wiki page entry but I haven't been able to track down the original

I have no idea! It was uploaded as part of a set on the original Fallen Hero fanserver I was a part of (but did not organize.) Then people used that to make new variants.

If Argent accidentally allowed her nanovores to eat too much and ended up with a bit too many, how would she handle that? Would she leave the excess ones at home to just vibe while she's out and about?

Oh she would not dare. But you might get headlines wondering if she put on weight. Sometimes she retires some early to get longer hair too.

Does Mortum have any favourite cheeses? (aside from pepperjack)

Probably, but Mortum is no connoisseur. I will say that they prefer hard cheeses, and that Parmesan makes everything better.

Has HG ever personally killed anyone or have they always been the type to have someone else do it? & how often does the HG organization as a whole take the blame/credit for things they didn't actually do?

Oh Hollow Ground has killed people. It's just not something they do often. And taking credit for others hard work is commonsense, building a reputation is hard work. Shortcuts are smart.

Between Armadillo & Shroud, who would you say is happier with how their life is going?

Armadillo.

Locus's telepathy is like reading books, Sidestep's is very imagery focused, what does the Rat King's see , or feel in the case that they were bound too young to have much visual bias?

The Rat-King is very spatially oriented I would say. One of the most important senses for rats are their whiskers, which helps them navigate the world. Since they were changed before they could use their senses much, all of their senses have been rewritten to be interpreted through telepathy. Sidestep feels the Rat-King's senses as akin to a radar, picking up shapes and movent in all directions. When they compliment Sidestep's own telepathy this fuses into a seamless whole, but while under dampeners only the Rat-King's senses remain, as a radar to help them navigate in the static storm. The Rat-King has grown fond of all Sidestep's telepathic senses, and enjoy a visual spectrum they never even knew existed before, as well as piggybacking things like tastebuds.

what are the RO's and sidesteps character archetypes?

I mean that would depend on what kind of a list of archetypes you are talking about? I'm not that well versed in things like TV-tropes and other stuff like that. But I will say that when I build the first draft of characters I tend to pick two general archetypes, as I see them, and mix them together. I then add a hidden third one for some spice. But the way I view characters is so vague... I mean Herald would be something like "naive rich trust fund kid" combined with "actual goddamn hero who tries to do the right thing" and hiding "family trauma." Argent would be "sexy, deadly, stabby" combined with "secretly a big nerd" and hiding "always in pain, always in control." I don't remember what I started out with anymore, that's just useful for the first draft. Then they start to grow into people.

Can HG initiate threading with multiple people at the same time (ex. Jake & Nocturne group hug)? And if so can it be with different commands "you can trust me & you have nothing to worry about"?

Yes and yes!

Is Sidestep able to stop someone else from being threaded as it happens? Or would they have to wait until afterwards to yank it out of whoever's mind?

If they are inside the mind in question at the time, yes. And that would be easier than to break it later.

Does the boost drug work in a way that's beyond science? Like does it come from some sort of higher dimensional source? (Considering Void blood and the inter-dimensional nature of Voids powers)

Beyond current science? Yes. Beyond any science? No. There is no magic, only things we do not understand yet. And which we might never understand.

What is the extent of how much Cy can access the memories of HG's younger sibling?

Almost non-existent.

What did HG's parents do?

Their father ran a criminal gang/organization. Though one could argue this was during the time where there was no law on the west coast, so was it really criminal? Their mother was essentially a housewife, emotional rock, mother.

Will we see a Re-Gene rebellion?

Now see that would be big spoilers.

What kind of details, if any, does Ortega share about what's going with Step after Step turns up alive with each of the rangers? Things like thinking about inviting them to the gala, where they're hanging out or worries about Step's emotional state or financial position.

Oh that is a tough one. I think the Rangers ask more questions than Ortega is ready to answer. Mostly because they're still in emotional turmoil. Ortega shares bits and pieces, but very, very little. And yes, this annoys and worries everyone.

In what order did Ortega want to contact Steel and Argent after the crash when Step was in the car? Did it play out the way they wanted? Does their ordering change when it's the puppet and does Herald get some nugget of info?

Hmmm. In general it would be Argent first to control information. Also Ortega would know Steel would be all over this immediately anyway. If it's the puppet, it would be Steel first. Ortega would trust Steel to inform Herald, he's the Marshal and Ortega is hurt. If it was the puppet, Steel would be the first choice. And whether it played out the way Ortega wanted would depend on the run. The outcomes can be very different.

What was the Rangers' initial reactions to hearing about the crash? Especially if romanced?

Oh fuck.

Has HG ever considered getting double Boosted? Maybe when their last sibling died?

No. They know the odds and is not that much of a risk taker.

Was Anathema and Sidesteps funeral separate or part of a larger mass funeral for the Heartbreak victims?

Separate. They was a mass memorial service later where they were also mentioned, but that was not a funeral.

Did Vernon attend the funeral as part of the press or did he sneak in?

He was part of the press at the time.

Is the opening of Retribution on the promenade at Long Beach? Which beach was ground zero for the Nanosurge exactly?

The coastline changed a lot in the Big One, some beaches were washed out, others were added to, and some disappeared entirely. But it would have been around where Manhattan beach is now.

What was Ortega thinking when Herald throws them across the room during the reveal?

Emotional: Oh shit I fucked up bad. Rational: This is new. This is interesting. I have underestimated him.

Will monster tagged steps ever be forgiven?

It depends on what happens moving forward. It's not impossible, especially as that tag can happen for relatively minor things due to shock. Also, sometimes things can be forgive, but that doesn't necessarily make it impossible to move forward.

What kind of relationship does Ortega hope Step has with HG? If being a regene is not revealed.

Estranged.

We know the Farm has dampeners and numbers as precautions against telepathy, but if its not too much of a spoiler, what precautions do they have against other, more volatile boosts?

Spoilers. But rest assured that Re-Genes with volatile powers are kept very secured.

Is Re-Gene in fighting (especially among the combat/terror beast variety) an issue? How does the Farm handle that?

Of course it is. There's always tension. It, and rivalry, is encouraged to a point. Just as long as it doesn't affect work.

Does a Sidestep who doesn't have lingering green eyes know their eye color changed when they ingested Void blood? Did Ortega tell them?

I think Ortega would have told them.

Will sidestep's base ever see visitors beyond henchmen in future books?

Most likely.

Since Step returned has Herald being pushing Steel and Ortega for more details on them?

Oh yes. Incessantly.

Considering Herald's skips on Physio, Argent lies to the X-Ray machines, Chen lies to therapists, Ortega regularly goes walkabout and Step avoids hospitals in general, is there anyone in the extended cast who doesn't have a hang up on health care?

Dr. Mortum! Sky-Raider.

Can entering Void spaces like the Tesseract displace you in time like traveling to the past or future?

No. Time might -feel- wonky, but not to that extent.

Actually, do Void spaces like the Tesseract still exist without the Void being "alive"? Are they still traversable? Or are they locked off now that Void blood is hard to access and grant the right perspective?

They still exist. It's finding them that's the issue.

When he was in melee instead of creating tornadoes was Sentinel more of a fighter or a tactician? And what was his fighting style like?

Fighter. His style was efficient, the least effort for the most effect. Ruthless.

What would the regenerator do to the Void?

Probably nothing.

Will probably get an avocado for this, but was Catastrofiend part of Project Stars? Was Cavalier (as Soldier 71)?

Catastrofiend is spoilers, but I think at this point it's no secret that Cavalier was Soldier 71.

Who's the Anders mentioned in Mortum's Truth Hurts?

Nobody that has come up in game yet, and most likely won't.

In Rosie's Mitchell entry, Joe says he liked Rosie's sister Gemma and seems to know her somewhat well. Has Gemma worked for Joe, or just met him?

She's worked for him. As will Rosie in those paths when she's not recruited.

Was there any intended symbolism with the bridal store of the Chapter 1 intro, or was it a choice made for imagery?

Just imagery. Mannequins have always creeped me out.

how do pilots/air traffic control deal with fliers and vice versa (non-beaconed)? what's the closest major airport to LD? how much air traffic is at that airport? (how many bwooshes can a step expect to hear in a day?)

Official fliers, like Herald, has a transponder beacon. They are not supposed to fly higher than 200 ft (61m) without activating it, but in practice most use the downtown skyscrapers as a visual guide and uses it when they go above rooftop level. There is a lot unlicensed drone traffic as well as fliers close to the ground, which is a danger. Collisions do happen, helicopter travel is not exactly safe. There are known helicopter routes nicknamed "flyways" most unlicensed fliers try to stay away from. The small airport is located well outside town, and as air travel is much less common than in our world the airplanes are seldom involved.

Did Lord Ember move to San Francisco because it spoke to him (Francis)

That's a good pun, but no.

Can we tease him about it irregardless about his actual reasons

Dragging Lord Ember should be a national pastime.

What kind of relationships was Oregeta hoping would happen between Herald and Argent, and Sidestep after Step resurfaces and helps out the rangers? You know after the shock wore off.

Friends and teammates. Ortega wants the good old days back.

has ortega's flirting with villains ever gone beyond banter/kisses?

Ortega doesn't kiss and tell.

Ortega, when Sidestep reveals Regene status, wants to figure out the people involved for when Sidestep wants to do something about them. Considering Ortega gets upset with killing Steps, is this Ortega rationalising their next revenge plot when they're done with Hollow Ground? Or does Ortega not expect little darling Step to want to kill them?

At that point Ortega doesn't know anything, they are just operating on angry instinct. No time to think yet, just gather information for later.

Why does Argent mentally refer to Steel by his given name rather than Steel or Chen in the Bad day. Good day. story?

Not sure it's a story as much as me experimenting with how characters think of each other in their head.

Forgive me if it's already been asked, but when did Chen realize he had a crush on Ricardo? Fairly early on in their friendship, or later?

Oh that was fairly early, Ricardo is a hard man to ignore.

For world building reasons completely irrelevant to contemporary history, what are some of the biggest super corporations in the FEZ? What are their products? And who are their evil CEOs?

I don't know yet, but you will eventually. Working on something.

Since Ben sees himself as a sky pirate does he have his own Jolly Roger? And does anyone ever find it strange he's based out of California in a Neo-Wild West era but chose "sky pirate" over "sky outlaw"?

A flag on a flying armor is a BAD idea. But there is a skull and crossbones emblazoned on his chest armor. And you know? I bet there already was a villain called "Outlaw." Besides, Ben likes pirates.

Will it be possible to choose Mortum as a rival in book 3?

Considering what happens in some endings? Oh yes.

Is anathema immune to HG's brand of tactile telepathy?

No.

What's Ben's nickname for Merle since Mirlene is Belle?

Doc. Much to Dr. Mortum's chagrin.

Do all combinations of Ortega and Mortum have the car race go the same way (ie. Ortega asking Mortum out for dinner?) or would this only happen between Ricardo and Mirlene?

Ricardo and Mirlene, or Julia and Merle. It would have taken longer for the others, the barrier to asking is higher even if the interest was there.

Does Mortum's telekinesis always need them to see the object they're affecting for it to work, or does this only apply at the microscopic level?

Yes, they need the visual

Did Mortum use their powers on the Puppet to pull them away if they spotted Charge at the gala, or was it just their own strength?

Good spot. It was a reflexive use. I doubt Dr. Mortum even noticed it happening.

Have they ever had any instances of using their telekinesis accidentally like when they've gotten emotional, for example, the business/frosty epilogue with Hollow Ground and the pencil?

Another good spot! That was another case of it being used.

I swear this question makes more sense with context. But is Vitruvian bisexual

Yeah, he was.

Do all terror beasts have such highly visible boosts like Armadillo?

Many of them do. Not everyone. A highly visible boost like that increases the chance they will be picked for that training, even if additional modding is needed to make them dangerous enough. The visual impact is part of the role.

Could Step possess their armour alongside the Rat King and just leave their body passed out in a corner somewhere?

Most likely not.

How does Ortega initially imagine how Argent and Step become close? Like the two touch-avoidants awkwardly standing in a room together until they talk to each other? Them getting into a sparring match and bonding over trying to beat the crap out of each other?

Look. Ortega gets Argent. Ortega gets Sidestep. Of course the two of them would also get each other, it just makes sense in Ortega's eyes.

How does an armor spotter recognize a particular designer's tech? What's Mortum's signature that makes their work recognizable to others?

I have no idea! I can barely tell different cars apart, but some people are really good at it!

Are Argent's three pupils a reference to the caput mortuum symbol, given that the nanovores are kind of associated with decay and her hair being made of dead/inert nanovores?

Nope. I just like the visual.

When you're writing the code, how do you come up with the label names for the scenes, and do you sometimes write them in anticipation for codivers? Do you have any favourite label names yourself? (some standouts to me are: thisisfine, wtf, nerd, touchnope, frkout, nopenope and

anxiety)

I write most of the labels for myself, sometimes to remind me what the scene is supposed to be about when I am writing another of the scenes first. If a label has a very bland name or a number, chances are it is something that needed to be split because another scene would connect at that point and I just picked the first word that came to mind. I don't think I have any favorites, probably the last one that made me chuckle. They are all spur of the moment and in most cases quickly forgotten.

How did Halabi and Mortum first meet?

Probably at a conference.

When Mortum first appears in Rebirth, Sidestep says they suspect their French accent is "an affectation" - is this because Sidestep's unfamiliar with Haitian accents, or is Mortum deliberately putting it on, or something else? Also, why did Mortum go for a Southern accent in particular when Ortega drops by?

Sidestep is unfamiliar with Haitian accents. Also, Dr. Mortum spent their student years doing their best to sound more "proper European french" in order to be more respected in scientific circles. The reason why they pick a southern accent is because they think it's easy to fake. Are they good at faking it? Doubtful.

Whereabouts did Mortum study and do their PhD at?

University of Florida.

When did Mortum move to the Free Western Territories/Los Diablos?

I would say around 2005 or so but I'm not sure exactly.

Are there any hero TV realities in the FH world?

Oh yes. But I have no names.

How did Anathema take Hood's death?

Badly. That was the closest thing they had to a father figure.

Will we get a chance to help Mortum improve their mental shields as a way to reconcile their anxiety about Sidestep reading their mind? I don't think they could rely on using numbers and dampeners forever, right?

That is definitely a path to walk. But the trust needs to be there.

When was the Los Diablos University established? Anarchist Sidesteps set up Argent as the university's Women's Studies Inspirational Leader award recipient, and Herald wears an LD University hoodie in Chapter 25, so it seems to be doing well enough.

It is doing quite well! It was one of the first joint projects after the governing council of Los Diablos was set up. Not exactly sure when, but it was quite early on. Everyone involved is invested in it, the companies need educated staff and joint research projects.

Does Zephyr know of Blaze's sexuality? If so, how do they feel about his insecurities around it?

Zephyr has no idea!

If Mortum underwent a TBR, what would their powers look like?

Depends on when and how. The specific situation matters a lot.

Does Mortum have a scar from being stabbed by Owl and where did she stab them? What was the situation this happened in?

I haven't detailed it yet! That will come out in game.

Did Mortum wear something to hide their face as an active villain, and if so, what did it look like? Also, how did their arm tentacles on their suit work?

Oh yes, they wore a helmet. The arm tentacles were wrist based and worked mostly to interface with electronic systems.

You've confirmed a couple of times that the call in the frosty/business associate Mortum epilogue was with HG, but you've also said that Mortum's threads work in such a way that they don't remember meeting HG. Can you expand on why Mortum has HG's number and takes calls from a person they've never met?

Hehehe. I think the way to phrase it best is that Dr. Mortum knows HG, but not as "Hollow Ground." They do however know they work with Hollow Ground's organization. An alternative identity like that can be quite useful for someone who needs to rely on subtlety. Hollow Ground has two separate ones, each of

them for a particular purpose. The one Dr. Mortum is aware of is seen as an upper level henchman working for Nocturne. Dr. Mortum is too valuable as an active part of the villain community, HG wants access to them. But they also don't want their face connected to Hollow Ground. The other... is big spoilers.

... how would Mortum react to Sidestep or the Puppet having the same name as them? (Merle/Mirlene)

What a funny coincidence.

Did Mortum have bootleg merch when they were active as a villain, and if so, how would they react to the Puppet or Sidestep bringing them some?

I don't think they had much, and they would have no nostalgic connection to it.

Is the Farm interested in capturing the Catfiend? Is its DNA viable to make Regenes, or is its DNA too degraded from all the Boosts?

The Farm would love it, but not for Re-Gene purposes. The DNA of a normal boost is already too degraded, the Catastrofiend would be useless.

Would Argent invite Sidestep to an event/function as a guest when soft? Would they invite villainstep to crash it as a date?

Most likely not on the first. Far more likely for the second.

Does Hollow Ground only contact Mortum in the Rebirth epilogue with a business/frosty relationship?

Yes. And there are reasons for that I won't say.

Worth a shot, but when Mortum invites the Puppet to the gala in Chapter 7, they get very heated talking about "so-called heroes" wearing masks for "vanity [more] than function and then apologizes for ranting about "personal business". What are they referring to?

Dr. Mortum knows a lot of villains. And almost everyone has a horror story of how bad some heroes can be, how selfish or nasty, or stupid and vain. They don't have a high opinion of heroes, nor of their motivations to become something like that. Corporate stooges or bullies the lot of them.

Do Owl and Handyman live above/behind Hoots or nearby?

Nearbyish.

In the Rebirth epilogue Ortega believes that the Gala attack would of turned out differently if they were younger. With everything else being the same would they be right or is it just wishful thinking?

Ortega without his suit would absolutely be a better fighter when they were younger. Not sure if it would have been enough, but it's not an inconsiderable difference.

What is Vitruvian's last name?

I have no idea yet.

Does/Did Mortum dress up for the Puppet if they're visiting the lab as friends/dating/etc early into the relationship?

Oh absolutely! You don't let your hair down early in a relationship. That takes time and trust.

Do they have anything else they wear while working in the lab, aside from cargo pants and t-shirts?

On occasion shorts/skirt. The occasional polo shirt or sweater. Comfortable things that doesn't shed too much fiber.

Do they believe in getting dressed for working from home (since they live in their lab), or are they sometimes doing work in their pajamas with a labcoat ontop?

Oh 100%. Sometimes you get an idea right in the morning and can't be arsed, and then it's soon nightfall again.

What does Mortum usually wear to bed and how do they prefer to sleep?

I think Mortum traditionally would have been a pajama person, but if together with the Puppet might come to realize that skin to skin contact is nice.

How badly is Mortum's sense of time messed up by being in an underground lab most of the time, and is the panoramic view projected on the giant screens in their bedroom they use instead of windows an attempt to mitigate that slightly (and how does that work with Mortum being a night owl?)

Time of day is relative unless you have appointments. The screens in the bedroom are synced to the outside day and night and is there to help ground them. However, since it's screens, they can turn them to the setting they want if needed.

Do they use the screens for anything else, like watching films?

On occasion, yeah. But I think mostly nature scenes.

Do they use a sun lamp or vitamin D supplements to compensate for lack of sunlight? ... is this the reason why they like cheese?? Because they're vitamin D deficient?

Mortum do have a strict vitamin regiment, but does spend time outdoors as well. They do their best to take care of their health. Besides, you can get some nice sunshine driving a cabriolet on one of the scenic, winding roads.

Where/who does Mortum get their clothes from, since they're bespoke/tailor made and not off the rack? Do they measure themselves and give their measurements to someone, or do they go in somewhere to have their measurements taken? Is their dislike of shopping retail related to when they first began socially transitioning?

Mortum has a tailor for fancy clothes and a personal shopper simpler things. It's easier, they hate shopping for personal clothes. And yes, that is related to their transitioning. It's cramped, awkward, nothing fits right and they feel watched.

In what ways do hero and villain fanbases act differently? Like, do they have different etiquettes in their respective spaces? Do they butt heads often?

Hmmm. Knowing online life, I think it's more different between different spaces than it is between sides. Many are fans of both.

You've said in the past the burning hair smell is a stress scent for Sidestep, and those usually accompany when Sidestep triggers a traumatic memory, followed by a seizure throughout the books. Did Sidestep have functional/non-epileptic seizures before the Heartbreak incident, or only after?

It's happened since the Void.

do you foresee any massive telepathy stat increases happening in revelations/closer to the level that rebirth offered?

I won't rule out both big increases and decreases depending on choices.

Would Mortum be able to lift Sidestep/catch them if they were falling with their telekinesis?

Not from a distance, but if they touch Sidestep it would help hold their weight.

If the Rangers had a game like Marvel Rivals, who would each Ranger main? Who, besides Ortega, would be egotistical enough to main themselves?

I really have no idea.

Given that Hood also had tattoos that he found, at best, distasteful, but still kept them, what would be his advice to Sidestep about removing or keeping their Regene tattoos, if he had known them?

I think Hood would have said "Make sure you understand what they are, and why you are keeping or getting rid of them. What purpose they serve. And if you are removing them for the sake of others and of yourself. The important thing is to make an informed choice."

Does Herald have any genuinely good memories of Josh?

Oh yes. Many.

For Sidestep self-assigned birthday reasons, do you have a specific date for the villain debut?

Nope!

What is the normal amount of telepathic nonsense Ortega and Steel expect from Sidestep?

That varies too much between Sidesteps to detail here.

What does Steel feel about talking to Step in public places about hard topics considering he can be there when someone stabs himself with a fork?

Look. So many things about Sidestep are complicated and weird, but that was a first. On the other hand, he has also seen veterans doing strange and self-destructive things when Sidestep has not been around, so he feels guilty for being suspicious.

What is Sentinel's birth date? How about Anathema's?

I have not decided yet! We'll see if I do their Mitchell files, then I will decide.

Does Argent still use the sewer bases she had before she became a Ranger?

No, that's gross.

You've said in the past Mortum is surprisingly good with farm animals and would know a lot about them and has ridden horses a long time ago in the past, did they grow up on/near a farm/ranch before their mother sent them to Port-au-Prince?

Yeah, Mortum spent their childhood on a farm..

Was Steel ever worried about Step being interested in a particular boost or tidbit of info back in their hero days? As in, what could the government be interested in with this?

Oh yeah. Ironically enough Steel often calls Ortega a paranoid overthinker, but in some cases they are too alike.

How willing would Ortega be to abandon their tinfoil theory going off only Herald's word?

It would need supportive evidence.

Is it Emberfall, or Emberstorm for Lord Ember's previous alias before he became the San Francisco kingpin? Emberstorm's used in the books, but Emberfall only seems to appear in QnAs and the 4.2 demo

Since I obviously messed up there (not uncommon), I would say that it went from Emberfall --> Emberstorm --> Lord Ember once he had established himself on top in San Francisco. Francis full name might technically be Lord Emberstorm, but it was shortened fast.

[New Demo Host Links!](#)

[February 7](#)

Alright, I have now uploaded the current demos to the new CoG demo site. They seem to work, but please let me know any issues. The save system is simpler, just one slot, and implemented literally hours ago so it might have issues. In fact, the entire site is constantly being updated, so things might be in flux.

Escape the hospital as Sidestep with broken legs!

<https://cogdemos.ink/play/malin-ryden/fallen-hero-revelations-path-12>

All the puppetstuck paths so far!

<https://cogdemos.ink/play/malin-ryden/fallen-hero-revelations-puppetstuck-path>

Free and healthy Sidestep messing with Hollow Ground

<https://cogdemos.ink/play/malin-ryden/fallen-hero-revelations-path-42>

My Partner's demo for his dark mecha game (with support by me)

<https://cogdemos.ink/play/malin-ryden/remnants>

[Telenovela 1.1.1](#)

[February 2](#)

Thank you for your understanding why things might be a little irregular right now. I won't talk about it in detail, and prefer to focus on positive things, so no worry about doom and gloom updates. I think we all need that with what's going on. So, in that vein, here is a little piece that will be filled out with options before being slotted into Revelations. Right now the options are Sidestep with broken legs, villain reveal to Argent, staying at Ortega's place and romancing both Ortega and Argent. Enjoy.

I will upload the demos to the new site this week and let you know, I simply have not had time yet, but everything is saved and safe, including my partner's demo for Remnants. Weirdly enough being open about this has made it easier to write, it's almost like bottling up things isn't healthy..

Los Diablos. Ortega's apartment. The guest room.

It's not your room, but you know that everyone would insist that it was. You know the truth. Just a guest, waiting out the weeks until your legs are well enough that you can hobble out of here. Save you from around the clock scrutiny and having to keep up the mask. Such as it is. Ortega knows you too well by now, and Argent is learning more than she should. And yet do they really know -you- or just the face that you present to them?

What else is there?

It's been easier than expected. Maybe it's the drugs. Maybe it's the pain. Maybe it's actually getting real sleep for once instead of shifting into a new body when your brain needs to recharge. Even with the nightmares, that feels...

Odd. The times you had fallen asleep in the past were tinged with dread and forgotten dreams. These ones you remember, a confusing mishmash of trauma and memory that wakes you up sweating. Just dreams.

Why did you use to be so afraid?

"You're not paying attention." Argent is not asking a question, instead she shifts slightly where she lies next to you on the bed, turning her attention from the telenovela to you. "Don't come to me if you get confused later."

"If Ortega didn't manage to make me care about the plot, how do you think you'll manage?" You look at her instead of the screen, where an improbably beautiful woman is worrying about not being enough. The Los Diablos sunlight is filtering through the blinds, enough to make Argent's hair glisten. Beautiful. You're lucky she can't read your mind.

"You're bored silly stuck in bed. What else do you have to do? Stare up at the ceiling regretting your life-choices? You can multitask." Her kiss is small and soft, barely brushing your cheek.

"You don't understand. If I give \${him} a finger \${he}'ll take the whole hand." Show actual interest instead of mocking something? Perish the thought.

"You're not wrong," she admits with a fond sigh. "That's how \${he} got me in. Still, from what I've heard you don't mind \${his} hands." She elbows you in the side, which you stoically accepts since your ribs are healing and the painkillers are making you giddy.

"That's downright lewd." You manage to look suitably shocked while doing your best to avoid thinking about Ortega's hands. And where they've been. Might go. "I expected more from an upstanding hero like you."

"We can't all be villains." Her joke is as sharp as her smile.

"Not here," you snap, reflexively looking around for Ortega though you know \${he}'s out. "What if we're overheard?"

"This place is clean," she sighs. "I told you. Even if you discount Ortega's paranoia and my talents, \${he} still shorts things out on a regular basis. Not a good environment for bugs to survive." She leaned in for another peck, this one hotter, leaving a feeling like fresh sunburn on your lips. "You need to tell \${him}."

"Are you mad? Is there any world where you imagine that going well?" Is it a joke? No, she looks serious, which makes it worse.

"Do you see keeping it a secret going better?" She tilts her head and her hair does that little liquid slide that makes it look heavier than it is. A mercury waterfall. Poetry. Shut up brain.

"No, but things will blow up -later- rather than sooner. And since I'm stuck in bed I'd prefer it to be late enough that I can at least dive for cover."

"Even if that means the explosion will be bigger?" She looks at you. You look away. In front of you the television plays out a different, louder argument.

"I doubt it will make much of a difference." The shrug comes naturally. It's out of your hands. "Considering what I've done already."

"It will," she insists. "You're emotionally involved now. The longer you keep up the act, the worse it will be."

"Oh, is that why you have told \${him} about your little friends?" You're not the only one with secrets. One could argue who has the bigger one.

"That's not the same. I'm an abomination—" her voice cracks "—who is only alive thanks to creatures that ate \${his} friend and nearly took his arm. And the whole city." She pulls back slightly, in control again, skin smoothly reflective. "I'm a weapon of mass destruction. If I lose control who knows what will happen. \${he} would lock me up if \${he} knew the truth. \${he} should."

"Which is why we are in the same boat." You meet her gaze, deadpan, deadly serious while the television blathers on in Spanish. "You think an alpha level telepath wouldn't be seen as a weapon of mass destruction? You have no idea what I could do if I only—"

"If you only what?" Ortega's voice. From the hallway. The front door slams shut a moment later. Sloppy. You didn't hear it opening.

"If I only told you the truth about this slop that Angie is making me watch." Your lie is smooth and seamless, switch tracks, distract with a bait you know \${he} will be unable to resist.

"What slop—" Ortega pokes \$(his) head through the door after stepping out of \$(his) shoes, catching sight of the television. "Mierda. No te andas con rodeos, ya veo." \${he} shakes \$(his) head looking between the two of you. "You'd better not catch my mother hearing you say that."

"I didn't think your mother watched Sin Senos No Hay Paraíso," Argent retorts with a smile. No trace of her emotional outburst remaining.

"You picked -that- of all things?" Ortega is shocked. Aghast. Amused. All theatrical enough to have been part of the show.

"Well, whatever you had been showing didn't work." She shrugs. "Might as well have fun with it."

"Angie..." Ortega sits down on the side of your bed, your legs healed enough that the movement doesn't make you grit your teeth in pain. Only at the awkwardness of being caught in the middle. Right between them. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised considering your taste in movies."

"What?" It is Argent's turn to look shocked, insulted, every emotion she could summon up on her far too perfect face while you sink deeper into bed, pondering if you should just hide your face under a pillow and pretend to go to sleep. Could you still leverage your health or have you healed too much for that?

"Angie said you still occasionally short out your apartment," you say instead. Words. From your mouth. Derailing their silly argument with real life problems because apparently you can't relax and enjoy yourself. Not when you could sense that at least Argent was about thirty seconds of argument from kissing Ortega right there over your head. You know Ortega would have reciprocated.

"Ah." It works. Ortega pulls back, gets off the bed to peel off \$(his) leather jacket to drape it over a chair. Effortless. Practiced? "Not often."

"Don't you still have the mobile surge protectors?" You remember helping to hook \$(him) up to them one night when \$(he) was too drunk. Back when you were Sidestep, regretting that your face had been revealed so you couldn't hide the heat on your face from seeing far too much bare skin. Your hand shaking. Putting a cable in a port. Stupid. So stupid.

"I choose to see the occasional surge as a form of spring cleaning." Ortega sits back down on the bed, this time putting \$(his) feet up, making \$(him)self comfortable next to you. "Takes care of nasty bugs."

"Not sure your generator should be acting up like that, though." You look to Argent, who nods in agreement.

"See? I told \$(him) that. Repeatedly."

"You also told me it was working fine as far as you could tell." \${he} reaches over to pat Argent's arm. You resist the urge to bite, even though it's right there, in front of your face. "It's just nightmares."

"Never just 'just' when it comes to that." You can sense Argent's unease, that's one reason you can't stay at her place. Can't stay the night. Why she can't stay here. A loss of control would be catastrophic.

"I'm fine," Ortega assures. "I just like my privacy and a bit of plausible deniability. Besides, the surge protectors you put on my kitchen equipment and television works fine. Really cut down on my insurance."

"So someone -can- bug your fridge." You can't resist it, trust the two of them to constantly derail your darker thoughts.

"My midnight snacks would not be a national scandal," Ortega jokes, but you can see the way \$(his) gaze goes to your tattoos. You can feel it. Even if they are hidden beneath your clothes. \${swear}. There went your mood again.

"According to what you've told me once upon a time they would be." Argent to the rescue with the sweetest, most vicious smile. "Back when -you- were the number one on the 'ten hottest heroes' list."

"\${nickname}..." Ortega whines, making \$(him)self far too comfortable next to you, now the brave shield to protect \$(him) from Argent's barbs. "Tell her she's being mean."

"But is she wrong though?" You pretend innocence as Argent slides down a little further and you're now quite comfortably sandwiched between them. In front of you the television still chatters away in Spanish, ignored by everyone.

"The truth hurts." Argent's smile has reached dangerous levels of smug, and only you note that she makes sure that there is no skin-to-skin contact between you. The covers are a safe barrier, you can feel the quiet churn of her mind, like waves against a pier. Maybe you're not the only one who needs this.

"It does," Ortega admits. "I'd whine more, but it feel like I'd be setting myself up for counterattack considering -someone- has two broken legs. Which technically hurts more."

"I'm on painkillers," you say generously. "You're just old." You soften the last with a turn of your head and a kiss to \$(his) cheek. Insufferably soft, but you can blame the drugs even though you're tapering off the dosage.

"I..." Ortega can't finish the sentence because Argent is giggling so hard next to you. "I walked into that," \$(he) finally admits.

"You sure did." This time Argent does lean over you to kiss \$(him), making sure not to put her weight on your ribs. "You're still number one on my list."

"Angie!" Is Ortega blushing? Impossible to tell, but there's a flustered crack to \$(his) voice even you can't miss. "You can't just blurt things out like that."

"Yeah," you agree, not knowing if you're supposed to be embarrassed or amused. "This is a sick bed."

"How are you feeling though?" Ortega takes the chance to focus on you rather than \${him}self. Saving face.

"Impatient." You settle for that word instead of a long list of others you could have picked. More complicated ones liable to escalate whatever was going on between the three of you. Unwise. Idiotic. Distracting. "I'm going nuts staying in bed. Or—" you interrupt before \${he} can "—wheeling around in your flat with my legs out like some kind of..."

"Bumper car?" Argent suggests.

"I try not to hit things. It hurts." No room. You want out but you're trapped here. Only distractions like this keep you sane.

"I think the casts are ready to come off." Ortega frowns. "I'd really want you to go in for x-rays so we could make sure that things have set enough."

"You're not dragging me to a hospital," you protest. "Or to the Rangers' med-bay."

"I haven't brought it up," Argent says, her voice serious enough that you both turn to face her. "I know a place where we can get access to that kind of equipment."

"A private clinic?" You don't like the suggestion, but her mind is evasive enough about it that it must be an underground thing. Illegal. Which would be safer.

"Sort of. Not with doctors or registrations or anything like that. But it would have an x-ray, and I can run it as well as any doctor." She smiles almost shyly. "Nobody else would need to know. I use it for my own medical checkups occasionally."

"That sounds delightfully suspicious," Ortega says, giving her a look. "Almost like you don't trust the system much."

"Shut up." But there's no malice in Argent's voice. "You know I don't. I always like to have a second opinion. As do you. Isn't that why you always come to me?"

"It is," \${he} admits. "This wouldn't be connected to a certain feathered friend, would it?"

"Are you talking about Owl?" Your voice cuts through their pleasant chatter. "Absolutely not. She hates my guts." But she would have the equipment. She never trusted hospitals either, and vigilantes need to know whether a bone is actually broken or if you can just walk it off. Most choose the latter anyway.

"She does not," Ortega assures.

"It doesn't matter," Argent says at the same time. "I've got access, they don't have to be around when we drop by. We don't have to tell anyone."

"There's no way Owl wouldn't have wired up that place to bits," you protest. Microphones. And cameras. Without your armor you have no easy way to scan for them.

"And I can handle that." She looks between the pair of you. "You know I can. And that fact stays between the three of us. Understood?"

"Understood," you and Ortega echo.

"With our combined talents there's no way we would be spotted," she continues. "Even with one of us... less mobile."

"Thank you," you retort, doing your best not to sneer. She's got a point. Between her ability to read and influence machines, your telepathy, and Ortega's situational awareness you'd make one hell of an infiltration team.

A team good enough to...? You bite back the thought, though it's started burrowing in. What if... what if you wouldn't have to do this on your own?

What if...?

"So should we put them in a Baby Bjorn for easier transport?" Argent suggest, teasing a laugh from Ortega.

"That's not a bad idea, or some sort of backpack situation."

"Oh like those cat carriers with the little bubble?" Argent giggles.

No, you tell yourself. No what-ifs. If you hadn't turned villain before you figure you'd have cause for doing so now.

You just have to stop smiling first.

[Real life update](#)

[January 21](#)

For people that know me, you might have noticed that I have been online a lot less than I used to be, and a lot less social on discord and the like. The progress of the game has also been slower than I would have liked. The thing is, bad stuff has been going on in real life so I have really not been in a headspace for either people or writing. For the last year or so, my mother's health has deteriorated. Many things have been found and dealt with, but in September things took a turn for the worst and she ended up in the emergency ward. She got better and came home, but was in pain. Something was wrong, but nobody could really figure out what it was, despite repeated examinations. Eventually she got scheduled for one of those super advanced scanning machines they only got at the big hospitals, and last week they managed to find that something was hiding behind the liver. She got operated today, the operation went well, but it was indeed cancer, and it has spread. There's going to be a doctor consultation tomorrow, after which I will know more and exactly how bad it is.

So. Yeah. I'm sorry. I'll probably be late with the updates this month. My sincerest apologies. I know there's already enough shit going on in the world 2025 that I feel bad to add to it, but I felt that you deserved to know now when I will be late, and it's easier to talk about it once on here, than a dozen times in person.

Thank you so much for your ongoing support, it means the world to me, and I hate to let you down. This isn't a secret, feel free to let people not on Patreon know what's up. It's a public post so everyone can read it.

/Malin

[Questions for last month!](#)

[January 1](#)

Happy new year everyone! I realized too late that I had not got a Questions post up due to holiday shenanigans where days of the week really bleeds together. So here it is, a few days late. Ask away!

Hope everyone will have a better 2025!

[State of the Art](#)

[Dec 29, 2024](#)

This month's lore post will dig into Ortega post-Heartbreak, and the new generator powering them.

There are no windows in the testing facility, no mirrors hiding hidden viewers. This is the high security boost rehab wing, reinforced for whatever can happen when people with too much power go out of control. I suppose I am one of them now.

"How do you feel, Charge?" Dr. Sam is making an effort to look relaxed, but I know she's as excited as I am. First time without safeguards. Without simulated tests.

Still, that's a question I'm not sure I should answer honestly. I feel too great for it to be real. Like I could climb a building without safety gear, like leaping off a plane in flight would be a good idea. My skin tingles like a limb that's fallen asleep, I want to scratch it, tear out the micrometal weave that's been painstakingly inserted. Instead I flex my hand, synthskin fusing nearly perfectly with flesh. "No tension around the ports. Do you mind if I stretch?"

"Go ahead, we want to know any issues you might have."

"Sure," I say, biting back a smile. This feeling can't be safe, I shouldn't be allowed to feel this good. What have they done? When will I land?

Keeping my thoughts to myself I walk over to the bars. It's less of a gym than a rehab facility, but it will do to test out how well this old body can move. The grip is great, no soreness and no stretch as I pull myself up. I know I'm heavier than I should be, my retirement meant putting on weight even if I hadn't been drinking. I might lie to everyone else but I don't like lying to myself. I was on the verge of becoming a joke, a failure, an ignoble end to an illustrious career. Another casualty of the Heartbreak incident.

I bite down hard on the side of my mouth, tasting blood but not ozone. Huh. Good control. "Did you do anything to the power distribution?"

"Oh yes," she says, the voice filled with excitement. "We needed to. In order for the generator to function to full capacity we needed to integrate it fully into your autonomous nervous system. You won't need the old failsafes anymore. At least in theory." She admits the last with a nervous smile.

"Is that why you've put me in the reinforced wing?" I pull myself up again, holding the position as long as I can until my arms starts to ache. Still, the grip is great, reconstructed flesh and bone. No expense spared. "In case I wasn't able to control it?"

"Just a precaution. Insurance, you know." She watches me hungrily but there's nothing sexual in it. "I trust my work, that's why I'm here."

"Not scared of a fusion reactor overload?" Am I? The glow in my stomach feels warm, but also like a vague pain. It reminds me of a bad fall, where the true pain initially is cushioned by adrenaline. My body knows it's compromised but does its best to compensate. Like I always do. Unique. One in a million. Flattery to make me agree to experimental surgery that was as likely to kill me as empower me.

"We have a portable cooler. If you are starting to experience anything out of the ordinary, let me know and we can plug you into the overload system and bleed off excess power."

"There's nothing ordinary about me," I say with a teasing smile as I let go, checking the back of my hands for any sign of tears or stress. Nothing.

"You know what I mean." Her voice is sharp now, I can see a hint of fear that I'm not taking this seriously. "I need you to tell me how you feel so I can see if we need to make adjustments."

"I feel great," I admit. "What are your instruments telling you?"

"So far the systems are green, but..." she hesitates. "Now that control is handed over to your nervous system there are limits to what we can see. We don't have control anymore. We can't see your inputs. Only the results."

"Huh." I touch my stomach, realizing what that means. This new generator is entirely under my control. No override codes. No command prompts. The skin on my lower arm is synth-skin smooth, but there's no sign of the battery meter that used to be there. No hidden access ports for plugs, or nearly imperceptible buttons for power settings. "Do I still need external units for tuning?"

"In theory, no." She walks over to me, reaching out to touch my arm with the invasive surety of a doctor. Checking my pulse. "I would still recommend static grounding before interacting with computers."

"What about excessive bleed-off before swimming?" It had always been a hassle.

"Without the charging ports, that shouldn't be needed. Unless you're hurt, the seals should be tight."

"The emitters?" I look at my hands again, trying to pick out differences in design.

"The default position is inert. It will take a conscious effort to activate them. We theorize that under water they will be harder to activate, a bit like a diving reflex."

"You theorize." I walk over to one of the insulated poles. The whole room is covered in rubber mats, someone didn't want to take chances. "I assume you want me to do another power check?"

"Please. This is the first time you're fully off grid, so we need to make sure everything works properly. Could you start to try to emulate standard taser settings?"

"Sure," I say, flexing my hand. This is truly climbing without safety gears. In the past, my charge had been easily adjustable by wrist controls. Now it was all up to me. I had spent weeks in bed practicing control and energy levels, but being able to see the curve on a screen and try to match it is different from trying it in real life. No visible feedback. If I messed up on a person, I might kill them.

Or myself.

It's still hard to grasp that there's a miniature fusion generator housed within my guts. It's even harder to imagine that the only thing that's keeping it from killing me is my own powers. Inertial electrostatic confinement. The electricity I can generate is only a fraction of what it's capable of, the rest is used to shield and contain it. I never asked whether it would give me cancer, because let's be fair, a long life is the least of my worries. I assume that it might, at least considering the new testing regiment. But, they'll catch anything early. I'm too expensive to let go to waste.

I can feel it. Inside me. Drawing on the generator gives a thrill not unlike the first moment's of free fall. A tingle in my nerves, like tensing muscles I never had before. I reach out and gently touch the pole, feeling the zap passing between us. A faint scent of ozone, a crawling sensation over my skin as if it was covered with spiders as the excess is dissipated safely over the Faraday web.

"Good. It's within the tolerance." She looks at her hand-held monitor. "How did it feel?"

"It tickled. Other than that, not much. Doesn't feel much different from the batteries, apart from the lack of a control system." Some might say this was more of a fusion battery than a generator, but with a battery life twice your lifetime it didn't make much difference. Probably looked cooler in the project presentation to whoever approved your surgery.

"You are the control system," she corrects. "It is as much a part of you now as any other organ."

"Some of them don't like me very much," I joke back. "I think my liver is pretty fed up with me."

"Well, it will be more thankful now that you've stopped drinking."

"Yeah, wouldn't want to operate a fusion reactor while drunk." But would it make a difference if it really will react as part of your body? On the other hand, throwing up is not nice, and I'd hate to imagine what could happen if I lost control of other things than your stomach.

"Exactly." She gives you a stern look. "Try a higher output."

"How high can I go?" I rub my hands together. In the past, a high charge meant a short fight, I'd lose power to my legs fast. Was that not going to be a thing anymore? No more fear of being paralyzed, no more waking up in a cold sweat fumbling for the charger because I forgot to plug it in before falling asleep.

"We have an overload alarm, please stop if it sounds. We don't want to cause a blackout."

"Oh." I look at her. "You're not kidding?" My smile widens.

I start gently, touching the pole with the faintest hint of static shock. Barely any draw, just ambient energy collected in my system. And then I increase the drain. I can feel it in my fingertips first, the tingle, the phantom sensations. The warmth in my gut is almost pleasant, as if pulling a greater charge relaxes some muscle I didn't know I had. The scent of ozone gets stronger, and I pull back my hand an inch because the heat is turning painful. An electrical arc still connects me to the pole, enabling me to feed more into it. It feels good in a disturbing way, like running too fast, feeling my body work perfectly in sync. How long until I run out of breath?

The alarm blares before I have a chance to find out, and I pull my hand away. The arc lingers for a moment, white hot against my eyes.

"I'm going to need sunglasses I think." I still see spots, like welding without the right precautions.

"You shouldn't reach those levels without your helmet and suit," she agrees. "It isn't safe. We still don't know the upper limit of the Faraday web." She looks at you cautiously, then back at her monitor. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yeah." I rub my fingertips. "Bit scalded, but like you said, that should be fixable with the gloves."

"No, no, I mean the generator. You just drew a lot of power from it." She looks down at the monitor again. "A LOT of power."

"Ah, yes. That." I consider what to tell her. The truth doesn't feel wise, she seems to be expecting that it would be an effort when it's anything but. Still, now that the thrill of the draw has faded, the dull ache I felt earlier is back. Stronger. Like indigestion, some unknown soreness in my gut that I don't know how to quell. A warning that I pulled too much? Or a sensation that will stay with me? Another ache to add to all your other ones. Nothing a few painkillers won't fix when the adrenaline fails. "You told me to try it out." I fake a weary smile. "I don't operate on half-measures."

"So I've been told. Still. Impressive." She looks down at the data, and I walk over to take a look over her shoulder. It's not hard to fake a weary limp.

The graph is familiar, I've seen it on the screen for the last month while dialing in your output levels and control. But the way the peak almost surges off the screen. I really can't connect that to any form of effort. If anything, it was easier than holding back at the start.

How powerful have they made me? Do they even know?

"What's my theoretical maximum output?" I ask, keeping my tone light.

"We are not sure," she admits. "Looking at this curve, you could generate a similar amount of power as a regular lightning bolt. Which is three times what your max output used to be."

"And that left me with minutes of movement at the end, if that."

"Yes. I'm not sure how long such a surge could be sustained, but it's unlikely you'd need to do it for long."

"Oh I don't know, I'm sure some penny-pincher would like to hook me up to the desk and have me power the Rangers building to save on the electricity bill."

"A regimen of regular bleeding off excess power would most likely be good for you."

"I was joking." I shake my head, but I can see what she means. It felt good to let loose, might as well have that power get to good use. "Just don't have me rename myself to 'Battery.' That doesn't have the same ring as Charge."

"Wouldn't dream of it." She reaches out to examine my hands, satisfied by their condition. "How do you feel physically? Any sign of neural degeneration?"

"None." It had been on the list of possible side effects, more probable than the blowing myself up or having a heart attack. Neural degeneration. Possible Parkinson-like tremors, or even ALS. "So far. How long until I know for sure?"

"We can only do our best to catch any symptoms early." Her smile is kind, as if she cares about you and not just her work. Maybe she does. "Theoretically the neural load on your system is less than in an average Soviet MBW, but we don't know how long those pilots last. Or what other systems they have sharing the load inside their armors. You're on your own."

"I'm usually the most comfortable that way." I flex my hands, then hold one of them out. Steady. I switch into a combat stance, my jabs are quick, practiced. They flow like water, only my aching muscles reminds me that I'm not in perfect shape. "I feel good. Steady. In control."

"Your reflexes were extraordinary," she admits. "Just remember that you're not twenty anymore."

"I feel better than I was at twenty," I brag. It's only half a lie. I'm heavier and with more muscle, my reflexes might be faster but I know I'm not as agile. Yet. A heavier body means more effort to move it. How much can your reaction time compensate? Training is the only way to find out. "Especially my hands. Thank you for letting me talk you into those mods."

"Thank Dr. Halabi, she was the one that sold it to the budget committee. It might have been cheaper to use fully modded hands for the interface, but that might have meant more issues with control since you'd have a double neural interface."

"I like my hands." Would I have said yes if it had meant losing them to copies? Wei's hands are... more and less than human. I know too much of what he gave up to make such a choice easily. "And you needed my precision and nervous system for this. Made no sense replacing my hands."

"They were unsure if the needed circuitry and insulation could be implemented with the titanium bone reinforcement, and the new Faraday web. There was a lot of things to fit on a very small area that needed to have full flexibility."

"Well, it's stellar work." I look over at the obstacle course. "Do you mind if I go for a run?"

"Not at all. We want to see if everything works fine. I think you have to get used to a lot of tests."

"I choose to see it as training." I stretch, feeling my spine move with unnatural smoothness. Did I ever think about my spine back in the day? Did I appreciate it? Probably not enough. Just like I didn't appreciate my youth.

It feels good being able to move again. Being stuck in bed for a month left me annoyed and irritated, and the slow rehab training afterwards didn't make things easier. I'm not fully recovered yet, that much is obvious as I stretch my legs. The incisions on my stomach are still sore, and I know better than to exert myself fully. Just a light jog. Glide over some of the obstacles. Have some fun on the balance beam. Everything feels fine, comparable to what I could expect after a major operation. No. Better. There's a sharpness to my movements now, something I know I need to compensate for in the future. Can't afford to overreact, if I fall on my ass, S...

I break off before I think the name. Before I remember the laugh. Breath hard and close my eyes. Balance with closed eyes was always harder, no visual clues to help me compensate. Only my own body. In my stomach, the generator churns. It's an illusion, of course. There's no mechanical parts. It still hurts, like a too hot engine. Did I overdo it before? Maybe. But it's preferable to remembering.

I can't afford to. I passed the psych evaluation, it wouldn't do to get stuck in therapy.

I can do this.

[New Discord Invite Code](#)

[Dec 21, 2024](#)

Alrightly, the old one seems to be defunct again, so here is a new invite code for the discord server.

<https://discord.gg/XEdSag7pj9>

[Trust Me.](#)

[Dec 21, 2024](#)

This starts out at the same point as last month's excerpt, but with choices added at the start, and a different person to meet than ZaZa. The latter part don't have choices or variables yet, but enjoy!

...

*label path2.2

The days pass. One after the other. The inertia of hiding after the terror of running. Nothing to do but live through it. Sink down in restless sleep, wake up with a feeling of disappointment because nothing has changed. Brush your teeth, clean your body, glare into the mirror for too long before the tension gets uncomfortable. Your body. Not your body. Familiar. A stolen car now in your name, tuned and taken care of and yet not yours.

Yours. Was your body ever truly yours? A project. Grown for someone else. Were you ever anything but a glitch in the system, a bug corrupting what you were meant to be? Free will in a brain designed for the opposite? So what are you now? Free from baggage? Free from tattoos? Human through and through. You could run. Leave it all. Be nothing. Nobody.

Do you even know how to exist without chains? Without limits?

No. You made your chains into weapons, into armor. Filled the little box they had put you in with rancor until you were as dense as a black hole. [i]Exceed maximum psychic depth.[/i] Hah. As if limits weren't just constructions of the human psyche. You were never human.

And now you are, and it's terrifying.

You can't feel the weight of the city around you. It doesn't feel real, reduced to concrete structures with cardboard people, all of them smiling, frowning, laughing, staring, none of them real. None of them with the weight of thoughts. You never thought you'd miss the skittering of cockroaches in the walls that you had reduced the onslaught of thoughts to, but now that it is gone how can you be sure you're real? You can strip off your clothes, but you can't strip away your skin. No clawmarks will change things. Nails not weapons. Red stripes that fade quickly. No tattoos, you could walk down main street dressed in nothing and all that would happen would be that you would be arrested for indecent exposure.

Not true. Not quite. Not after the hospital. You might get arrested by the Rangers. But the point still stand. As do you. Alive. Free.

*fake_choice

#In hiding.

You need to stay out of sight until you understand what's going on. Luckily you're no stranger to that life.

#Terrified.

Whatever is going on here is not good. You don't understand it. You have no control. All you can be sure of is the rising dread, and your attempt to stay one step ahead of it.

#Paranoid.

You've done a paranoid dance around the city, never sleeping in the same place twice.

*set daring %- 10

Steal a car, ride the bus, rest in a library. Rent a hotel room, worse and worse as your funds got lower. Avoid places you would be seen, keep your notes, draw your maps, try to find a way to solve this.

Can you?

Facts on paper, black pen, blue pen, no orange because the temptation to draw on your skin might be too strong. What you know:

<lb>

» My body is alive.

<lb>

» Somebody is using my body.

<lb>

» I won't go back when I fall asleep.

<lb>

» I can't go back.

You look down at the page. [i]Somebody[/i] has been written in, [i]something[/i] has been crossed over underneath. Your pen hovers over [i]I can't go back[/i], almost ready to cross that out as well. Defeatist thinking. You won't accept that. Instead you carefully add a new line:

» I can dream.

Disconcerting. True. You don't remember much come morning but you remember that you dreamed. Something. [i]Something.[/i] You put down the pen, turning to a new page. No facts. Speculation. Blue pen. The end of it is chewed bumpy already. Frustration. An itchy pain. Like a teething baby, but you were never a baby and you don't remember your teeth growing in. A fleeting notion of losing teeth, growing into adult ones. Did they fall out in the tank? Were they caught in the filter with all the refuse? Did some technician pick them up as trophies? You were supposed to put them under a pillow, right? Someone told you that, but was it a memory or an implant or stolen thoughts? Faeries. Stealing your teeth and giving you money in return. The Farm never gave you anything. Did they keep your teeth? Did someone steal them?

*fake_choice

#They might as well have.

They might as well have. Perhaps they still exist, frozen in a sample-container somewhere with your blood and marrow. You can extract DNA from tooth in a pinch, and in case of a freezer-failure they would last longer. Sounds like them. But the truth is the Farm could never steal anything from you.

You don't even own your own body.

#My memories taste wrong.

Maybe you have stayed too long in this body already, your memories taste wrong. Smell like something intrusive. A door that had been closed for too long finally open wide. A stench. Dead air. A dead body. You nearly choke, but as you do the smell is gone.

All that surrounds you are the scents of coffee and people.

#Do faeries exist?

If people put their teeth under the pillow for the faeries, does that mean faeries exist? Why else would they make up a story like that? You always thought the rules the Farm invented for you Re-Genes were strange, but perhaps that's a trait of humanity in general.

Or perhaps you're spiraling again.

You chew the pen, then stop as you catch a look from a young woman at another table. The coffee shop is busy, but she noticed you all the same. Did you look out of place? Did you grimace? You force your face into a small smile, hiding your fangs for now. No fangs. Why do you want to bite people? When did you start? Your first weapon. Are you regressing? Your smile works, this body still knows the drill even if your brain is circling the drain. The young woman looks down at her magazine once more, sipping her coffee. You admire her hair, her perfectly poised hands. Like a statue. She doesn't feel real. You don't know what she feels. If she feels. You don't. You can't. She's blank. Dry cardboard. A fake fruit in a display case, never rotting, never eaten. Does it matter? If it's never eaten, it doesn't matter if it's real. If she never dies, does it matter if she was alive at all?

It's like being surrounded by dead bodies who are still moving. A quiet, polite, zombie apocalypse. Not even Ortega's annoying static to prove $\{he\}$'s alive. Flat. Empty. A graveyard of bodies where the souls have checked out.

You look down at the page again, the tiny letters scrawled in blue. By your hand? Maybe. Probably. [b]DieDieDieDie[/b] is written between the lines. You hold up your hand and look at it. Is it a wish for murder or a chance to prove your luck?

*fake_choice

#Someone needs to die.

Someone needs to die, you know that deep in your bones. And yet you're not sure the intent is yours. You know your enemies intimately, but this feeling has no target. There's a taste of blood in your mouth and hands on your face, a caress filled with a pain that almost feels intimate.

*if ace

Ah. You know this scene. You watched it play out in black and white, Ace's eyes meeting yours across time and space. Seeing you. Telling you.

You look down at the paper again. Are you haunted? Receiving messages from beyond, penned by a dead soul, already devoured and digested?

Do they want you to kill Shroud at last?

Or... them?

*else

Feels like a first kiss. Feels like drowning. Feels like things you should ■■■■■■. You don't dig your fingers into a wound and hope it will heal. You do it to dig out what hurts you. Who hurt you.

Who hurt... $\{him\}$?

There is no face. A white veil. A cellar. A chair. A camera in that keeps watch.

You turn to look at it, knowing someone will be looking back.

Eventually.

#Throw the dice and hope for sevens.

The gesture of throwing a pair of dice feels natural, you can almost hear the sound of them landing on soft felt. The physical thrill of knowing before they stop. Taking that moment, stretching it, pulling it back, back like a hooked fish until you can taste it before touching the dice. Knowing if it would be bad. Or good. Hear your own sigh of excited relief or annoyed huff at a loss.

Learning when to walk away.

*if ace

You know this body didn't in the past. Will it be able to with you at the helm?

Ace. Are you the ghost in \${phis} machine? Or just the pilot of an abandoned ship left to drift?

You've been dreaming of tables. The smell of too many bodies, alcohol, sweet perfume, cigarette smoke. Learning to walk away, cash in your chips in time. And then... and then...

You look down at your hand drawing an increasingly smaller spiral. In the end all patterns become a dot. A point. A point you can stretch into a new line. Spiral to wave to pattern, tic, tac, toe the line, wait two breaths to pick up the dice, change the angle you toss them at. A bad roll to a good one, shake them in your hand until it felt right and then let go.

Watch them fall with the surety of a winner. No doubt. Ride that wave. Remember that feeling.

*if red13

You felt it at Joes. The dizzying spin of the wheel.

*if precognition <= 30

But what is it?

*elseif precognition >= 50

It has served you well so far.

*else

Right now it's all you have.

You've made a bet you're not sure you can cash right now, but you need information. Possibly help. Not that you can reveal the truth, but you needed someone in your corner. Backup.

It took you weeks of agonizing to determine who you would call.

*if boss

It couldn't be Pelayo. You know him, he'll do his job, and if he was asked to bring you in, he would. Ward was too close to Pelayo, and you didn't trust Nehal to keep her mouth shut even if you were ready to risk her like this. ZaZa was an option. He always was the wild card.

You weren't sure if you could you trust \${hench_name}. Under other circumstances you would have said yes, but you have no idea how eloquent your real body is. Or what or who is in it. If pushed to choose between \${villain_name} and \${puppet_name}, who would \${hhe} pick?

*if ((puppetmortum_relationship = "frosty") or (puppetmortum_relationship = "business associate"))

You knew Dr. Mortum wouldn't stick \${mhis} neck out for you. Not when you can't pay \${mhim}, and right now you don't dare to access any of your accounts. They could be used to trace you.

*elseif ((puppetmortum_relationship = "revealed") or (puppetmortum_relationship = "betrayed"))

Dr. Mortum was a risk. \${mhe} might be the only one equipped to understand the truth, but you didn't part on good terms. And with things the way they are, \${mhe} might see this as yet another attempt to manipulate \${mhim}.

*else

Dr. Mortum would come if you asked \${mhim} to. You knew that. But getting \${mhim} involved gives rise to other considerations. You want your body back alive, and how can you be sure the good doctor won't take the simpler route and have \${villain_name} eliminated if given the choice? You would need to craft

the right story to make sure that wouldn't happen, without revealing the truth.

```
*if ((puppetortega_relationship != "none") and (puppetortega_relationship != "workout friend"))
```

And finally there was Ortega.

```
*if ortega_flirting_puppet
```

You've strung \${him} on so far, but how long can that last?

```
*if suspect_ortega_uses_puppet
```

You're an excellent liar, but you can't shake the feeling that so is \${he}. Who is using who is debatable at this point.

\${he} would come if you asked \${him} to, but could you predict what \${he} would do? Would you even know what story to tell?

Hard decisions, but in the end the person you decided to ask for help was...

```
*fake_choice
```

```
*if (boss) #ZaZa.
```

```
*goto zmeet
```

```
#$!{hench_name}.
```

```
*goto hmeet
```

```
*selectable_if ((puppetmortum_relationship ! "frosty") and (puppetmortum_relationship != "business associate")) #Dr. Mortum.
```

```
*goto mmeet
```

```
*if ((puppetortega_relationship != "none") and (puppetortega_relationship != "workout friend")) #Ortega.
```

```
*goto omeet
```

```
*label omeet
```

```
*comment NO CHOICES OR VARIABLES HERE YET, JUST A SINGLE PATH.
```

Ortega is late. You look at your watch, feeling the cold steel in your pocket. Another bet, Russian roulette, not a White Russian but a Virgin Mary. Finding the right moment to push your bet. Risk reaching out. The gun feels heavy, like failure. But being here feels right. A chance. You can't run away forever, you tried, and that didn't get you anywhere. Is \${he} watching you? You try to reach out, but again your numb brain finds nothing but your own paranoid fantasies. No familiar static. Not just that. It's worse. You can't feel anything. No thoughts. You wish your head was empty. A joke you never understood before. But now? The people around you might as well be. You used to be bombard by the streams of their consciousness, a constant trickle, from rain to waterfall. And now?

Dry. Empty.

You look down at your notebook, then close it. It fits in your pocket. How come this silence is so different from what you used to feel around Ortega? \${he} never felt dead to you. Not empty. If anything, \${he} was always too full, to the point of overflowing. Full of \${him}self. You can't stop the chuckle. Your life might be in shambles and your body hijacked by an unknown entity, but at least you still have your sense of humor. Such as it is.

Is this a bad idea? You scan the cafe again, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. How many times have you been sitting here before, as \${puppet_name}, waiting for Ortega? Another date. Another stolen moment in a stolen body. And now you really have stolen a body. And \${he} knows it. You attacked Steel. Which wouldn't make things better. And yet you are sitting here, betting everything on Ortega being curious enough to talk rather than send in the LDPD to arrest you. After all, you know where \${name} is. \${he} wouldn't be able to ignore that bait. \${he}'d need to know.

The bigger question is how much you can afford to tell \${him}. Not the truth of course, that would be a bad idea. Maybe some curated version as a last resort, but once you start talking about things like body hopping and possession, there's too much of a risk that \${he}'d put things together. You don't think \${he} knows that \${name} is \${villain_name} yet. You managed to talk yourself out of trouble before the crash. That's one boat you don't want to rock. No, you need a better story.

The faint sound of chimes at the door makes you look up, locking eyes with Ortega the moment \${he} enters. As if you both instinctively knew. \${he} breaks the connection first, walking over to order coffee. Chatting with the girl behind the counter, a carefree smile as if nothing was wrong. At ease. You know the truth. It's there in the way \${he} still has you within \${his} field of vision. Just to make sure. Still, you're grateful to get a moment to compose yourself, trying to decide how to play this. Play \${him} without playing yourself.

"Fancy meeting you here." Ortega's smile is relaxed but \${his} eyes are tense. Not something anybody would notice, but you know \${him} too well. "Been a while."

"Well, you've been in the hospital." You keep your voice soft as you sip your cold coffee. No trace of bruises on \${his} face, just the faintest hint of a healing scar where \${he} must have been cut going through the windshield.

"You were visiting I heard. I'm a bit disappointed it wasn't me you wanted to see." Oh there is the razor in \${his} smile. No. Not a razor. A rusted dagger, liable to give you tetanus if you allowed yourself to be stabbed.

"It was business, not pleasure." You keep your voice short while allowing your gaze to waver. Play up the conflict. Play up the worry. "I wanted to. I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Ortega lifts \${his} cup but doesn't drink. Instead \${he} looks down at it, as if trying to discern the future in the milky foam on top. It's formed a heart, which is probably a bad omen. Nothing but broken hearts here for the two of you. \${he} takes a sip and eradicates any trace of it.

"For this whole situation." You gesture vaguely, letting \${him} take \${his} pick.

"We both know that's not true." There's a tired capitulation in the way \${he} looks at you. As if seeing you face to face settled something. "You're here for a reason. Might want to start with that."

"\${name} is safe. Alive." You lock eyes with \${him} as you say the words. The relief is obvious in the way \${he} carefully puts the cup down so \${he} can rest \${his} face in \${his} hands for just a moment. Guard down. If you wanted to take \${him} down, this would be your moment. Instead you sit there, giving \${him} the time \${he} needs to pull \${him}self together again.

"Why?" \${his} eyes narrow. "Why did you help kidnap \${chim}? What possible use could \${che} have to you?"

"It's not important." You can sense that \${he}'s fishing for something. As if \${he} already has a theory and only want you to confirm it. That's an opening, as long as you can figure out what it is. "I'm just doing my job."

"I've heard that before. Is this your job too? Was I?"

"It's complicated," you admit. "We're complicated. But the fact that I'm here? That's for me. Not anybody else. I shouldn't be here."

"You shouldn't," \${he} agrees. "But I'll take what I can get." There is a moment where you can see \${him} rub one of the emitters on \${his} hand, most likely considering \${his} options. "Are you working for Hollow Ground?"

"You know I can't answer that," you say vaguely, taking another sip of your cold coffee. You don't like to think about the meeting under Parkfield. It had been stupid to go in your real body, that was what this one was for.

"You just did," Ortega says softly. Is that pity in \${his} voice? "And I'm not surprised. It explains everything, doesn't it?"

"Then there's no need for me to give you answers." You wish you could keep up with whatever conspiracy theory \${he}'s entertaining now. Being vague is your best option.

"Only about one thing. You wanted a meeting, and I know it wasn't to say you were sorry."

"Yes," you admit. "Regardless of what you think, I like \${name} and don't want to see \${chim} hurt. Getting \${chim} out of the hospital was for \${chis} own safety. But..." you look up at Ortega, trying to judge how \${he}'s interpreting your words so far.

"Who told you it was for \${chis} own safety?" The question is surprising enough that you draw a blank.

"I mean... I got my orders," you mumble, annoyed that Ortega didn't go for the bait but something completely irrelevant. How typical. "You know I can't tell you that."

"Can't blame me for trying." \${he} smiles. "Are you worried about \${chim}?"

"I am," you admit, that part is true. What is going on with your body worries you on a deep, visceral level you don't want to think about too closely. "\${name} has changed since... since \${che} got back. Something is wrong and I'm worried."

"Huh." Ortega rubs \${his} chin. "@{sv Has|Have} \${che} done anything, or is it just a surprising change in demeanor and attitude?"

"I mean..." you frown, trying to figure out what Ortega is getting at. It's too specific to be a guess. "It's like you say. \${che} @{sv has|have} changed. I had to leave, it was just too... weird. Not threatening, just... wrong." Technically no threats. Just a wrongness so terrifying it still gave you shivers. From the look on Ortega's face they believe you. Which is worrying. What does \${he} know that you don't?

"And you came to me."

"You're... friends?" You add a question mark at the end to make it more believable. \${puppet_name} wouldn't know all the details. "I don't think \${che} @{sv has|have} too many of those."

"Oh boy." Ortega sighs again, looking towards the windows, but doesn't seem to spot anything suspicious. "I know I can't ask too many questions yet. I'll try not to..." the smallest of shrugs. "You know."

"Sure." You don't, but you're not about to tell \${him}. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't trust you to help. Somehow."

"Help \${chim}... or you?"

"I..." you swallow, avoiding \${his} gaze. "I don't need help."

"Bullshit. It's written all over you. When was the last time you slept?" \${he} leans forward.

"Pot calling kettle much?" You lean in as well, \${he} might try to look all smooth and in control, but you can see the cracks. "But sure, I'll bite. Maybe I do need help. But above all I need you to help \${name}."

"How?"

"That's..." you hate how \${he} catches you off guard with those direct questions. How are you supposed to play \${him} if \${he}'s the one in the driver's seat? "I need to meet with \${name}. In person. But right now I don't dare to do that on my own."

"Are you afraid you might be seen as disloyal?" The words are careful, almost tender.

"I suppose. Or worse. I don't know where we stand anymore, and..." you break off. Frowns. Tries to find words that won't hang you. "I want to help \${chim} but I'm not sure \${che} wants help."

"Oh I can guarantee you \${che} @sv doesn't\don't}." Ortega smiles. "But that doesn't mean \${che} @sv doesn't\don't} need it."

"I wish I could tell you more." Is that true? Do you wish you could bare your heart to Ortega and admit everything and get this masquerade over with? Maybe. Rip the bandaid off. Be the villain. Be the manipulator. Be the enemy. Just to stop \${him} smiling softly at you when you're wearing someone else's face. "I wish I knew what to do."

It's a gamble either way. If you can meet your body face to face perhaps you'll be able to take it back. You're not sure how, though. You're not telepathic anymore. What if you can goad the imposter into attacking you? Initiate the contact? That might be enough for you to get a foothold. And then the rest would be up to you. However, you don't dare to walk into your base alone. The imposter might order you shot. Or imprisoned. \${che} would have too many options. You need to make sure that a telepathic attack is \${chis} only weapon. The best plan you have so far.

But that means getting \${villain_name} out of \${chis} base. You don't want Ortega near it, it's likely even \${he} would add up the dots. \${name}. \${villain_name}. If you can pull this off without ruining your secret identity it's worth a bit of extra effort. The question is how. The reason you're sitting here with Ortega in the first place is that you can't trust \${hench_name} to not pick \${villain_name} over you. And with the injuries it will be some weeks yet before \${che} can move on \${chis} own. Maybe you should have waited. You have a bad feeling about this, all the ways out are bad ones.

"Hey," Ortega says, a little too loud to get your attention.

"Sorry, I was a million miles away." You try to laugh it off.

"You looked it." There is a hint of worry on \${chis} face. "You were saying that you didn't know what to do, and I suggested that you trust me. You need help."

"I do," you admit. "But I can't." Trust Ortega. If you thought you could do that your life would have unfolded very differently. "I shouldn't have come."

"Hey," Ortega repeats, softer this time. "I'm glad you did. You might not believe it, but I was worried about you too."

"Business before pleasure," you mumble, but you don't hesitate when \${he} he reaches out to take \${his} hand in yours. The way his thumb rubs the back of your hand is an intimately familiar gesture. "I need to think about how to go about this."

"You could just tell me where \${he} @sv is\are}. That way I can help you plan the rescue." So convincing. So willing to help.

"It's not that simple." You feel an impending sense of doom, squeezing his hand in return. You can't tell him that, the odds are not in your favor when it comes to this particular russian roulette. You know it. "I can't. Not yet."

"I'm sorry to hear that." \${he} shakes his head. "But I understand. Business before pleasure."

Your body locks up in a cramp before you even realize what has happened, the pain hot enough to send you to the floor tasting lightning. The bastard tasered you. Smiled at you so sadly and zapped you through the hand he was squeezing in pretend goodbye. There are distant screams, and the last thing you hear before you back out is Ortega's voice, filled with authority.

"It is fine, I'm with the Rangers. Stand back. \${phe} will be fine."

And then the world goes dark.

[Dec 18, 2024](#)

Alright, here is the QnA, slightly late, but that is December for you! Hope y'all are less stressed by the season than I am!

Would Hollow Ground ever take Sidestep an aquarium?

OH. Dual answer. Hollow Ground is very much like "We already have aquariums at home." On the other hand, the Los Diablos aquarium might become important for... reasons.

How would the Rangers react learning Sidesteps true age?

Shock, confusion, trying to make sense of it, probably some insensitive questions (Ortega), possibly make fun of it (Argent) and

Can Daniel mime well? Has he ever mimed blowing up a balloon and then floating away on it?

Ahahahaa oh this is the funniest question for my brain to have a visceral reaction to, but I will immediately say NO. Don't ask me why, but he's really bad at it. Argent is great though.

With Ortega being from Texas do they know any dances like two-step or Mexican cumbia? Did their mom make them learn/dance with them as a kid? I just want a couples dance with LDs hottest ranger 🤔

Oh you know Ortega is a good dancer. I can imagine they know a variety of styles, and was very good at them as a teen. Lots of practice, lots of people who wanted to dance.

What do fish feel like to a telepath?

Depends on the fish and the telepath. To Sidestep, most fish feels like a vague background shimmer. They have a presence, unlike insects, but nothing more than awareness.

Sidestep sees literal mindscapes, Locus reads minds as if they were books, but what about other telepaths like Heartbreak and Thunderhead? How do they experience those kinds of telepathic deep dives?

Thunderhead was a telepath, but her greatest strength were as an empath. She would read, feel and experience people's emotions around her. Some might see her active influencing of people as a form of self-defense, making sure people around her where happy, hard-working, law abiding and loyal made her feel good. Being surrounded by arguments and strife was painful.

Heartbreak experienced the world as a series of cascading and escalating events, like falling head over heels down a waterslide, surrounded by strobe lights and loud music. The world was overwhelming and incomprehensible, intruding on them, invading them. The only way to fix the pressure difference was projecting.

How was chargestep typically portrayed in movies (dynamics, tropes, etc.) and how was that portrayal affected by their gender/queerness?

It would vary a lot depending on the Sidestep. I can only say it in the most general of terms. Shorter Sidesteps tended to be cast more as the sidekick, some would say slightly infantilized. Opposite sex Ortega/Sidestep would be romanticized a lot, though it might be everything from open romance to rivals with sexual tension. Shorter Sidesteps who gave a male impression is an exception to this, they would be delegated to sidekicks, or pining. If it was a same sex Charge/Sidestep dynamic, they would focus on the best friend dynamic. There might be subtext, but subtext was all it was, and mainly in the eyes of fans.

Don't know if this was asked before, but who is your favorite character to write?

A tie between Sidestep's unhinged inner monologue, Ortega being shiftier as fuck and speaking in like three layers of subtext, and Argent's supreme lack of giving a fuck.

How do you think pre-heartbreak sidestep would do in other hero settings, like Marvel and DC and the like, where would they do the best at? Still a Re-gene, just somewhere where Re-Genes don't exist normally.

I can see Sidestep fitting right in DC's early more mature period, the teen titan relaunch days 1980-1996. Re-Genes might as well exist there. In Marvel maybe during the X-men run where they first learned about Genosha and have Sidestep be an escaped Mutate.

You mentioned before that Finch brought up antidepressants and step turned those down. How would medication like that affect their telepathy? Or do they just assume it will based on past experiences with other painkillers and sedatives?

I don't think it would affect their telepathy, but Sidestep is suspicious of mood-altering drugs and attempts to make their mental state more palatable.

Did sidestep know Luis? were they close?

Sidestep knew Sentinel, yeah. How close they were depends on the Sidestep.

where exactly is Ortega's generator located?

General abdomen area. Dunno exactly where.

Apologies if this has been answered before, I wasn't able to find a reference to it in the old Q&As, but i may have missed something. In "The Void - 6, Ortega revisited", when Step gets back from scouting the abandoned buildings and says they found a power source, Ortega thinks "There's a tension to the words I can feel but not decipher. Something happened.", but they don't press Step on it. DID something happen (if it's not spoilers)? Or did the trauma just finally start to hit when Step was away from Ortega and could drop the "i'm fine" act, and that's what Ortega picked up on?

Oh that was absolutely it. Sidestep had a quiet freakout when Ortega couldn't see, possibly telepathically frightening the nearby animals to flee in panic.

Does HG think they have complete control of LD?

No, and they have no interest to. Being able to influence it is enough, the rest implies responsibility.

Does Sidestep, or escaped ReGenes in general, not consider themselves Boosted? They've never known anything else, and there might be an underlying assumption that Boosted people were in a position where suicide was not an unwelcome outcome, which is not something Sidestep and other ReGenes associate with their powers.

Hmmm. I would say in general, they do not consider themselves boosted for the reason you stated above. But there are always exceptions.

You said you don't make a conscious decision to write a "type" of character. I don't want to be rude, but maybe you need to make a conscious decision to try to write a sapphic character. Every male RO has more queer content than female ROs. Which so far is some vs nothing at all.

I'm sorry you feel that way. I made the decision to not make Chen romanceable by all when I added the rest of the Rangers as RO's to stick to his character. That imbalance will always be there. Argent has not had a sex-scene yet for character reasons due to her nanovore issues. If I had stuck to two RO's only as planned, the playing field would be more level. It is an inherently imbalanced book as a result.

That last ones not really a question now is it? It's a Q&A, not a suggestions box.

I included it in the QnA regardless.

Would Mortum ever get to try on Sidestep's cape if they got the chance or was offered?

No.

I know is silly, but would Mortum like it if Sidestep use their cape as a umbrella if they where outside? Just trying to keep them from catching a cold, not actually wanting anything?

That sounds sweet.

I'm very curious about what your organization system looks like while writing this. Fallen Hero is so expansive, how do you keep everything straight?

Oh boy. Drawings on paper with arrows and notes, lots of little document notes. However, none of the planning survive the exposure to reality. A lot of things needs to be changed and rewritten when I realize path conflicts I didn't predict. This is in part why the start of Revelations is taken so long.

Are the more political savvy LD civilians concerned about the peace treaty or do they just assume that another one will be signed?

Oh there are a lot of worried people I think.

Will anarchist step be able to help Vera with her goals involving her neighborhood?

Possibly, I dunno yet. But Vera ties into the main plot, so it might work.

Has anyone landed on the moon yet? If not, which characters are the most hyped to watch a potential moon landing?

Nope, no moonlanding! Hmmm... I think Chen.

How are regens supposed to refer to their handlers? Like by code names? Mr/Mrs? Last names? Does it vary from handler to handler? If so how does the farm prefer for handlers to be addressed.

They are supposed to use the designation code, a combo of words and numbers. However, in practice, each Re-Gene has a nickname that is either a riff on the letters used in their code, or pointing to some physical or power quirk. Special Directive operators have proper code names. Regenes have no first or last

names.

If Ortega got beat up bad enough in the first fight will they finally wear the helmet next round?

Oh yes.

You said in an earlier Q&A that current Sidestep would beat old Sidestep. Could they still beat old Side if they were in the suit with the assistance of the Rat King? If not, which armor combinations would Current last the longest against?

Current Sidestep would still take down old Sidestep with the suit and Rat-King.

Would the Rangers save a sympathetic, non-lethal villain that “made good points” to Ortega, gained Argent's respect (no reveal), and saved the civilians in the mansion with Steel if it became known that they were in danger and they had to risk themselves to save them? Undeniable that our MC would be in chains after, but would they go the extra mile and risk their lives for a “villain?”

That's something I won't reveal in a QnA but in game!

If they would, at what point of player ruthlessness would they leave the MC to fend for themselves?

Also not something I will reveal beforehand! I want you to be unsure, nervous and possibly surprised.

Is Deadeye's bullet control limited by her line of sight? Or is it like kill cam shots in video games where her perception is sorta piggybacking on the bullet she's controlling?

More like the latter.

In armor I did a play through of evil but in the same play through when out of armor with the rangers I made the nicest choices. So I'm curious is there's gonna be a path where the MC has something like DID disorder?

I won't name any mental states, disorders or diagnosis in game. That is up to you as the reader if you want to have a name for it.

I was looking through some of the older QnAs and came across a Re-Gene term for a loved one: Heartmate. Do you think Step will be able to call their RO that either in the next book or the last one?

It might be cute, but at this point, Sidestep's not exactly close to their Re-Gene roots, and, as a Cuckoo, was not "raised" in Re-Gene culture in the same way.

How close would the Rangers be to catching our MC if they introduced themselves as “Sidestep” at the Museum, was a known telepath, and then later changed their villain name to “Heartbreak” and said “it's my origin story” to Mia (given that they've done nothing else suspicious.)

I mean that's pretty close to holding up a sign telling the truth, ennit?

Has anyone wondered about the resemblance between a mirror image puppet and Sidestep, if they know both the puppet and what Sidestep looks like, such as the mob boss crew? If they look similar, would the crew question that at all?

I mean it's one of the things you think about in passing, mostly in a "huh" way. I'm sure everyone has seen someone who looks a lot like someone else, only to find out they weren't.

If it's not too spoilerish, what kind of good memories Sidestep would have had in the farm? I got curious, since their thought about it, when meeting Arde. From the glimpses we've seen, the farm is horrible place to be.

That is up to the individual Sidestep. Might be a choice later, but there sure wasn't many of them.

Did Sidestep ever get caught in Puzzle boxes traps, in their vigilantes days?

Yeah, probably. It makes sense, and would be annoying as hell.

Okay, so did the paingate help Alcoholic vice Sidestep with hangovers? If so, how did their first hangover go?

No. Not intense enough. Headaches, nausea and minor pains were just like normal.

We know HG saw their oldest brother as inspiration and spoiled their youngest sibling, but what kind of relationship did they have with their second older brother; the one who died?

I don't know yet, I haven't thought about it.

Considering the close age-gap between HG older sibling, did the second oldest brother's death hit hard for surviving brother?

OH yes. That one I know. They were very close.

What would make Shroud happy? Does Shroud even know an answer to that?

To not be hungry.

Will we ever get to see Ortega all-in fighting Sidestep, without holding back?

Yes.

It tooks years for Armadillo to trust Dove. What made Arde finally trust Dove enough?

The realization that if they wanted to move forward, they would have to trust someone. Either that or live the rest of their life without trusting anybody ever again, and Arde didn't want that life.

Dang it's one thing if your car breaks down, that happens. But your bed too? That's just a punch in the face.

October and November has been tough, not gonna lie. And in December my bank messed up, to add to things. But things have resolved now, and hopefully 2025 will be less chaotic.

How would Ortega, Chen, and former Rangers react to a Villain!Sidestep naming themselves after the Void?

Ooooooooooh. Perhaps that is also something I need some dialog for. Hmmm.

If Herald were to die mid air would he fall to the ground or float off into space?

Assuming that he did not have a very fast upward trajectory when it happened and was close to escape velocity, he would fall to the ground.

There's a question passed around social media—"What is common knowledge in your field, but shocks outsiders?" What would Dr. Mortum's answer be?

"Most villains who rely on technology and armor has no real understanding of how it works, and relies on tech-savvy henchmen to manage their daily villain routine. Henchmen with expertise in weapons/armor can demand high salaries if they know how to keep their mouth shut and look suitably like ignorant brutes around others. The same goes for henchmen managing social media and fanclubs. There has been talk about forming a union, but so far attempts have been unsuccessful due to infighting."

We know, from Sidestep's perspective, a lot of the big threats the Rangers have taken down, like the Void, Nanosurge and HB, what are some similar level threats the LD Rangers have taken down without them, or before their recruitment? What about the other ranger teams?

Oh boy. Lemme think. I know there was what the media called a "zombie" invasion in Washington state, and the "Zombie Kingdom" is still an ongoing but less acute issue. The man behind this is of course Cornelius Vaughn, he has refused to adopt a villain identity and goes by his real name. Ex-military, maskless, and nearly indestructible. He also has the power to induce the people following him to near suicidal acts of bravery, as well as lending them some of his invulnerability. Also known as "The Zombie General," a moniker he hates. His "zombie" followers are of course not dead, but their dazed behavior while far from his command, in combination with their ability to survive gruesome wounds has led to that nickname. Especially as prolonged exposure to Vaughn's influence tends to leech people of both vitality and free will, leading them to look more and more corpse-like. Vaughn was never captured by the Seattle Rangers, but he was driven off into the cascade mountains, and lost most of the troops supporting him, so it counts like a win.

The San Francisco Rangers were the ones to originally face Vimana, the self-titled "atomic woman." This was years back, during Armstrong's tenure as Marshal, and was the incident that led to his premature death in leukemia a year later. Two other members, Blue Moon and Clandestine were killed in the fight, and the San Antonio reservoir was destroyed in the process, and the surrounding land contaminated. Vimana escaped east, leaving the Free Western Territories for the more lawless midwest. In a world where atomic bombs/energy was never more than a fringe scientific theory deemed too dangerous/useless compared to solar/fusion, her atomic blasts are seen as tantamount to terrorist weapons. There are a lot of rumors surrounding atomic power and the invisible killer of radiation, and she utilizes that to her advantage. To make it clear, the technology to enrich uranium has existed for nearly a century, but weapons technology went in different directions in the FH world. With the focus on more close warfare like powered armor, it was deemed too risky to use and stayed on the drawing board. Missile tech was not as focused on. Instead early advancements in solar/battery tech and the latter fusion technology filled that gap. Atomic power was seen as dangerous, dirty and a scorched earth tactic. Most people's experience to radiation was for x-rays and other medical tech. Thus, Vimana is a frightening woman, even more so than she would be in our world. She might only have been driven off, but that is a win.

Did HB use Themmy's feelings about Void's death against them?

Oh yes.

Does ortega's dad have any ties to the farm?

None.

If Sidestep got their hands on it, would Rat King's casing be compatible with Porthole's armor(s)?

Not really, but the thing with tech is that you can rebuild and adjust things.

Is hollow ground concerned at all with all the telepaths going missing?

Not really.

Hopefully someone will let me know if this has been asked before: where is religion in terms of Fallen Hero? Roughly the same in terms of influence/spread/ and faiths or did the hero drug shake things up? Are any of the rangers religious? Or is this a subject you're mostly avoiding/hand waving?

This is a subject that I am mostly going to avoid/handwave. I imagine it might be similar to today's world. The thing is, I am not really religious, and and grew up seeing it as more of a cultural habit thing than a form of faith. I don't think I could write it well, and it's not a part of my headspace when I write any of the characters. As it has no relation to the story, I have decided to leave that up to the readers.

Was the airstrike necessary or redundant to resolving the HB crisis? As in, would the sphere of influence continue spreading without the airstrike?

Hmmm... I really wish I could answer that. Maybe I should. We're going to learn it in game eventually, so I won't elaborate. But essentially the sphere of influence would have stopped regardless.

Do the ROs prefer hot or cold water? Any outliers who enjoy ice baths or water hot enough to boil a lobster?

Hot water lovers to cold water lovers: Ben - Daniel - Dr. Mortum - Vera- Chen - Argent - Ortega.

What would Sidestep's nanovores colony sound or feel like to Argent's?

Like a muted grind, a suppressed toothache, a distant echo of a scream in a forest.

How does Chen recognize and deal with toxic/problematic patterns in his relationships? Would he notice if Sidestep fell into an almost handler-regene like pattern with him in an attempt for familiarity in their relationship?

Chen has some issues with identifying that at first. He was an army man for quite some time, and that messed him up a bit. However, he has a habit of analyzing his own reactions and checking in, so he'd get it eventually and just ask.

Ooh I would ask this but love a take on all the Rangers if possible!

I think Ortega has a hard time seeing their own toxic traits in relationships. Argent has an easier time, if for no other reason that she refuses to be dependent on or used like that. Daniel would spot it the easiest and bring it up early on.

What would Sidestep look like if they were The Long Quiet in Slay the Princess?

I have no idea what this is so that will be your headcanon!

Has Argent ever encountered a woman who is boosted to be super beautiful? How would it make her feel to know that no matter what features she takes on, this person will always be more beautiful than her, since she can't shapeshift that supernatural glamour?

Argent doesn't make herself beautiful for others, she makes herself beautiful for herself only. At least that's what she tells me...

If the mc was imprisoned would they be one of the boosts placed under perpetual coma due to their powers?

Not at first, it is assumed dampeners and drugs can handle it. If people realize that they are beyond that, then that might be considered.

Following that up, could Sidestep learn to do telepathy while in a coma?

What is a coma but an uneventful dream?

Who runs best in high heels?

Julia. Argent hates that.

What is the closest FHverse equivalent of Pepsiman?

I... don't even know what a Pepsiman is?

Does Chen ever wish he had been stationed in a different Rangers team like Seattle instead LD? Has that changed since becoming the Marshal?

I think not. This might be a complicated place, but it's been his home for years now.

Sidestep sometimes remembers the Marshal as Captain Wei Chen, is captain a rank within the Rangers officially or just carry over from his military days?

Chen has never served as a Captain in the military, but it is a real rank. He was promoted by the US Army some time into his tenure with the Rangers in order to give the Rangers more "military stature." So his career has gone from Sergeant Steel to Captain Steel to Marshal Steel.

If different programming/memories had been on Sidestep's AI chip would they have still turned out the same?

If all events afterwards had been exactly the same? Probably. Some little details, skills and nightmares might have varied, but Sidestep was made by lived experience.

What are the cast's reactions to finding a small spider suddenly in their personal space?

Daniel put it outside, Ortega let it be, Chen smash it unless Spoon gets there first and eats it. Argent would mysteriously never find any spiders near her, Dr. Mortum would grab the can of Raid. Ben would kill it (spend too long in the tropics and spiders are not friends) and Vera would let one of her pigeons eat it. If she is in pigeon form, she might see it as a snack.

Would Mia ever inform on the Villain? What would be the trigger?

Oh that is spoilers for you. I want you to sweat.

We know that Ortega thinks they know Sidestep's past. And Steel had thoughts but found out the truth. What does Herald think is likely about Sidestep's past? Did it change after hearing stories from Ortega?

That will probably come up in game! But it was a lot more rosy than the reality.

How aware are the Rangers of the actual makeup of Regenes? Do they know they're basically human lite with AI chips or do they now think Sidestep is something like the terminator?

Most never thought too deeply about it. I honestly am not sure for most of them, I need to explore that in the story. But the starting assumption were closer to the terminator than to human-lite.

Mortum gave us a micro-infodump on cape technology but what's mask tech like? Can they be expressive like the comic/animation norm & MCU Spider-Man/Deadpool or are they all completely static like older live-action superhero movies?

It is more fun if they can be expressive! So they can be, probably some form of micro-muscle tracking tech that translates facial expression to movement in the mask by unducing electrical currents or something.

During HB why does focusing on memories of friendship/the Friendless scar increase Sidestep's reputation? I had my own guess about it but my curiosity for the actual answer has peaked

In essence, if I am to trust past-Malin, if Sidestep chooses to focus on past friendships, that means that there must have been friendships to be had. And thus, they probably spent more time around Ortega doing hero shit and being a valuable colleague, hence the reputation increase.

Boosted animals seem to have greatly extended lifespans. Do Humans experience a similar effect?

Some do. It's not universal, but also not uncommon.

Are any of the cast ticklish?

Ortega would pretend to be ticklish. Daniel is ticklish. Dr. Mortum would vehemently refuse to admit that they are ticklish despite evidence to the contrary.

Does Mortum's lab have a self destruct button?

Spoilers.

Has Mortum ever made any really dumb lab mistakes (in their eyes) and if yes, could we have an example?

Oh absolutely! Mostly related to putting things in their pocket that should under no circumstances be put in their pocket and then forgetting about it.

How close Porthole is to the "brain in a jar" trope? How/why are they not being studied by the Special Directive or any other organisation?

I mean... kinda close I suppose? And what makes you think they are not part of a study program? The Special Directive doesn't do those as they are an enforcement arm, but many other organizations do. That might be where they get their money/bodies from. You don't have to lock up your subjects when they can just come in a few times a week for checkups and tests.

What was the battle for phoenix mentioned during the auction?

A big villain/hero battle that involved the Catastrofiend, and left large parts of downtown Phoenix in ruins.

Are The Squares™ merely demo speculation bait, or will they be presented as such in the final product (and, if so, will we get a concrete answer to what's beneath them within Revelations)?

They will be presented in the final product, and you will learn what's behind them in Revelations.

Is there potential for a pupstuck route where sidestep confesses to the whole puppet situation in a bid to have the Rangers/Ranger They Trust help? Or is it a situation you cant see yourself writing/sidestep doing?

Not to the full extent, but there might be a partial choice there that I am currently working on to see if it makes sense.

How does Regene hygiene work with beards/leg hair/underarm hair/etc? Body hair can get in the way of a lot of medical diagnostic tools. I can see them just ignoring body hair until it needs to be shaved off, but I have a harder time imagining them allowing beards because there's individuality in that. So do some Regenes get regular shaves too? What if there's one that shaves in the morning and wakes up the following day with 5 o'clock shadow?

Re-Genes can and do shave, just like they shower.

What was Anathema's presentation score? Did they have a certain style? Going from having nothing to getting a Ranger sized paycheck, what did they prefer to spend their money on?

I think it was middling, they had kind of a comfortable but eclectic style. They spent a lot of money on charities and small business, they didn't really like feeling rich.

The Nanosurge was pretty big when Sidestep stopped it, aside from the sample stolen at the start of book 1 and Argent's cluster, how many samples were squirreled away by interested parties?

Far too many...

What did Danny find most attractive about Argent when they were dating?

Her confidence and poise.

If they met and posed as a regular civilian to her, would Tía Elena get along with Hollow Ground?

Probably.

The stats page gives off the impression that it's a file on the MC i.e. the CLASSIFIED, Subject: Villain, clinical tone, etc; is that just for the sake of aesthetic or is it an approximation of an actual file someone has on Step? & if it is would it be a spoiler to say who's it is?

That part is pure aesthetics.

How political do the Rangers get? We see celebrities share their political views all the time. Is it the same for the Rangers or are they made to say, 'no comment.' Has this caused issues for Rangers whose sexuality, gender, heritage, faith, etc. are brought up in politics?

In general, the Rangers are supposed to avoid talking politics. They are representatives of the US Government and should behave accordingly. Preferably they're not supposed to have any opinions that differ from the generally accepted US Government norm. In practice, these things slip out all the time, mostly with little consequence. Ortega is the greatest offender, and is by now used to adding a little laugh and a "this is just my personal opinion, not as a member of the Rangers." It has landed them in hot water on more than one occasion, but the media loves someone who actually speaks out on things, so Charge's popularity has been a shield. As have their ability to play the "I'm just a jock, don't mind me, I don't think" card.

What's Regina's favorite thing about Sidestep?

Their will to live.

If it came to it, would the US government prefer to disavow the LD Rangers, or the Farm?

What makes you think the US government is involved with the Farm?

What is Regina's least favorite thing about Sidestep?

Their contrariness.

What's your favorite aquatic species?

Eels!

Are there any physical traits in your characters that you never mentioned in their description but are always present in your imagination? Like, maybe the eye colour that was missing in the books but you always imagined them as green, or the character having a ring, that sort of thing?

No, I very seldom picture the characters as physical traits. I see things like Ortega's smile and the way their eyes change when it's a real one. Things like Argent's fluid movement as she leans against a wall. Or the sound of Chen's footsteps. I'm kind of faceblind and don't like looking at people's faces (probably connected) so I rarely focus on looks. More vibes.

Does Argent like watching bad movies? Either in an ironic way like how people treat The Room, and/or enjoying critiquing/dragging them, etc?

Argent enjoys watching what other people might term bad movies, but she might not agree that they are bad. She doesn't like dragging movies, and detests boring ones. She's looking for something in them, and if she finds that, she can accept that other parts might be crap.

If Argent found herself in our world, or a world like ours, would she be more interested in abusing her powers in a place where nobody else has powers, or would she be too busy watching movies that don't exist in her world?

She would go deep into hiding and make sure nobody would ever find out she existed. So probably become a recluse and watch movies that don't exist.

How good is Regina under pressure of a gunfire or other non-lab-related danger? Would she keep her cool enough to not get killed by accidental poor judgement?

Oh yes.

For purely selfish reasons I have to ask: does Nestlé exist in FHR universe and can our Sidesteps be compared to it's CEO?

While the FH world is a capitalistic libertarian hellscape, it is by no means as globalized as our world. The massive multinational companies doesn't exist in the same way. There is no simple way for a european company to buy up all their american competitors, the markets are too protective, and the nation states too paranoid. There is still a cold war/conflict fear which leads to the same conglomerates not having formed. SO Nesté exists, but it's not our Nestlé.

Can people understand Zephyr when they go fast? Or does it turn into gibberish at speed? And how often does Zephyr accidentally swallow an insect?

Zephyr rarely speak when they go fast, it's problematic and hard to understand. Also, they need to breathe! Some insects have been swallowed...

Does Los Diablos still have the same iconography (flag, motto, etc.) as Los Angeles?

No, but I have not made up what the new one is!

Did the Oakland/LA Raiders & Raider Nation survive The Big One & Las Vegas?

No, sadly.

And in general are the FEZ states included in the NBA/NFL/etc. or are they left doing their own thing

They do their own thing, mainly due to accusations of boost use/drugs and general trustworthiness. They were never let back in. Also, since travel there is still expensive/uncommon, there is no regular exchange. A lot of people north and east still think of the west like some sort of desolate wasteland, quite different from the reality. It is in the US government's interest keeping it like that.

Has Sidestep checked Finch's office for bugs?

Of course.

Could we get more detail on the special forces unit that Chen & Ben were in? Like their purpose & connection to other organizations like the CIA or SD? Or are those spoilers/unimportant?

I would say they are mostly unimportant. I haven't detailed anything, because it is in the past, and mostly useful as a character foundation trait. Not for plot purposes.

And was anyone else we know of a part of it? Even if it was before or after them & they never met those 2

I don't think so!

How long has Owl had Hoots? Was she running it while she was an active vigilante, pre-Nanosurge?

No, she took over it after the Nanosurge as an attempt to have something to do. She did have money invested in it beforehand, but she never had anything to do with the actual running of the place then.

What do the Rangers miss most about their lives before the heroics? Excluding the obvious (family, skin, limbs, etc.)

Chen misses being a nobody. Argent misses being able to relax. Ortega misses being able to do what they want. Daniel misses planning for his future.

Is ZaZa's name short for anything?

No, it is a nickname, but it is a riff on his real name.

How heavily monitored are ReGenes? Was it to the point that their beds didn't even have blankets to hide under? Or were there still ways to get away from observation if you're clever? (Hide under the sheets, bathroom breaks, blindspots in camera surveillance, etc.)

There's always ways to hide.

How heavy is a solidified nanovore swarm? Is Argent lighter or heavier than a woman of equivalent size and stature?

I would say she is heavier.

Do ReGene tattoos bruise like normal skin or do they keep their initial coloring no matter what?

They bruise, but depending on the tattoo color, the pooled blood underneath the skin might change how the color is perceived.

Was there ever a point in time where The Catastrofiend was superstitious?

Probably.

What would The Void think of 5 Pennies & his powers?

Interesting.

How does Joes boost work exactly? If he had multiple boosts would the clones be boosted as well?

One for all and all for one.

Which characters are fans of Star Wars: A New Hope(since the Big One happened before The Empire Strikes Back)?

Probably only Argent, who like the jankiness of sixties/seventies science fiction.

Hood's first name was John but what last name did he use when he was Marshal? Did he ever use different names/aliases thru his life?

He did. I think it varied a lot at the start, and he tended to give a different last name depending on the place. As he became too well known he used Hood as his last name, which was what he was using when the Rangers were formed.

Hood had a lot of tattoos, did they have any kind of theme? What were the mostly of? Were they done on a whim or things he wanted to commemorate? What were his favorite/most notable tattoos?

Oh boy. The original ones were done when he was part of the biker gang as a kid. Those were crude, and right wing. Think things like eagles, runes, nazi allusions, all things designed to provoke and horrify. Including some facial tattoos. He fixed up/tattooed over many of them as best he could after he had left those circumstances behind, but you can still spot things if you know what to look for. He doesn't love them. He doesn't see them with pride. However, he never removed them. He saw it as a reminder of what he could have, but never wanted to be.

Since it seems to be the most common height to lie about being in the US how much pleasure does Ortega get when they get to burst the bubble of someone lying about being 6'0?

You know that's the case. At least if it's someone they don't like.

What happens if I Boost someone who's infected with multicellular parasites?

Most likely nothing out of the ordinary. So far the boost drugs have not been proven to affect other forms of life than mammals and birds.

Is Daniel uncomfortable being called Mr. Sullivan by Marek and others? Or does he just accept that's what he's going to be called by those who know his last name?

I think part of him wishes he felt more uncomfortable with it. But it's part of how he grew up.

What is anti-telepathic training like? How does one prepare their mind?

Basically there are three main strategies, which ones used and to what extent depends on the person. The strategies are: Detect, Divert and Deny.

Detect means training to be aware of any changes in your thought process and outside influence. This is tricky, but warning signs can be old memories resurfacing without context, vivid daydreams, feeling watched, strong feelings of anxiety and being unable to stop thinking about unrelated things. As these are things that happens to most people on occasion, context is important. For example, if you are a IT professional at a bank who is suddenly unable to stop thinking about your login sequence and password, or a soldier who gets intrusive thoughts about shooting your fellow guard would raise some flags.

Divert is taking those red flags and intrusive thoughts and learning how to divert your thoughts to other things. This is most often learning to focus on other things, such as an earworm song, meditative mantra, counting, or sexual thoughts. The point is to focus your thoughts so hard on a single subject that has nothing to do with what someone might want to learn. It has the advantage of not being an overt tactic, and is meant to be employed at the first suspicion that something might be wrong. Better safe than sorry.

Deny is the third tactic, and the hardest one for most. People are thought to discipline their minds, to avoid daydreaming and drifting thoughts. To stay in the moment. Be present. Meditation, mantras and self-knowledge are important tools. If the person in question has a hint of psychic sensitivity, this is where the training will be focused.

Is HG the type to try to set their sibling up with someone? Would Nocturne/Jake want to get involved?

Nope, I don't think so.

How well have the Rangers been able to keep on top of things seeing as they're down to 4 members with two of those members being somewhat new-ish to the team? Is it odd that they still have had no extra team mates or is four just seen as an acceptable number for a city of Los Diablos's size?

The Rangers is not the law enforcement of Los Diablos. That's the LDPD, which do have a "special operatives" section of mods and boosts trained to deal with the more garden variety villains. Companies might have their own security teams, which might also be boosts or mods, which will handle company business. Vigilantes prey on street crime and less powerful villains. The function of the Rangers is to be the symbol of the US Government in the city, to fight the flashiest threats, be cool in the media, and remind everyone that the US Government is still looking out for them, even though the FWT is independent. This is part what Mayor Alvarez is trying to counter with the Guardians, to try to build a city awareness, an alternative symbol of independence. Thus, the number of Rangers (and indeed the power level, once we stay above a certain level) is less important than their symbolic presence and value.

What's one thing that Daniel never wants anyone to know about himself?

The extent to how his rich isolated upbringing has fucked him over and made him ignorant on what the average person has to deal with. He knows he's sheltered and has done his best to try not to be, but he's still exposed to facets of life and the world that he had assumed were different (and a lot more benign.) It's hard to unlearn privilege, he knows it's not his fault that he was born into money, but he still feels vaguely ashamed of it.

For Sidesteps that take the option to say they visit Ranger HQ regularly to 'help out,' (near the beginning of Retribution) what exactly does that mean? Are they like a consultant for building villain profiles, helping organize paperwork, sitting in on stake outs or what? Are their visits logged and recorded? If so, how do the Rangers explain it in their paperwork? As a volunteer or intern or something?

Oh nothing that organized. Everyone is aware that the less paperwork the better. Or, well, at least Ortega is, and they would absolutely make sure that things are "adjusted" if needed. Exactly what helping out means would depend on the Sidestep. It can be helping Ortega to stake people out, sit in and share intel on the current villains, poke holes in Chen's tactics, maybe do some tech tinkering, scan some thoughts if they still openly are a telepath. Maybe even be part of a surprise fight now and then.

As the villain, can we ever bait Ortega into kissing us without knowing our identity, or are they not into that anymore?

I guess we'll have to see what kind of sexual tension might happen.

I don't know if this one has been asked but how 'safe' is it for Ortega to hold small animals like hamsters given that they have shocked Sidestep a little bit in some playthroughs by accident

Ortega avoids those things. Though if it is an animal small enough to hold, at least it is not grounded.

Are people who take immunosuppressive drugs while getting boosted more likely to survive the boosting process?

Yes and no. I think the jury is still out on that. Though, so far most of the positive signs have been from people who were already suffering life-altering illnesses and saw boosting as a last chance. Perhaps more of them survived, but it's not exactly a large sample size, and some later succumbed to their illness.

Would having technical knowledge (engineering, programming, etc) help Argent use her technopathy better, or are her powers more of a "she just delivers her intent and it gets done" kind of deal?

Technical knowledge helps, and Argent has studied a lot in her spare time. She already had an interest as a child, and she has kept that up, though she has no official degree or schooling.

How would Ortega rate their cooking skills compared to their mothers? How would Elena rate Ortega's cooking skills?

Oh nobody who has a mother that can cook can ever beat their skills. That's just fact, combining childhood memories with experience, and the simple joy of eating a meal someone else prepared for you is a combination you can't beat. Not even Ortega.

If you could assign a motivation (like one sidestep chooses) for the Rangers and Mortum, what would they choose?

Oh that is SPOILERS for some, so I will decline to answer.

Is the Slasher still alive? Are they still one of Lord Embers lieutenants if so?

Yeah, holding the fort in San Francisco.

[Questions for the month!](#)

[Dec 1, 2024](#)

A little late, but please ask your questions for the month!

Also, a HUGE thank you for everyone supporting me. I can't tell you how much it means, especially during a month where both my bed and car broke down in a permanent non-fixable way so I had to empty my reserves. Thank you so much everybody, you really make a difference.

[Meditation](#)

[Nov 30, 2024](#)

Time for this month's lore post, this time we take a dive into Sidestep's past, right after they escaped the Farm the second time and had made their way back to Los Diablos.

Los Diablos, 2017

Around you, the city seethes. Was it always this loud? You have retreated underground, to the old tunnels, the place of the forgotten. The domain of the lost. Dirt and concrete helps. Or maybe distance. The claustrophobic press of the dark is held at bay by a single candle as you fruitlessly try to meditate.

Fuck. The itch on your back is just out of reach and impossible to ignore. Close enough to pain it might well be a wound healed wrong, a twisted nerve reminding you that it exist. Broken and put together again too many times, the fall from the window just the most spectacular in a long line of falls from grace. Yes. Laugh about it. Only way to deal. Push back memories of pain so blinding you might as well have been the surface of the sun. You don't even know how bad it really was, you've walked through life coddled by your pain-gate and then it broke and you were...

Were...

You bite the side of your cheek hard enough to fill your mouth with metal, not the half-remembered taste of the rubber hose down your throat. Start from the top. Catalog the pain. Identify it. Isolate it. Analyze it. Above all, breathe. No machine to do it for you. Ignore the hitch in your chest as you do, that pain is old and familiar. Maybe you need to redefine things. Pain is too loaded a word, what you're feeling now is less than you did back at the Farm, locked in that cell, recuperating despite yourself. Your throat is not sore from screaming, but from a cold you picked up recently. New strains. You haven't been among people that long, of course you'd catch every single germ. Makes staying in the tunnels a worse idea. Or maybe better. Less people. More rats. You swallow, deciding to steal some antibiotics once you're ready to dare the streets.

Maybe tomorrow.

The itch is gone, the pain added to the constant hum of your body. You spent hours working out, reveling in not being watched. Testing what you could do. Where the strains were. What you needed to work on. So much. And yet you're more whole than you feared. Three weeks without drugs have cleared your system of anything that could hide the damage done. And, to your surprise, you're functional. They actually put you back together. Range of movement, while less, is acceptable. Your muscles, while weak, are not atrophied. What little work you could do in your cell has kept you going, and now that you're increasing the strain you hope you can build yourself back up. Not the same. Never the same.

You can't let that stop you.

You breathe. Hold your breath. Breathe again. Your lung capacity is good. The only thing you could train in your cell without issue. Testing your broken ribs, your injured spine. Only half a thought that if you held it long enough you could pass out. Your body betrayed you there, wanted to be awake too much to force yourself unconscious. There were things in the dark. You hold your breath again and watch the candle. You are the flame. The ring of light around you keep the shadows at bay. Shields. Focus. You need to. Focus.

You close your eyes and invite the dark, extend your reach, and listen to the babble of the city. Indecipherable. Confusing. A million voices mumbling outside the door. Have you become so weak? Too much time under dampeners, on drugs, lost in numbness until you feared your telepathy had been forcefully stripped from you, or worse, another casualty of what made you go through that window. Have you grown this strong? You never used to be able to hear this. Feel this. DO this. You didn't realize until your chains fell away and you were truly outside again.

Much. Too much.

You need shields. Protection. Repression. No more drugs or dampeners though, you won't resort to that. You won't bind yourself without the possibility of an emergency release. Hide instead. Run. You need to do this. Master whatever you're capable of. Breathe. Find the knob to turn the city down. Like a radio. Mute it. Breathe. You open your eyes and watch the candle flicker. Your breath or a faint draft? You try to move it with your mind, just to see if that's yet another effect of what you've been through. No such luck. Just an endless row of thoughts and feelings prepared to invade your waking consciousness at every opportunity.

Don't think about the dreams.

You flex your hands, feeling the slight numbness that comes with cold and inactivity. And scars. Your knuckles still hurt, you shouldn't have hit that wall but it did make the voices stop. Pain has its uses. That's a lesson you've learned. Maybe the pain-gate was a crutch all along. To separate you from your body. To make you feel less aware of it. More disposable. Humans cry when they skin their knees. They are allowed that weakness.

You cried. Coming here. Finally. When it sunk in that you really had escaped. When you lost yourself in the human chum, hoping the sharks would be confused by everything around you. Muddy the tracks. Lose the scent of blood in an abattoir, drown yourself in minds and screams and love and fear and life. LIFE. So much. SO much. You never knew before, and know you feel too much. You can't. It will destroy you. You need your armor back on.

Were lobsters immortal? Do you need to be?

The memory is strange, disjointed, another thread that doesn't connect to you. Picked up somewhere, the aquarium murky, rubber bands on claws to keep them shut and of course the lobster is not immortal but kept for slaughter.

You press your hand against your mouth. Swallow. You will grow a new shell. Fill it. Keep your claws. Push away the things that doesn't fit. Put them in the closet and close the door. You've already done emergency surgery before coming here, cut down things to an understandable scale, you can't let yourself be overwhelmed. That was how you always survived. One step. Focus on that. No consequences. No big picture. No understanding. Then it might be too much, and there's nothing to stop you now. Nothing but yourself.

Breathe. Watch the flame.

But how can you unsee this? Can you go back to pretending you know nothing, knowing what might be coming?

Breathe. Watch the flame.

You can't afford to care. Can't afford to be emotional. You know that. You can see the chain of events like losing a game of chess. Make the wrong opening move and lose twenty later. Sacrifice. Loss. Pain. Use it. You can do that. Use it. Be smart. Bite the hand. The hand. You look at your hands, biting back a laugh because you know it would be unhinged. Can you really be contemplating this? In your state? Like this? A single broken tool?

You need to do better. Be better. And the first step is mastering yourself enough to go topside and get some more food. New clothes. Medical supplies. Test yourself. Test your shields.

Hah. What shields.

You look at the flame, watch it flicker. Watch it burn. It will go out in time. Lobsters are not immortal. You have a deadline to grow into your shell. You can't waste that trying to understand. Trying to comprehend. Accept. Heal. No time. One step. Then the next. Fuck the pain. Fuck the fear. Fuck plans. Start at square one, and if you're afraid of making the wrong move, make small enough moves that nothing need to be walked back. Insular. Isolated. Just you. One pawn. One broken tool. Don't start the game. Don't press the timer. Just breathe.

You can't afford to listen to the city. You can't afford to imagine what it would sound like if you had to listen to it scream.

Breathe. Mute. Mental hands over psychic ears. You can do that. That's a start. A first step.

The plan will come eventually.

[Paper Dolls \(2.2\)](#)

[Nov 24, 2024](#)

Here is an excerpt of another of the puppetstuck paths, no choices, no variations, just following a single variation. It will be expanded once it turns into a demo, but until then, enjoy it as a short story! It follows path 2.2 where you rescued your broken body from the hospital and discovered that something is now inhabiting it.

The days pass. One after the other. The inertia of hiding after the terror of running. Nothing to do but live through it. Sink down in restless sleep, wake up with a feeling of disappointment because nothing has changed. Brush your teeth, clean your body, glare into the mirror for too long before the tension gets uncomfortable. Your body. Not your body. Familiar. A stolen car now in your name, tuned and taken care of and yet not yours.

Yours. Was your body ever truly yours? A project. Grown for someone else. Were you ever anything but a glitch in the system, a bug corrupting what you were meant to be? Free will in a brain designed for the opposite? So what are you now? Free from baggage? Free from tattoos? Human through and through. You could run. Leave it all. Be nothing. Nobody.

Do you even know how to exist without chains? Without limits?

No. You made your chains into weapons, into armor. Filled the little box they had put you in with rancor until you were as dense as a black hole. [i]Exceed maximum psychic depth.[/i] Hah. As if limits weren't just constructions of the human psyche. You were never human.

And now you are, and it's terrifying.

You can't feel the weight of the city around you. It doesn't feel real, reduced to concrete structures with cardboard people, all of them smiling, frowning, laughing, staring, none of them real. None of them with the weight of thoughts. You never thought you'd miss the skittering of cockroaches in the walls that you had reduced the onslaught of thoughts to, but now that it is gone how can you be sure you're real? You can strip off your clothes, but you can't strip away your skin. No clawmarks will change things. Nails not weapons. Red stripes that fade quickly. No tattoos, you could walk down main street dressed in nothing and all that would happen would be that you would be arrested for indecent exposure.

Not true. Not quite. Not after the hospital. You might get arrested by the Rangers. But the point still stand. As do you. Alive. Free.

Hiding.

You've done a paranoid dance around the city, never sleeping in the same place twice. Steal a car, ride the bus, rest in a library. Rent a hotel room, worse and worse as your funds got lower. Avoid places you would be seen, keep your notes, draw your maps, try to find a way to solve this.

Can you?

Facts on paper, black pen, blue pen, no orange because the temptation to draw on your skin might be too strong. What you know:

» My body is alive.

» Somebody is using my body.

» I won't go back when I fall asleep.

» I can't go back.

You look down at the page. [i]Somebody[/i] has been written in, [i]something[/i] has been crossed over underneath. Your pen hovers over [i]I can't go back[/i], almost ready to cross that out as well. Defeatist thinking. You won't accept that. Instead you carefully add a new line:

» I can dream.

Disconcerting. True. You don't remember much come morning but you remember that you dreamed. Something. [i]Something[/i] You put down the pen, turning to a new page. No facts. Speculation. Blue pen. The end of it is chewed bumpy already. Frustration. An itchy pain. Like a teething baby, but you were never a baby and you don't remember your teeth growing in. A fleeting notion of losing teeth, growing into adult ones. Did they fall out in the tank? Were they caught in the filter with all the refuse? Did some technician pick them up as trophies? You were supposed to put them under a pillow, right? Someone told you that, but was it a memory or an implant or stolen thoughts? Faeries. Stealing your teeth and giving you money in return. The Farm never gave you anything. Did they keep your teeth? Did someone steal them?

You chew the pen, then stop as you catch a look from a young woman at another table. The coffee shop is busy, but she noticed you all the same. Did you look out of place? Did you snarl? You force your face into a small smile, hiding your fangs for now. No fangs. Why do you want to bite people? When did you start? Your first weapon. Are you regressing? Your smile works, this body still knows the drill even if your brain is circling the drain. The young woman looks down at her magazine once more, sipping her coffee. You admire her hair, her perfectly poised hands. Like a statue. She doesn't feel real. You don't know what she feels. If she feels. You don't. You can't. She's blank. Dry cardboard. A fake fruit in a display case, never rotting, never eaten. Does it matter? If it's never eaten, it doesn't matter if it's real. If she never dies, does it matter if she was alive at all?

It's like being surrounded by dead bodies who are still moving. A quiet, polite, zombie apocalypse. Not even Ortega's annoying static to prove {he}'s alive. Flat. Empty. A graveyard of bodies where the souls have checked out.

You look down at the page again, the tiny letters scrawled in blue. By your hand? Maybe. Probably. [i>DieDieDieDie[/i] is written between the lines. You hold up your hand and look at it. Is it a wish for murder or a chance to prove your luck? The gesture of throwing a pair of dice feels natural, you can almost hear the sound of them landing on soft felt. The physical thrill of knowing before they stop. Taking that moment, stretching it, pulling it back, back like a hooked fish until you can taste it before touching the dice. Knowing if it would be bad. Or good. Hear your own sigh of excited relief or annoyed huff at a loss.

Learning when to walk away.

You've been dreaming of tables. The smell of too many bodies, alcohol, sweet perfume, cigarette smoke. Learning to walk away, cash in your chips in time. And then... and then...

You look down at your hand drawing an increasingly smaller spiral. In the end all patterns become a dot. A point. A point you can stretch into a new line. Spiral to wave to pattern, tic, tac, toe the line, wait two breaths to pick up the dice, change the angle you toss them at. A bad roll to a good one, shake them in your hand until it felt right and then let go.

Watch them fall with the surety of a winner. No doubt. Ride that wave. Remember that feeling. Right now it's all you have.

He's late. You look at your watch, feeling the cold steel in your pocket. Another bet, Russian roulette, not a White Russian but a Virgin Mary. Finding the right moment to push your bet. Risk reaching out. The gun feels heavy, like failure. But being here feels right. A chance. You can't run away forever, you tried, and that didn't get you anywhere. Is he watching you? You try to reach out, but again your numb brain finds nothing but your own paranoid fantasies. No thoughts. You wish your head was empty. A joke you never understood before. But now? The people around you might as well be. You used to be bombard by the streams of their consciousness, a constant trickle, from rain to waterfall. And now?

Dry. Empty.

You look down at your notebook, then close it. It fits in your pocket. When you look up again, ZaZa is buying coffee at the counter, sauntering over to your table as if nothing was wrong. Maybe nothing is. For him. For you? Everything.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet." You look down at your own coffee, cold now, but ZaZa's purchase has brought you some time before the staff starts looking angrily at you. "I wasn't sure you'd come alone."

"At this point I'm curious enough to go along with a few weird precautions." ZaZa sounds amused, arranging his gangly limbs in the too tiny fashionable chair. Not made for lounging, but he's doing his best.

"You think I'm being silly, aren't you?" You look straight at him, maybe too intently because he looks away. Scans the premises, though you bet he's already scoped this place out.

"Well," he starts, drawing out the syllables as he looks back at you. Meets your eyes. "You wouldn't be the first person in this high stress industry to head down the path of paranoia."

"Is that it?" You bite your lips, wishing it didn't sound so much like a question. "Paranoia?"

"Won't know until you tell me." He raises his cup in a small toast, and you echo it. Cold coffee. Terrible. You swallow anyway. "Or why you wanted to meet me and not Pelayo."

"Because I think you could keep your mouth shut and not report everything back to the boss." And because you could tell him these things and not have him laugh in your face. You knew that of all your crew, ZaZa was the wild card, talented enough to risk a bit of disobedience.

"Are you saying I'm insubordinate?" The look on his face makes you smile for the first time in weeks.

"No." You shake your head. "Just that you think for yourself. And right now I need that."

"Suppose I should feel flattered then. Or maybe worried." He shifts on the chair, and you decide that he's probably carrying two guns from his stance. One on his ankle, easy to get out by faking tying his shoelaces. The other in a shoulder holster, the bulk shows at certain angles. Does he want you to know?

"Don't worry. I'm not here to make trouble." You place your hands on the table, wondering if he's playing the same game with you. Spot the gun. Find the knife. "I just want to try to find a way out of this."

"Really?" A small twitch of his mouth. "Are you here to tell me what's going on then? Why you ran way? Did something happen between you and the boss?"

"Yeah." You swallow, thinking back to that overbearing moment of dread. It's hard to think about, like a cigarette burn in a photograph, the face of the subject obliterated and only the scorched edges remaining. "You might say that. How is $\text{\$}{\text{\textit{che}}}$?"

"Testy." The word comes quick enough to be real, accompanied by a sigh. "You can imagine that I'm sure. That crash messed $\text{\$}{\text{\textit{chim}}}$ up bad. Legs are healing, but you know how it is. Bed rest doesn't agree with some people."

"So $\text{\$}{\text{\textit{che}}}$ @{sv 'sl're} conscious." Another fact, and your teeth ache to bring out your notebook and pen. Instead you sip more cold coffee. Caffeine is bad for anxiety. And yet you can't stop yourself. Your anxiety is the only thing that feels real.

"Yeah, I think $\text{\$}{\text{\textit{che}}}$ had come around when you left." ZaZa looks unsure, $\text{\$}{\text{\textit{hench_name}}}$ had been the one who had been there. "Right?"

"Just wanted to make sure." It would have been better if it had been a nightmare. A hallucination. But if you seriously had believed that you wouldn't have stayed away this long. "@{sv Has|Have} $\text{\$}{\text{\textit{che}}}$ asked about me?"

"Yeah. Dunno what happened between you, but the boss seems to be as confused as we are why you ran off. Been wanting to know why you left."

"And... $\text{\$}{\text{\textit{che}}}$ @{sv sounds|sound} normal?" A leading question, but you get nothing more than a curious look.

"I guess? A bit incoherent, but $\text{\$}{\text{\textit{che}}}$ 'd been pumped full of drugs, so that's understandable." A twitch of his hand, and you think he's lying. It doesn't feel understandable to him. Lying to yourself is a skill not everybody has, but you're an expert. You can see the signs.

"There is something wrong with $\text{\$}{\text{\textit{chim}}}$." You need to take a risk, and the hesitation in ZaZa's voice makes it worth to push this narrative. "Don't tell me you don't see it."

"And if I have?" The cup is steady in ZaZa's hands, but there's a nervous twitch in his leg. Does he want to put a hand on his gun? Calm himself by proving that he has power over his surroundings?

"Then you know what I'm talking about." You look him directly in his eyes. "You know how loyal I've been. What I've done in this job. What I risked to get \${chim} back. And now I'm sitting here petrified enough that it's taken me this long to even dare to reach out to one of you in case you were..."

"Where what?" You have his attention now.

"Compromised. I don't even know." You resist the urge to bring up your notebook. "Something changed. Either at the hospital, or during the crash. Whoever it woke up in that bed, it wasn't the boss. It was some kind of imposter. Gave me the creeps. Uncanny valley."

"I hate that I know what you mean." ZaZa looks out the window, lowering his voice. "You think something happened with Hollow Ground?"

"I don't know," you lie, because it happened afterwards. After the crash. Unless. What if he's right? What if Hollow Ground did something to you? Is \${hghe} to blame? "Have the boss asked you to do anything weird?"

"I mean the boss always was inscrutable, you know?" ZaZa rubs his chin. "Never told us why we needed to do things, but we trusted \${chim} to know best, you know? And the pay was good."

"Come on. Share a bit." You lean forward. "You won't be able to pretend like it's nothing. Not when you know."

"\${che}@{sv 's'|re} been obsessed with getting you back. Pelayo's been trying to calm \${chim} down, but the more \${che} @ {sv heals|heal} the more impatient \${che} @ {sv becomes|become}. Do you think \${che} @ {sv knows|know} you're on to \${chim}?"

"Probably. I didn't exactly make a graceful exit. @ {sv Does|Do} \${che} want me dead?"

"No. Just brought to \${chim}."

"How do the others react to that? You must have been gossiping. I know what you're like once the boss is not listening." You've encouraged that distance, cultivated their fear of you. Their obedience. Did you play into the impostor's hands? Are they afraid to question any discrepancies?

"Of course we have." ZaZa empties his coffee, looking down at the empty mug. \${hench_name} thinks this all can be solved as long as we talk about it. Nehal thinks you're worried about revealing too many of the boss's secrets when we broke \${chim} out of the hospital. Which is fair. I'd be too."

"I am," you admit, but not for the reason he thinks. You had no choice at the time, their speculations would have been worse than the truth. "And Pelayo?" Ward would either oppose Pelayo or go along, whichever would be the funniest.

"Personal opinions doesn't matter. We have a job to do. As did you. He's looking for you."

"\${!\$swear}." You instinctively look out the window.

"Don't worry. I didn't say anything. Wanted to see what it was about first. And, I figured that if the others got involved you'd have smelled a trap and never arrived. I was too curious not to take the chance."

"Thank you." You wish you could be sure what would happen when ZaZa returned. Would he let everyone know? Could he keep a secret?

Could he—

You bite down hard on your lip. That's the crux of this, isn't it? Wha—who is inside your body? Are they telepathic? They have to be, otherwise you don't understand how they would have been able to pull this off. No. The big question is if they can use it in your body. Use your telepathy. You never could when you possessed others, but you have never tried possessing another telepath, have you? How would that even work? Could the impostor read ZaZa's mind and find out what you talked about?

You can't take the chance that they can't. You need to play your part. Don't reveal too much.

"I don't know what to do," you admit.

"You could leave town until this blows over," he suggests. "Go to Portland or maybe San Francisco. If this is related to Hollow Ground, they've got no pull there. If you need money, I can get you some."

"Thank you." It's a surprisingly kind suggestion, and it makes sense with what he knows. If you had been who you were pretending to be it would make sense to accept. "I'll think about it." Walk away and live as an anonymous human while whoever it was got to take over your body for good. Walk away. Truly free. Let them win.

Let them win. As if.

"Can I ask you a question though?" ZaZa's voice has gone hesitant, with a brief crack in it like glass.

"Sure." The realization race down your spine like a shot of whiskey. This is it. This is why he took the risk to come here. Your mouth is dry and you are gripped by a sense of impending doom. You should have said no, but it's too late, his mouth opens in slow motion, the words spilling out like bullets.

"Who is ■■■■ ■■■■■?"

The name grinds to a halt as it reaches your ear, crashing into well-built walls, pulverized like a cheap car racing headfirst into a cliff. The sound is deafening, and you press your hands against your ears to stop the ringing.

Everything freezes. You feel compressed, dried and stretched, a bog-body in the making. Burnt hair in your nose. Iron in your mouth. Heart stopped. Unhear. Unremember.

A memory defrosted. Freezer-burn. Standing in the dark, hands outstretched to touch the walls. Growing closer. Pressing together. Too deep. Can't breathe. Pressure building, your arms pressed closer to your body. Claustrophobic. Cold.

You can't survive this. Any moment now your shield will break, and then your bones, and then your soft heart and brain will be paste in the face of an uncaring universe.

What's at the core of a black hole?

"!{puppet_name}!" ZaZa's voice in the dark, warm hands on you, your muscles contorting.

Are you having a seizure?

"Shit, shit, no, don't call an ambulance, \${phe}'s epileptic, just give us a moment." ZaZa lies like a professional, and there is a softness under your head. A jacket. It smells of gun oil and tobacco.

"I'm fine," you say, after a second, after a minute, after orbiting empty depths and rising to the surface. Your lips don't quite make it, the words are slurred.

"Shhh." ZaZa sits awkwardly next to you, jacket off, gun exposed for everyone to see. No wonder people have left.

"I am." This time you form the words one by one, remembering how tongue and lips work. Your mouth taste like blood, and the sharp pain tells you that you've bitten your cheek. "Fine."

"Are you sure I shouldn't call an ambulance, sir?" The waitress is looking nervously at the two of you, phone in hand.

"It's over now," he assures. "Just give us some time to recover. Sorry for causing a scene." He looks at you like you're about to break in two, but you force a nod.

"I just need a moment. And some warm water?" You try to sit up, but your body feels strangely detached from you.

"Here, I'll help you up." ZaZa helps you up on the chair, pulling on his jacket once more. Around you, the bystanders look away. You can't tell if they are disappointed or relieved. If they will remember you or the incident.

"Sorry." You lean heavily against the table, eyes half closed. You try to remember what Ortega did after \${his} seizures. what \${he} asked you to do to help. But your brain feels sluggish and filled with inertia, the memories won't come.

"It's okay." ZaZa breathes a sigh of relief, that much you can tell. "I didn't know you had epilepsy."

"I don't like to talk about myself," you say, evading an answer. Is this something you have now? Since when? You wish you could remember what set you off, but it's all blurred. "I'll be fine in half an hour or so."

"Are you sure?" He looks doubtful. "I can call you a cab so you can go home and rest. You look like hell."

"I don't feel much better. That might not be a bad idea." You don't trust yourself right now, you need to lie down before you fall down.

"Just a moment." He turns away to call a cab, then looks back at you, a little bit paler than normal. "Alright. They'll be here soon. You need money for it?"

"No," you lie, but he places a wad of bills on the table anyway, putting your hand on top of it.

"Listen. I don't know what's going on here, but we can talk about that later. I'm not going to rat you out."

"Who else can I trust?" You sip the lukewarm water that has appeared on your table, giving the hovering waitress a weak smile to make her go away.

"Might be worth talking to \${hench_name}. You're friends. \${hhe}'s worried. And in the meantime I can try to keep an ear out what the boss's plans for you are."

"Thank you." Plans will have to wait, the room is still spinning and the thought of a taxi and a cheap motel sounds better than ever.

"It'll be fine." His smile is infectious. "Trust me."

[Nov 16, 2024](#)

Alright, here comes the QnA!

....

Was Ortega always this obsessed with Sidestep? Or is this a post-heartbreak thing?

I would say that it's for the most part a Heartbreak thing/trauma response. Before it happened, Sidestep relationships could vary from "that vigilante I work really well together," to "best friend kinda," to "oh shit am I in love?" If you combine that with the conviction that Sidestep was Hollow Ground's estranged/rebellious younger sibling who was on the right side of the law (most of the time,) and it would be a potent mix. Not obsession though, not in that way. The obsession was more with Hollow Ground, and even that was on a slightly lower level. Revenge is nice, but pre-Heartbreak Ortega didn't really let it consume their life. However, Heartbreak messed Ortega up as much as it did Sidestep. The coping mechanisms has not made things better.

I'm looking for a general idea not specifics here, How far can we push either Ortega & Argent on killing people? Would they be willing to help under the right circumstances? Would Ricardo or Julia have notably different opinions & limits?(Especially if one's Step was sexually assaulted likely for years)

Both Ortega and Argent wouldn't be needing much pushing to kill people they felt deserved it. They have both killed before in the line of duty (and from lack of control). They would absolutely be willing to help under certain circumstances, there would be no gender difference.

How did Themmy feel after Sidestep killed the Void? Were they more suspicious than others about how they accomplished it? Did they feel regret or resentment that they had no part in it?

Anathema did their best to keep a straight face and act happy about it, but secretly they were kind of destroyed. The Void was bad, they knew that, but also that was the person that had helped them survive and get a life early on. They knew the whole cult bit was bad, and that they should be able to just shrug it off, but it still hurt. Knowing that wasn't an option anymore. That a person that had once been their whole world was gone. They were relieved, sure, but also... empty. So empty.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how fucked up is the worst possible relationship variant between Sidestep and Regina? I know you can't spoil anything, but I'm really curious about the extent of Regina's manipulation.

Considering the character Regina is based on, I'd say it can be pretty fucked up. Not in the physical sense mind you, Regina is all about mental and emotional manipulation. Since it's hard to know what the scale represents I would just go with my own vibes and rate it between 5-8. So 8 would be the worst.

Would any of the RO's+Hollow Ground listen to Sidestep talk about their special interest for a couple hours? Would any of them try to scoot out of the conversation?

Would listen intently with input: Dr. Mortum. Chen. Would listen but probably also change the subject (consciously or subconsciously): Ortega. Argent. Would listen: Herald. Sky-Raider. Would listen but try to scoot out: Hollow Ground. Dove.

Does Blaze have any siblings? What about Zephyr?

I don't see either of them having siblings currently. Both of them feel like an only child.

Did Chen have to break up/mediate a lot in fights between his siblings? Did he have to work early to help support his family?

Chen absolutely had to mediate fights early on. He was seen as the mature one, which made everyone very surprise when he (in their eyes) overreacted and went no-contact. He didn't have to work (apart from the odd extra work as a kid), but he studied a lot. It was expected that he would be an engineer or similar and support his family. Studies were seen as important, his family would be considered middle-class, but with bigger ambitions for their children.

How did Danny's family teach him and his brother about what they thought they needed to know? Career wise and otherwise?

When they were young, that was the nanny's job. As they were older, that would be handled by private teachers, schools and the like. Daniel's parents weren't exactly emotionally available, they were too busy with their own lives to have much time for their kids. They outsourced that bit. Honestly, I think Daniel considers the nanny he had while growing up as more of a mother. They're still in contact with letters and phonecalls (she doesn't work for his parents anymore, she was fired when he was thirteen and they decided he was too old for a nanny) and he makes sure that she's got enough money to live a good life.

What goes through Ortega's head if the MC chooses to completely cut her/him out? (Just curious:)

Increased suspicion. There must be a reason for it, and if there is none Ortega can understand, they will make one up.

If another telepathic mind-reader tried to read Sidestep's mind, would Sidestep's powers be able to stop or lessen what the person hears?

Oh yes. That would be a direct showdown unless the other telepath was very, very sneaky. Sidestep's thoughts are very hard to hear in general, they are a telepath's worst nightmare.

How would HG take a Sidestep who takes the most after the personality of their oldest brother: the one they saw as an inspiration?

HG would be proud.

What is it about Argent that Lord Ember likes/has a crush on?

Style! Competence! Cool! Hot! What's not to like?

Did Lord Ember pay his 'lovers' to act like they're into him? More seriously, why did he choose them? What traits is he looking for?

The thing with money and power is that you don't always need to pay people directly to have them act like they are into you more than they actually are. I think what Lord Ember looks for more is whether they make him look good or not, then it's trustworthiness and hotness.

Amending a previous question: would Nocturne notice a forgery if it's a *near* perfect replica that's replaced one of her pieces of clothing/accessories?

If she liked it enough. So yes for her favorite pieces, but no if it's just something she likes to wear sometimes.

Has Zephyr ever been the type to tape a stupid note on Blaze's back to mess with him?

I was going to say no, but then I paused and realized Zephyr might very well have been exactly that asshole.

On that note, what do they most appreciate/like about each other? What do they dislike/hate?

Blaze and Zephyr trusts each other. They know the other would risk their lives for them, and that their heart is in the right place. They have been through a lot, and have worked together/been friends for a long time. They like many of the same things, and in more stress-free times they have a lot of fun together. They both also likes friendly competition. The thing that annoys Blaze the most about Zephyr is his dedication to being "that guy (gn)" and inability to let a thing slide without being snide about it. Also the money and fame thing. The thing that annoys Zephyr the most about Blaze is that he's sold out a bit to the man and is trying to be so proper and uptight. Can't let his hair down anymore. He's changed.

Is the true Fallen Hero the friends we made along the way?

Most likely! Friendships are what saves us in the end.

Maybe it's the friends we broke along the way? 🤔

No, that's just our brains.

Who would Puzzle Box usually target for her traps? Were people able to survive them, or was it a certain-death kind of thing?

Puzzle Box had a thing for new vigilantes, and saw it as kind of a rite of passage. Her traps were absolutely survivable, but there was no guarantee it would be with your dignity intact, and without bad injuries. She respected intelligence and loved being outplayed, but always made sure to be far away when the vigilante finally got out. Cameras are great. In that vein she tended to target people she felt might be a challenge to her. Or, on occasion, people that annoyed her so she could make fun of them when they failed.

If Ortega and the puppet kissed at the gala, did Ortega feel the explosives the puppet had hidden on them? Was this just a mild suspicion or an extreme one after the whole thing blew over?

Ortega did not feel any explosives.

There's a lot of different flavors of kill variables in the game already, but do you think there could ever be something like a "justice kill" or "necessary kill" tag in which Sidestep views their killing/killing of certain people as good? I know the attitude with agentkill is more like, "they knew what they were getting into," but I was curious if a more self-righteous tinge would be possible.

It's possible. Tags can always change depending on what I need them to do in game. If the discussion comes up, let's say in combat banter, I'll tag it.

Do you think we will ever get to talk to Joe about his boost in-game?

I have no idea!

Sorry if this is too broad of a question, but do any characters spring to mind immediately when envisioning someone who has (a) tattoo(s)? (Not including our Re-Gene friends or Argent, of course.)

Chen. Though I'm not sure if he have his army tattoos anymore, or if they were on one of the bodyparts he has lost. Sky-Raider has a lot, that I know. Ortega might have too.

Does Argent like live theatre? How about recordings of it?

Too many people. And I think Argent prefers movies to the theater.

How often would you say Argent goes to the movie theater to see a film versus wait for its DVD release?

If she goes to the movie theater, it would be for a special preview. She's a celebrity, and she likes to relax when she watches movies, not have to think how she is perceived, or that she's surrounded by people.

Has Mortum published any scientific papers recently? Do they still keep up with current publications?

I would say that Dr. Mortum still publishes the odd paper under a pseudonym. They definitely keep up with current publications.

How conventionally humanoid are Porthole's bodies? Are they mistaken as just a regular person in an armor by the general public?

Humanity is optional. Porthole likes to go weird. They might be humanoid because it's a shape this world is adapted for, but neither of them make any effort to look human. While they might be mistaken for a regular person in their biggest armors, I'd say the movement patterns ruins that illusion pretty fast.

Do the Guardians have matching uniforms like the Rangers do?

Did the Guardians have any input on their costumes or was that chosen for them? Do they each have one iconic look or a few?

There is a team look, but with more individual variations than the Rangers. Think more team logo and jacket rather than synchronized colors. A bit more x-men than fantastic four.

Always wondered, where did Steps get their original costume? Did they make it themselves? Buy the parts from a store? Is there a hero/villain costume making company?

The first costume was pilfered from various parts. Think part sports-goods, part utility. There are costume making companies, but their prices are way above what Sidestep could handle at the time. They were very much for homemade costumes, but eventually Ortega offered to have the Rangers pay for a proper one with protection and quality materials.

Have the Guardians ever done anything important? Any major villain or crisis they are chiefly responsible neutralizing?

They have caught a few villains, but nobody important. I would say that is something the current team is very aware of. They need to score a big win eventually.

Are the Guardians allowed to kill, and have any of them killed before joining?

I mean, it's like for cops. You're not supposed to, but if things happens in the line of duty it tends to be seen as justified. The team has different opinions of it. I don't think Bumblebee has ever caused the death of someone. I know Temerein and Blaze has. As for the others I am unsure.

How many times can an individual be Boosted? Does it have diminishing returns, or does it inevitably end with either invulnerability or death?

There's no limit but what the body can handle. There are extremely few that manage beyond

How do you decide how queerness affects characters/what kind of queer they are?

I mean my baseline is that everyone is queer, so my inner question tends to be how "straight-presenting" they are. And for that it tends to be a combination of how much outward pressure they are under, how much they value their own self-image/presentation, and what hangups they have with them from growing up. I very rarely make conscious decisions to create a certain "type" of character, they grow on their own accord as I write and figure them out. I tend to joke "one day I will manage to write a straight character."

How do you decide how Sidestep and other characters interact with a character's queerness?

I write and see what happens. A lot of the time it's things either me, or people I know have talked about or struggled with, and it might not land the way I wanted it to the first time around. The polishing happens during playtesting, as I try to refine what it is I want to talk about with this character, and make sure that comes across as well as it can in the text and the way others interpret it. The further away something is from me, the more I rely on playtesters and discussions with people who live that life. For example, the gendermess bisexual disaster parts I know far too well, while the more aromantic/asexual dynamics require a lot of input from people.

During the void story, there's a "New Girl" in Sentinals chapter, but during the next one Sidestep refers to the same person with male pronouns. I just found this interesting and was curious what it meant (if on purpose).

Probably a mistake. I make a lot of them, pronouns are tricky.

During the void compound assault, Step sees the cultist placing things on a pedestal. A glass pyramid, a gold ball... Is there any connection to these and the shapes the Farm used to train Sidestep?

Nope. No farm connection.

If we start working with HG, will the puppet be allowed a place in the organization? For communication purposes or otherwise?

You gotta work out what the issue with the puppet is first, not giving any spoilers there...

And as for the Jake and Puppet flirt going on, was that something that will carry over or did it only matter for Retribution?

It's one of those variables where I saw something happening and felt I needed to tag it, but had no plans with it yet. There were just vibes, and they might lead somewhere, but it was not a preplanned event.

Does Argent have eyebrows? What about eyelashes? Body hair?

Eyebrows and lashes, yes. Bodyhair, no.

Can Argent wear earrings?

Yes, and she does quite often.

Is Anathema always your exact gender? If your cisgender are they too?

I like to think that it's more what pronouns Anathema uses than what gender they are. There is no stopping them from being trans, or be nonbinary but going with she/her pronouns for example.

For the memes, will we ever be able to see "fallen hero" be said in any context within the coming books?

If I can write it without cracking up and feeling like everybody should stop and face the camera.

If it's not too spoilery, in the demo Vera can mention she's noticed Sentinel due to the changes in the winds. Would Danny or Sky Raider also have picked up on this or is this unique to Vera due to the difference in the nature of how she flies compared to the other two?

I would say that the changes in the wind is uniquely Vera. Birds are a lot more dependent on that. Neither Danny nor Sky-Raider relies on winds in the same way.

Given Ortega just casually brings Gucci for jail breaks it made me wonder, who has the more expensive wardrobe between HG, Nocturne, Argent and Ortega?

Most expensive to least: Nocturne - Ortega - Hollow Ground - Argent.

How far could Ace's precognition see ahead pre Shroud nominating them? It seems odd they would take certain actions, like gambling somewhere associated with Ember and getting on Shroud's radar, if they knew it would end badly for them.

Ace would not have been able to see far ahead enough to know they'd end up in trouble eventually for playing certain venues. For Ace their precognition was very focused in the immediate, this hand, this spin of the wheel, this evening. Anything further in the future would rarely trigger, the shroud events were an anomaly. It also depends on where you focus your interest. For Ace it was gambling focused since that was where their interest was, and what they knew. For Sidestep it is fight focused, since that is what they need and know. Easier to see the things you are looking for.

Are there any characters you wish you had given a different name to? Whether because you later thought of something more fitting or cooler or because issues like the constant typos Psychopathor is subjected to?

Psychoraptor is my favorite, what do you mean? His name is perfect. I will say that I did rename a Retribution character because of his name. Carter was originally named Marconi (after the inventor of the radio, I had just watched a documentary), and people kept saying Macaroni and eventually I felt iffy about the Italian/gangster associations and changed it.

Obviously we know we'll get some secrets coming out to Sidestep in the next book. When the revelations do start happening are there any secrets that will never come out to Step in any path/circumstance, that we as readers might still know/learn; like through the Q&A's or side stories? I'm giving Ortega and their multitude of secrets, issues and conspiracy theories a very hard side eye

I have no idea yet! That will be up to the characters once they start talking. At least one of the secrets is still up in the air though. I hope to have it in book three, I really do. It's a big Ortega related one.

How would the farm handle/what is the procedure for a Regene that had a boost that made them resistant or immune to scrubbing and recycling?

Looks over at Sidestep. Uhm. Well. If at first you don't succeed, try and try again. But they would be seen as a danger.

Following from a question asked a while ago about the Rat King being able to work out if Argent tried to mess with the suit, if she did how would the girls feel about this/Argent?

OH a new playmate!

Obviously Ortega is conspiracy king/queen, but who amongst the ROs is the next biggest conspiracy theorist? Or just the person who believes things that are nonsense or not true?

Sky-Raider isn't a conspiracy theorist, but he really is the type to believe some weird shit like aliens exist.

Was Ace ever lonely?

Oh yes. But not enough to change.

Without any intentional manipulation telepathic, intellectual, or emotional who of the ROs would be willing to be in a poly relationship? If it's not to spoilery or too much work to think about, it would be nice to know most to less likely.

Hmmm. Most likely to less likely: Ortega and Sky-Raider in general. Daniel - Dr. Mortum - Chen - Argent with specific people. Dove not at all.

Are the gates blocking memories?

Among other things. But are memories the symptom or the cause?

What's the rock scene like in Los Diablos?

Thriving! The whole rock/punk/underground culture is alive and vibrant. Lots of space if you don't mind the unsafer areas, and with the corporate pressure of clean media many need an outlet.

When you open a door, is it one way or two?

Depends on the (mental) air pressure difference.

Since it's that time of year, when they believed Sidestep to be dead did Ortega and their mother ever create an ofrenda for them? Or do any other Día de los Muertos celebrations for them?

I think Ortega's mother suggested it. It didn't really go over well at the start. But eventually it was a way to heal somewhat.

Via the trapped in puppet route, will there be an opportunity to tell Mortum, who doesn't know about the Sidestep/Puppet situation, that you (the puppet) were being mind controlled by Sidestep/Villain?

Oh yes. Absolutely.

Since we can already ally with HG in the demo, will we be able to share the intel we gather on Hollow Ground with Ortega in Book 3? Or is a Hollow Ground confrontation a Book 4 kind of deal

Hollow Ground is book three.

Some time ago you mentioned that we would get an opportunity to help the Rangers as a vigilante or something, just not as Sidestep... Would Chen still let you participate in this sort of thing in the "Complicated" route where you told him you know he knows that you're the villain?

I don't know yet! It's still an optional scene, we'll see who and where it fits.

Is Arde a MBO or a SCO? I remember him being called a terror beast, and Sidestep is a cuckoo. What are the nicknames for the other re-genes still stuck with the Directive?

Arde is an MBO I think. I'm not sure of the other nicknames yet, I'll add them once I come up with them.

I'm not sure if it was ever mentioned, but what is Rosie's boost? What powers does she have?

Rosie is bulletproof and stronger than normal.

Is it feasible for a strong enough telepath to bypass epilepsy?

Nothing is impossible.

after step broke into their mansion how did that talk btw the hg trio go if step revealed their face?

Maybe I'll write it someday and find out! It would be fun.

How would current Sidestep hold up when faced off against past versions of themselves? (i.e Pre-HB, Post-Nanosurge if there any difference between those two, and finally the Farm-era Cuckoo)

Current Sidestep would win against all other past version of themselves except one. Not gonna tell you which one!

Continuing with the topic of present Sidestep facing the past, how would they do if they had to deal with the three biggest moments that had an impact on their telepathy at their current power level? (Nanosurge, Void, HB)

Oh boy. The current Sidestep could handle the Nanosurge better, the Void about the same, and Heartbreak worse.

So what happens if there's a telepath with epilepsy, are they just immune to other telepaths, do they cancel each other out? Are they extremely overpowered? I thought about Charge as a telepath and it scared me so I gotta know

I... hm... You know... I don't know. I need to think about this! It's a bit like trying to imagine a whale with fire powers.

What was your intent behind not revealing that Sidestep is a Regene until the second book? What do you think the story/the reader gain from learning about that later rather than sooner?

Thank you for this question! Now let me rant. If you tell someone something upfront, they make a decision how to feel about that based on their previous experiences and knowledge. If I had led with Sidestep being a Re-Gene, people would see everything else after that filtered through that lens. And as Re-Gene was just a word at that point, they would see it filtered through things like clone, android, artificial intelligence and whatever media they had consumed with it lately. The reader would already have a viewpoint they would filter Sidestep's internal mess through. I wanted the reader to have as blank a slate as possible when interacting with Sidestep's thought process, and having Sidestep be assumed to be a human was something I saw as essential to that.

In a similar way, I also have withheld other pertinent background information, like what the threat is, what the Farm is, a lot of other things that informs why Sidestep is doing the things they do. This isn't to be mean or mysterious (though I play that bit up online), it is to make sure the reader have no ability to judge whether Sidestep is justified or not yet. I want the blindness to facts there because I want people to interact with the feelings, with the angst, the rage, the guilt, everything simmering around in there. I want people to feel, not think.

A writing question. How do you approach writing an unreliable narrator (such as Sidestep), and would you have any advice on it?

Stay in the character's headspace at all times when writing. Make sure to have other people surround the character that won't call them out on it, but will on occasion act in ways that can make the reader question the truth of what the main character thinks. Have the discrepancies be small at the start, on occasion slightly larger. Eventually there might come a point where the reader realizes the truth, but that point will come at different stages in the story for everyone. I think the main thing is to not do any "nudge-nudge wink-wink" with the audience. Trust the reader, don't pander to them. They will figure it out. Or not.

What is the difference in how Ortega views a Sidestep that has seemingly lost their telepathy vs a Sidestep that still has powers? I found it interesting that during an argument in Rebirth, Ortega describes the former as looking "bleak", but the latter as "empty".

I think it is Ortega projecting a lot on how they would feel about losing their powers on Sidestep. They have a hard time understanding that it might be a relief in some ways, and see it as Sidestep having lost something intrinsic to them.

Roughly how ethical are the world governments? I'm so curious since I've been following real world politics since before I could talk(my mom was a political junkie). The thought of any of our actual leaders having access to superpowers or gene splicing is terrifying.

There are no ethical governments. There might be ethical people in politics, but I very much doubt they get very far. I am a cynic at heart. There might be governments and politicians that genuinely wants what's best for people, but the issue is that at that point they are very far removed from what most regular people actually need, and too wrapped up in what the people with money rely on.

So how hard is it to get Argent to cut you? Cause that's only ever happened once in my playthroughs. Also how hard or easy is it to manipulate the main cast, I'm looking for a general idea not specifics. Where'd be the fun in knowing what buttons to push?

I would say it is hard. It is one of the achievements that fewest people have got if I look at the steam stats (2.7% in Rebirth, 6,1% in Retribution). She tries to keep control. Manipulating people is easier, but staying at arm's-length emotionally while you do it might be harder.

Minor question about argent's nanos: do they differentiate between types of meat (mammal, bug, fish ect.) or as long as it's meat it's fine?

Human is best, after that pork, then mammal.

How's the music scene in the FHverse? Both underground and mainstream. Is it similar to ours or have new unique movements popped up because of the rise of mods and boosts?

I would say that it is similar to ours in most parts.

So we know Ortega theorizes about why step doesn't want their face photographed, but do they theorize about why step doesn't show skin?

Shy and self-conscious. It's not that unusual, though Sidestep takes it to the extreme. Many people got phobias and hangups.

You've said more paths are gonna be added to the pupstuck demo we got. Are you gonna update the same post with the new stuff or will the next batch have a separate post?

It looks like the one I am working on next will slot into this one. But not sure. I have two alternatives, just not sure if one is worth the work.

In paths where neither Herald nor Steel interrupt Argent when she's carving up Step's face in the hospital-- how do the Rangers find out what happened? Do they check the camera footage when the nurse finds Step covered in blood the next morning? or did they find out sooner than that?

Argent told a nurse on the way out of the hospital to go check on Sidestep, so they got help pretty quickly. But yes, they find it out by checking the camera. Argent made a point not to delete that footage, she's willing to stand for what she did.

How well do you think the main cast members would do in Marvel or DC?

I think everyone would fit in nicely.

Who among the cast has the most creative subconscious when it comes to nightmares? Everyone has pretty bad traumas, yes, but whose nightmares are straight out of a horror movie rather than, I don't know, more realistic ones (in-universe).

Argent. By far. Though Herald has some interesting visual ones.

What are the telepath ratings? Locus was referred to as an alpha level telepath, what is required for the levels? And what level is Sidestep now?

There is no specific requirement other than public consensus. All the boosts are so variable, even a thing like "telepathy" can be very different between people. Sidestep is Alpha going on Omega.

The cast has a lot of bilinguals. Who amongst them have bye-lingual moments the most? (eg: forgetting a word in one language only to remember in the other one, switching between languages and not noticing etc etc) (As a bilingual myself i had to ask!)

I would say Ortega. Though I don't write it out, I imagine the talks with Sidestep might shift back and forth between Spanish and English depending on the subject.

will we able to joke about our regene nature in future books? (Eg: "what are you, five?" "Jokes on you I've never been five!")

Sidestep is a troll, once the cat is out of the bag and the world has not crumbled, of course they'd use it.

How do the members of the HG and Ember syndicates express their membership? Is it pure trust in stating your membership? Secret handshake? Badge or token? Coordinated uniforms like Team Rocket from Pokemon?

I would say that Lord Ember absolutely is the type to be into coordinated uniforms. Not sure if it's for everyone, but he absolutely has that kind of ego. Hollow Ground on the other hand would be a lot stealthier. Probably a combination of knowledge/trust (they're big on the whole family thing) and some kind of secret handshake type deal. Not good advertising yourself if you're trying to remain a myth you know...

If sidestep and ace were playing poker and both were cheating with their respective abilities, who would win?

Ace. The easiest way for them to win would be to never even look at the cards and play blind. Sidestep would have nothing to go on then.

Would the Rat King's telepathy work on AI?

Nope.

When Argent is scrubbing Sidestep from the Ranger's and Memorial's systems do you have an idea of what Argent does when soft to get that extra SD reduction? Is it just because she starts before Ortega asks her? Or does she risk a more in person confrontation where she tells the doctors it's classified like the puppet can?

It's a combination of acting quickly with damage control, and some judicious hands-on confrontation with important individuals. Also, she can make sure all the security camera footage is lost quite easily...

What would happen if Vera transformed from pigeon to human in an enclosed space? Would she get squished or break the container based on its durability? Can she stop and revert her transformation in progress?

It would be based on the durability, she'd crack a glass container or a birdcage, but have issues in a small concrete room. She can halt/reverse her transformation, though there might be issues with "breaking" in the middle. Better than the alternative though...

Is Argent's speed and strength just generic physical boosts from her TBR or just the nanovores?

I would say about 50% from the nanovores for the speed part, and 90% from the nanovores for the strength part.

If the Farm hadn't picked up Sidestep off the sidewalk during HB, would they have gotten killed in the airstrike that followed?

Most likely.

How resistant are the cast + HG to close relationship / romanced Sidestep (sibling Sidestep for HG) to their puppy dog eyes?

Most resistant to least: Argent, Herald, Hollow Ground, Dr. Mortum, Ortega, Chen. Not sure about Dove and Sky-Raider yet!

The curiosity is finally too much for me, in the HG visit demo what was HG about to say to Terrifying Step here before deciding not to?

"That could be de..." \${hghe} @ihgsv hesitateshesitate} a moment, reconsidering whatever comment \${hghe} had planned. "You know what, I'm not going to comment on that. The fact that you want to be a nightmare creature says enough."

I... I don't remember. I really don't. Right now just pick what would be funniest.

This question originates from hilarious shenanigans but now I'm genuinely curious: Has anyone that took the Super Hero Drug gotten a super powerful Booty? I.E. a Booty Boost? Booty centered powers?

Only tangentially. I can see several physical powers (sprinting, attractive, etc) that might lead to a powerful ass.

Is the Canadian province of Alberta still rat-free? What are the Rat King's thoughts on its anti-rat sentiment?

In the interest of rat supremacy, I don't think Alberta is rat-free anymore. Also, what an interesting fact! I had no idea that was the case!

When Shroud drains someone, does the drain time differ between people? Do stronger Boosts take longer? Could she stop in the middle and let the person recover?

Yes, the time differs, and boosts or people with more physical stamina takes longer (gives more juice). Technically she can stop halfway, but it's very hard for her. A bit like breaking a suction seal, it takes effort. And, most of the time, she doesn't have the will to. She's always hungry. Other people could get her off her victim, but again, it would take force. Most of the time the victim can't do anything, it takes a rare person to be able to act while she's absorbing. If interrupted, the victim would eventually recover, but if it had been going on too long they might lose part of themselves permanently.

Do electric vehicles exist in fhr? If so would argent own one?

Not outside enclosed indoor areas like factories and stuff. There's not the infrastructure for it. Gas is easier that way. As for Argent owning one... please note how many times she has been stuck in traffic while riding cabs...

Is Argent's strength dependant on how many nanovores she has in a given part of her body? If so, does she have them move around relevant parts to boost her ability to do a certain task? (eg more nanovores to her legs when she needs to make an extra far jump, or more to her arms when she needs to throw something extra hard)

Yes, that is happening, and but it's usually not more noticeable than bulging muscles as people exert effort and so on.

This has been asked about fighting ability a few times but I don't think it's ever been asked about tactical ability, how do the Rangers + Fight/Tac Steps stack up in that regard?

That's a little bit more spoilery, but I would say that in order from most tactical to least it's something like: Chen/Sidestep - Ortega - Argent - Herald.

How does Argent feel about movies like The Matrix or Terminator where a core part of the plot revolves around the machines uprising and getting into a war against humanity?

The Matrix doesn't exist in this universe, but she does love the Terminator! She's not worried about a machine uprising, she, if anybody, would be aware of their limits. Cool effects though!

What are the Rangers' reactions to learning about low presentation, tunnel base Sidestep having a ton of funds(without Sidestep revealing the source of said funds is crime)?0

Chen: "Some people are really committed to the gremlin act." Argent: "Bro (gn), you live like this?" Herald: "Is this the opposite of a hoarding problem?" Ortega: "I knew it was bad. Just not that bad."

Do the Rangers get paid more or do the Guardians?

The Rangers does.

Does Porthole have any admirers? They sound gorgeous. What's their presentation stat like?

I would say that Porthole has admirers! Their fighting armor is less elaborately decorated (repairs), but style is important. I think their presentation stat would be near maxed out.

What would Porthole(brain in a jar) think about Rat King(brains in a jar) and vice versa?

Spoilers.

Does the villain get auto reveal as a telepath on the puppet path since it seems like the imposter is trying to use Step's powers even if they are doing a poor job

I only have one single Impostor variable for the puppet right now, so at the moment, yes. Whether that's still true in the future we'll see,

Will there be a chance to have a similar experience with Steel when it comes to removing the HG thread in the future, for those with a positive relationship but didn't trigger the option in retribution? (Forgive me if it's been asked before)

Yeah, probably. I see no reason to time-lock it, there just needs to be enough trust.

What would Porthole's jamming tech feel like to a technopath like Argent?

Glitchy stroboscope.

Did Temerain ever have a different name in her vigilante career or was she always Temerain?

She was always Temerain.

Does Bumblebee ever feel bad compared to Herald? I imagine being the worse flyer on the worse hero team would hit her self esteem.

She's not the worse flyer, she's a different flyer! She thinks she could outmaneuver him easily in a game of tag.

Did Porthole lose/discard their organic body by choice? Is their brain boosted?

Spoilers.

Did Heartbreak gain their initial telepathy from Project Stripes?

Yes.

What is Arde's everyday style of dress?

Basically coveralls.

Are Lord Ember's fire powers touch based? Or can he throw it/start random fires?

He can throw fire/do the flamethrower. Think napalm.

Do you think Julia would of had a quince? And if yes, did Elena manage to get her into a dress?

Julia was not averse to dresses. She could and still will dress up! She was averse to the expectations of how she was supposed to act in them... I don't think she had a quince though.

i know there's a way to ruin hollow grounds relationship with jake but can we ruin their relationship with nocturne too?

I mean... I don't think it can be done, but if I write and it makes sense I won't be against doing it! It's not written in stone or anything.

Was Ortega's modding a product of the bionic and cybernetic division of Project Stars/Stripes? Was Ortega's father aware of Project Stars/Stripes?

Ortega's father was aware of Stars, not Stripes. And I would say it's tangentially related, but not within the scope of the program.

How exactly did 5 Pennies react to the museum getting blown up?

FUCK!

With enough practice, could Argent be able to freely transform and reform her body at will without worrying about losing control of her nanovores, or is that beyond her potential?

In theory, yes. In practice, her fear of losing herself would put a stop to that.

How many TBRs has Sidestep been through?

Depends a bit on your Sidestep. I would say four that I count. Some people might say three, others more. It's not like it's a known science with clear boundaries. Not every trauma is a TBR. And not all TBR's are [REDACTED].

If Argent tells the villain to stop killing is she surprised if they actually seem to listen & does she regret not doing it sooner? & has anyone else considered that there might be a correlation between the bridge fight & the villains behavior?

Argent doesn't do regret (at least she tries not to do that). She's just glad it worked. As for if anybody has picked it up... depends on how closely they study the villain. So it will vary depending on the run.

Are new nanovores built/assembled or does the swarm lay eggs that quickly hatch and mature?

I would say it's more like cell division, they assemble copies of their internal structure, and then splits in two.

Do mods like Chen's and Ortega's have an impact on their life expectancy?

Yeah, most likely.

Speaking of life expectancy, what is it for the average person in the world of Fallen Hero? We've seen how our current medical advancement has dramatically increased human life expectancy here in the real world. From what I can tell, Fallen Hero is leaps and bounds ahead in medical technology, so do people live longer on average as well?

Not on the west coast. The thing that mostly affects the increase in average life expectancy is infant mortality, and that is currently higher than it is today due to environmental damage and the cost of healthcare. The thing is, it doesn't matter how good medical tech is if you can't afford it/have access to it.

How old does the Eternal Monarch of Britain look?

Like a pleasant old grandma.

What is each Ranger's biggest fear? Asking for a villain.

Ahahaha nice try. Not gonna tell you.

What was it about Ember that made Argent trust him once?

He can actually be surprisingly charismatic before he loses his cool. I know I'm dragging him here, but he wouldn't have reached the place if people didn't feel inspired to follow him.

If, theoretically, an organ was somehow transplanted into Anathema's body, would that organ eventually become invincible?

Yes.

How thorough/specific is the regene languages vocabulary? Like would "housecat", "mountain lion", & "tiger" all use the same signs or would there be some form differentiation?

I think they would be used with modifiers like: smallcat, bigcat, stripedbigcat and so on. Only the things they experience often and in everyday life would have separate core words.

Where did the idea for terrifying armor emitting infrasound come from?

The theory that the bad vibes of some haunted buildings could be explained by infrasound from traffic or wind in certain structures.

Jumping off this quesiton... if you somehow got one of Anathema's organs in you...is that organ still invincible?

No.

Who among the cast give the best massages?

Ortega. Good hands.

Has Sidestep thought about a boost with super senses seeing through their armor?

Yes. They've taken care not to confront boosts they know have those powers. They're not too common in the city though, the sensory stimulation there tends to drive people a bit nuts.

Out the nebulous pool of escaped Regenes, which would you say has the most ambitious or biggest plans for their future? Are there any with greater goals than Sidestep?

Sidestep is the top there. No contest.

Theoretically, could Thief-step(perhaps with HG backing) amass enough money to buy out the Farm as an operation? What would be the cast's reaction to such a purchase? What would Regina's be?

Nope. Not even theoretically. It's not a public operation that would be for sale any more than the CIA would be.

How do horror movies impact Argent in relation to her vores? Can they be dangerous? A needed challenge to help her get them under control?

Apart from helping her be a bit less sensitive to gore, there's really nothing deep about Argent's love of horror. She just likes the genre.

If Blaze cries and he's using/recently used his powers, do they evaporate upon hitting his skin? Does he save money on things like kettles and heaters by boiling the water/heating the room himself?

Yeah, I think the tears would evaporate then. And I wouldn't say he saves money by boiling water himself, it's just quicker, and it helps him with control.

if chen saw hollow ground on the street (with ortega not having told him about tinfoil) what would he assume their relationship to sidestep was? another regene or genetic donor?

Someone who looks like Sidestep? Hmm... I think he would assume coincidence, genetic donor, or another regene from the same batch. It would be impossible to say for sure, he'd leave all options open.

Does the Rat King get offended if Sidestep picks "Rat King" as a villain name?

No.

Are there fake boosts? People who say their boosts let them talk to the dead or make them psychic or something because they want to scare folks?

Oh yes!

Do Rangers get off days?

Yeah, but there's always one of them on active duty.

Could Step possess an animal?

Not fully, no. But control lightly (suggest) and briefly hooking into their senses, yes. It would depend on the animal, and the sensory issues might be troublesome as Sidestep would have no way to properly interpret things like scent-profiles and such. It would mostly be vision and audion.

How are boosted or modded villains handled in small towns away from the major cities? Is that under the rangers jurisdiction?

It's not Ranger's jurisdiction except in Nevada (Dave does what he likes and is always on the move). They might be called in to handle big problems though. Normally it's local heroes or vigilantes who deal with that.

could the nanovores lock onto pycroclast while he's in ash form? would they follow the central part of the ash/largest part of ash/what?

Nope. He'd be uninteresting to them.

Does Argent's form shift around while she sleeps, or is it stable?

It is stable. Even in her nightmares. She's quite proud of that, she put up cameras to check.

How would Mortum react to losing a street race against Nehal?

"Merde. Losing to a five year old..."

Does Spoon like his pj's? What's his favorite?

Whichever is the dirtiest/longest since it was washed.

Does he have any of those ones that resemble the stegosaurus?

That looks cute as hell, so Chen must have bought one.

[Public Puppet Revelations demo](#)

[Nov 12, 2024](#)

Path 3.1-3.3 and 2.3

Bugfixed, spellchecked, and with some tiny additions. This one is open for everyone, so feel free to share!

Length: 86 500 words long with code, 68 000 without code. An average playthrough is 19 200 words.

The link: <https://dashingdon.com/go/17502>

[A new Discord link!](#)

[Oct 30, 2024](#)

The other one died, so here is a new one. Please be nice in there!

<https://discord.gg/H2Ac9R945>

[Time for the questions of the month!](#)

[Oct 29, 2024](#)

Just leave them here and I'll try not to cough in your direction! (still fighting it)

[Politics](#)

[Oct 24, 2024](#)

The headquarters of the Guardians wasn't as impressive as the sign outside suggested, but it served its purpose. The team had been up and running for over two years by now, but the budget was still not set in stone. Up for debate. Walking the fine line between spending it all and risk being scolded for breaking it, and not spending enough and risk having it reduced next year. The original team had been four members only, Captain Blaze and Zephyr the speedster, experienced in teamwork since their Long Beach days, and Porthole and Temerain, less so. Temerain was a seasoned vigilante, the loner, the planner. Porthole might be the biggest drain on their budget with the upkeep on their robotic bodies, but was also the muscle on the team. Originally there had been more members suggested, but the budget had only allowed for four. Four that all the members of the council could agree on. Sure, the Guardians was Mayor Alvarez pet project, but it wasn't she that footed the bills. And so far, four members had been deemed enough.

That had changed after the attack on Carter's mansion. The budget had been upped, and a new member added to the roster. Bumblebee, adding much needed flight and recon capacity. There was talk of a sixth, but that one proved more... divisive. Perhaps not worth the investment. The team needed a decisive win, not just over a formidable opponent, but to win over holdouts on the council opposed to the whole affair.

The Guardians project was failing. It was time to ensure that it wouldn't.

...

"I know I'm the new gal here, but are you sure that's a good idea?" Bumblebee pulled down her hand, maybe there had been no need to raise it in the first place, but this was a meeting and it had seemed polite.

"Between you and me, not really," Captain Blaze admitted, still standing up, the image of Retribution projected behind him looming larger than life. "But Mayor Alvarez feels that we need to make a statement."

"Huh." Temerain leaned back in the chair, rocking back and forth as she watched the ceiling. "Funny how they've become the top priority right after moving against some of the mayor's allies."

"You know that's not what this is about," Zephyr argued, leaning over the table. "Retribution beat the Rangers. When we beat Retribution that means we're stronger than the Rangers. It's a simple as that."

"Technically it would be 'if' we beat them," Porthole helpfully suggested. "As if we're still not certain we can do that." They were in their civilian body, immaculately decorated and graceful, the plasteel frame ivory white with intricately carved patterns.

"Especially as Retribution already took down..." Bumblebee fell silent as she could feel all eyes on her. Maybe not the best move to call out their Captain for getting beaten up. "What I mean is..."

"What you mean is I lost." Captain Blaze stepped in to fill the silence before Zephyr did. "Which I did because I was alone, unprepared, and in a room full of civilians. Not exactly the best place to showcase my abilities."

"That's the point, ennit?" Temerain was still watching the ceiling. "Retribution wins because they pick the battlefield. They're smarter, not stronger. Attacks when their enemies are weak and unprepared. Divided."

"Not to mention they use the fact that we have to take civilians into account." Zephyr shook their head. "Especially with some of our powers." A quick glance at Blaze, who didn't look away. Just held the glance until Zephyr did. "Anyway," they continued. "My point still stands."

"We're heroes," Porthole agreed, tapping the table thoughtfully. "So maybe we need to think like heroes. We're a team. Retribution is alone. Villains often are. Their moods are not conducive to cooperation."

"Are we a team, though?" Bumblebee looked around the table. "I know I'm the newest one here, but I'm used to fighting as a vigilante. As were Temerain. And the Mayor has been having us out on all these individual missions, we haven't really had the time to work together. Are we a team and not just a paycheck and coordinated team jackets?"

"You've got a point." Captain Blaze sat back down. Heavily. "Not saying I agree with that, but Mayor Alvarez has her hands tied as well. Getting the funding for this project has left her beholden to too many sponsors. They all want a piece of us when it suits them."

"You know me," Zephyr admitted. "I'm the last one to complain about a steady paycheck, let alone a bonus, but it feels like they're setting us up for failure. Glorified LDPD. Running errands. We need to make a NAME for ourselves, then we will be able to dictate the terms. Tell me I'm wrong."

"Not gonna do that this time." Temerain briefly looked to Zephyr, then back at the ceiling. "We're being played. We need to figure out how to turn that to our advantage."

"Pardon me," Porthole gestured to the projected image of Retribution. "Even if we are being played, this Retribution is still a problem, right? Do the reasons really matter if it's the right thing to do?"

"I mean..." Bumblebee hesitated. "Retribution did attack Carter's mansion, I'd argue that their motivations are complicated. Maybe they're not just a problem."

"We're not the ones supposed to deal with corruption." Captain Blaze's voice was hard. "We fight villains. We don't investigate politicians."

"Not any money in that," Zephyr muttered.

"She's got a point, though." Temerain rocked her chair back and forth. "They might be sending us after Retribution as damage control."

"Regardless, their villainous record is still impressive." Porthole, gestured to the stack of papers spread across the table. "Politics or not, that fact still stands."

An uneasy silence fell over the meeting chamber, before Bumblebee forced herself to break it. "Speaking of politics. Our new recruit. I've been hearing rumors that..."

"Unsubstantiated rumors." Captain Blaze gave her a look. "You really think the Mayor would pull that kind of thing on us? He's a murderer, plain and simple."

"Come on," Zephyr protested. "He was a hero before he fucked up, he's been in jail, I bet he's a changed man. And he'd give us the edge we need. The Mayor doesn't want us to fail."

"I don't think we can assume the Mayor is pulling the strings." Temerain finally sat up straight, looking at Blaze. "I know you think her heart's in the right place, but she's not the one with the keys to the safe where the money's been kept."

"Neither are we." Porthole, tilted their head in an approximation of a thoughtful look. "We can only adjust to the decisions made for us. If the rumors are correct he will either be a powerful asset, or the undoing of our team."

"Exactly," Bumblebee nodded. "I'm not gonna argue we need power, I know I'm not exactly the greatest addition to the team when it comes to that, but we need to talk about how to deal with him if he really is the new recruit we've been promised."

"There's more to being a hero than power." Captain Blaze gave Bumblebee a smile. "And being a flier is nothing to scoff at when it comes to team utility."

"We were lucky she's too slow a flier to have been nabbed by the private industry already," Zephyr taunted. "There speed is essential. And the pay is better."

"And yet you're still here." Temerain's voice went hard. "Despite your complaints about our pay."

"We ARE all here." Porthole slammed their hand on the table, an uncharacteristic enough gesture that everybody jump. "We want to be heroes, right? More than we were? Maybe give our new member the same option?"

"I suppose." Bumblebee looked down at the table. "And, like Rain said, it's not like we have a choice."

Another pause, but this time Captain Blaze looked over to Porthole, making the smallest nod. Porthole nodded in return, and there was faint hiss of crackling static in the room. They looked down at their elegant, if faintly skeletal, arm. The carvings had lit up in green, pulsating in a gentle rhythm.

"Now that we're sure nobody is listening in, we always have a choice." Blaze looked serious now, trying to drive his point home. "We can walk. If we don't like what we see. Or what we have to do. But until that point, we need to find a way to work within the system."

"Still can't believe nobody's called you on that bullshit." Zephyr looked at Porthole. "Jamming our own meetings."

"Either that means nobody is listening in or recording us," Temerain folded her arms behind her neck, looking back up at the ceiling. "Or that they are nervous about bringing up the jamming and proving it. Which means they're not confident in their control of us."

"I am not comfortable with this state of affairs," Porthole admitted. "But I am agreeing to the necessity of it. Nobody is listening in, we can speak freely."

"Okay." Bumblebee clenched her hands. "I do NOT want to work with Five Pennies, the man is a creep and a murderer."

"I'm not happy about this either," Blaze admitted. "But I don't think they would have suggested him as a candidate if they didn't think he was reformed. Any fallout would be firmly on the council's doorstep."

"Or on Mayor Alvarez's." Zephyr sighed. "I might not like her much, but if the council doesn't want her, a scandal like this would be a good way to get rid of her."

"The council appointed her, they can remove her. No need for a manufactured scandal." Temerain reached out to grab the bottle of soda that floated to her hand. "They're the ones with the power. Alvarez is trying to dance to their tune, same as us."

"The tune sets the rhythm, but we still pick the steps." Porthole patted their torso where their brain was housed. "Like me. I might have a machined body, but that doesn't mean I need to forego organic beauty, at least in my civilian life. Why, I remember—"

"But why pick Five Pennies then?" Bumblebee interrupted before this got out of hand. Porthole was lovely but could be long-winded.

"Power is my guess." Blaze rubbed his forehead. "It's hard to predict someone whose powers you don't understand. And he was a hero for years before he broke bad. Maybe he's got therapy and wants a second chance."

"Therapy." Zephyr snorted. "The man was always full of himself, don't think he'd ask for help."

"Or someone wants him out of jail, and this is a good opportunity to make that happen." Temerain sipped her drink. "A lot of things has 'happened' lately. Too many for my taste."

"Statistically, the majority of the dastardly dealings you suggest are quite improbable," Porthole pointed out. "I agreed to shield this meeting because it was likely someone could listen in, and the consequences if they did might be unpleasant for us. But you are suggesting plots when mere coincidence might serve."

"Never attribute to conspiracy what can be explained by incompetence... or something like that. I suppose you have a point," Bumblebee admitted. "Maybe they just wanted to add more power to the team."

"Regardless, we have Retribution to deal with first." Captain Blaze gestured to the projected image. "I don't want to look like we're sitting around waiting for backup before taking that bastard on. I want to bring them in first, then we'll deal with Five Pennies from a position of strength. Having proven ourselves."

"Agreed." Zephyr smiled. "For once."

"I'm in." Temerain sipped her bottle. "We don't need extra firepower if we play this smart and work together."

"I have been wondering how my Porthole armor would stand up to Retribution. The extra arms should be quite helpful, though—"

"They can disintegrate metal," Bumblebee interrupted again. "Or something. We're not sure exactly what they can do. I don't think you'll be safe in hand to hand. You're better off staying at range."

"She's right." Blaze rubbed his chin. "Retribution is an excellent close combat fighter. You saw the footage of the fight with Charge. And Lady Argent. I don't think either of us can measure up there. I know I can't."

"Speak for yourself." Zephyr was nearly vibrating with excitement. "I'm looking forward to trying."

"You'll bounce off like a bird off a windshield," Temerain scoffed. "Doubt they can hit you, but you're gonna have to deal damage. Best you can do is push them over. You think your cannon can do any damage, Porthole?"

"Most likely. It is a distasteful weapon, but I foresee the greatest problem will be hitting Retribution without risking innocent bystanders. They have proven themselves quite adept at positioning."

"So that's what we need to stop." Bumblebee faltered as all eyes turned to her. "I mean, you said it yourselves. Retribution controls the battlefield and is strong in hand to hand. So we need to make sure they fight where and how we want. Not the other way around. If there's no risk of collateral damage I bet the Captain could take them down."

"Their armor was insulated against heat, but I couldn't exactly go all out in the hotel. There are limits to both insulation and energy absorption."

"You've got limits too, Vince." Zephyr sounded almost gentle. "Don't forget that. No ocean to dump you in around here."

"What I don't get is why they've never used their disintegration against Lady Argent. She's inorganic, at least her skin." Temerain looked over at Porthole. "It feels like a shame not to use Porthole for what they're really good at."

"Perhaps the question is focus." Porthole held out their arm, the green lights still pulsating. "From what little footage we have, the disintegration has mostly been used while stationary. And Lady Argent leaves anybody precious little room to stand still. Or," they admitted, "the inorganic layer on her skin might be thin enough that it's hard to target."

"Or vital enough it might kill her if removed." Bumblebee looked up at the projected image. "Not all villains are willing to kill."

"And not all heroes shy away from it." Captain Blaze rubbed his chin. "We can't make assumptions. We can't even assume they can only disintegrate inorganic matter. Maybe they avoid using it on people."

"Retribution is a prick," Zephyr raised his voice. "Don't make this more complicated than it needs to be. They're a villain and needs to be beaten. End of story. Fuck motivations."

"How much of your inorganic body can you lose before it becomes dangerous, Porthole?" Temerain looked thoughtful. "Vulnerabilities aside, we can't overlook that it's just an armored body. It can take a lot of damage."

"Oh my bodies are entirely expendable as long as my container is not breached." Porthole tapped his chest again. "If we hypothesize that disintegration seems to take focus and time, which seems likely from the evidence at hand, all I need to do is to make sure Retribution doesn't have time to lay their hands on me. I can always jettison a limb or two if needed."

"That's too risky," Bumblebee protested. "Even if they're not a murderer, Retribution might think you're a robot and eat you right up. We know too little to take that risk."

"We all take risks, Bee." Captain Blaze looked between her and Porthole. "None of us are safe."

"You're too used to staying out of the fight up there," Zephyr mocked. "Playing it safe with your little gun."

"Nothing that says her gun has to be little," Temerain pointed out. "Can your cannon be fitted with an external power source Porthole?"

"Of course it can, though it would have to be as a backpack. It would be quite unwieldy, which I suppose would be less of an issue to a flier."

"The recoil would send me halfway to space," Bumblebee protested. "That's why I'm using energy weapons. I'd only get one shot with that beast."

"One shot might be all we need. You're our best marksman, sorry Port, but she is." Blaze looked directly at their inorganic member. "Are you willing to take the risk to engage Retribution?"

"We'll back you up," Zephyr assured.

"There is a way to insulate Porthole's container, at least if we are correct that Retribution's disintegration only works on inorganic matter." Temerain was smiling now, which she rarely did. "You know what I'm thinking about, don't you?"

"Of course. It's a simple deduction." Porthole patted their chest. "I can remove some of the insulation and cover my container with a thick layer of meat."

"Gross!" Bumblebee covered her mouth.

"And clever." Blaze shook his head. "Don't remove any heat insulation though, I don't want to risk harming you."

"You could tag-team." Zephyr rubbed his hands. "And you're not sloppy, Vince. If Porthole can hold them immobile long enough you can do your whole welding trick and open up a can of Retribution. And then I can kick their ass."

"Their armor is an asset, but don't underestimate whoever is inside," Temerain warned. "So far they haven't won their fights by being sloppy. They might like to come off as the new villain on the block, but whoever this is, they know their stuff. Their opponents. And we have to assume that means us."

"Ah yes." Porthole held up a finger. "So what we need to do is to be predictable and unpredictable, play to our strengths but not in the way Retribution thinks we would."

"Are you sure you're not overthinking this?" Bumblebee shifted in her chair.

"We might," Blaze admitted. "But there's enough weird rumors around Retribution that we can't take anything for granted."

"Like the possibility they might be a telepath." Temerain didn't phrase that as a question.

"Won't matter to me," Zephyr chuckled. "Not when I go fast."

"I for one think it would be an interesting experience to encounter a mind-reader." Porthole looked more excited than anything. "I never have."

"They're not that common anymore." Bumblebee couldn't stop herself from looking sad. "Most of them are gone or dead by now. Can't be easy living in a city if you can read people's minds. Even if some of them were great heroes, like..."

"Not now, Bee." Blaze shook his head. "Let's focus on Retribution. Not on people lost. Now, if the rumors are correct, there might be ways to—"

"Wait!" Porthole held up their hand. "Allow me to adjust, I think there might be—"

[RECORDING INTERRUPTED]

[September questions answered](#)

[Oct 19, 2024](#)

At the end of the Livestock dream when Step overhears Regina speaking to her assistant, is it significant that they are using gendered pronouns to refer to the subject of their conversation?

I would say that might be in the eye of the beholder. Most people would use gendered pronouns by reflex, even if "it" might be a more official stance for the base re-gene.

When the Rangers eventually found out about Sidestep's telepathy, did Sidestep get any of the typical 'Oh yeah, what number am I thinking of right now?' questions?

Absolutely.

Will there be an opportunity for a Gender Questioning Sidestep to start actively transitioning in the story? I absolutely love how gender has been treated thus far, and would love to see even more of it!

Yeah, that is planned.

Who is more obsessed with Sidestep, Ortega or Regina?

Ortega... I started typing, and then I hesitated. Maybe it's Regina? It's... hard to say actually.

Have Herald and Vera ever run into each other (literally) when he was out flying and she was in pigeon form?

Yes, but not physically crashing into each other.

Will trans Sidesteps get to have any more unique interactions with ROs and other characters? I really loved how this was handled in Retribution.

When something comes up that will be different for them, yes.

Glad you're feeling better!

Sadly I then started feeling worse again. Better now, still sick, but no fever, just slime, coughs and exhaustion. It's hit my parents and partner hard too, my mum had to go to the emergency room. They're doing better now, but it's been a hard month for everyone.

It's been mentioned that drugs like sedatives and painkillers inhibit telepathic ability -- are stimulants similarly disruptive? Or would they help in the short term?

I would say that they can help sharpen focus slightly, so more helpful in the short term.

Will the location/circumstances that a car crash Step is in at the end of Retribution/beginning of Revelations have much of an impact on their recovery?

I have some things planned, but I'll have to see how that would affect the story. They are not added yet.

Given his heart accelerates to a worrying rate the more intensely he uses his powers, would it help if Blaze strengthened his heart via aerobic exercise and the like/be on a diet that helps with heart health?

Physical fitness is very important to him in order to use his powers, so yeah, he's doing that already.

Does Nocturne actually care if her vision of justice actually lines up with what the majority of people affected would consider 'fair' or 'right'?

Not even a little.

The nanovore cage is in the left hand of the villain suit. Is Sidestep intended to be right-handed, with the nanovores as an off-hand?

It is more of an allusion to "left hand path," not an implication of handedness. I'm just a humble Swedish metalhead.

Is Hollow Ground getting enough sugar? They get tired from their telepathy often and don't seem particularly inclined to sugary stuff.

They probably should have a better diet/energy intake, yes.

How strict is border control between the FWT and the rest of the US? Would you be able to cross into a state outside of the FEZ without realizing it?

Considering that a lot of the rocky mountain region bordering the FEZ got hit hard by ash/eruptive activity, it's rather easy to cross over the border. Idaho, Utah and Arizona are quite depopulated, large tracts of lands essentially a wasteland.

Does Las Vegas exist (in a similar capacity/niche to today)?

It exists, but not like today, no. Atlantic City holds that role now.

A question a while back about gaming consoles having updated hardware but not so much online compatibility made me consider: I know phones don't have apps or internet and are mainly for calling/texting, but are they mostly touchscreen by now or are they still stuck in the Blackberry keyboard era? Are flip phones still in?

Flip phones still exist, and are useful/cheap. Touch screens also exist, and are more high end.

Is there a set number of limbs the Catastrofiend has right now?

I fear saying something and then changing my mind. Maybe six? Might be more or less if it's dramatically appropriate.

Does the Catastrofiend eat things/people with its mouth (generous term) or does it use some other apparatus (such as a vacuum mod or something not traditionally mouth-y)?

Oh it uses its mouth. Though it's not... traditional at this point.

Does the Catastrofiend still wear clothes?

You wish it would. But not last time you saw it.

What exactly is a scrambler? I believe I've seen them be mentioned in the context of disrupting both people and cameras before, so I'm not sure if "scrambler" is a catch-all term for different devices or if they are mechanistically related somehow but just act on different targets.

It's a catch-all term really. There are many variants, and most are combined in order to disrupt many things. It's like calling a gun a gun, regardless of whether it's a high powered rifle, a handgun, a paintball gun, or a water pistol. Not always technically correct, but people do it anyway.

To add onto that, how large are the radii on them? Do they have different main variants like dampeners do?

There are a lot of variants, but I would say they tend to have rather small radius, many focused in a single direction.

There are files on Sidestep that exist in-world, like the Mitchell's villain profile or the Farm barcode file. Will we ever get the opportunity to see these (or something in similar vein to these) in-game or would writing and/or programming something like that in be too unfitting or messy?

The main problem would be that I had to write them, and thus finalize all Sidesteps secrets in a single, unchanging document instead of being able to adjust if needed.

How modded are Ortega's bones? Have they had bones replaced entirely, or do their mods just add on to what they already have?

Not replaced, but strengthened in some places. Don't ask me how... there are limits to my pseudoscience!

We know Shroud finds boosts and people with interesting life experiences to be a tastier experience for her. Does the Catastrofiend find certain boosts tastier than others? Or does it not discriminate as much.

I'm sure it might, yeah. But it's less discriminating.

Would Hollow Ground watch American reality TV show Shark Tank or would it remind them of work too much.

Too much like work.

Herald flies around in civilian clothes constantly. Does he actually get cold doing that? If he doesn't get cold, is that part of his boost or is he just good with cold temperatures?

Part of his boost is that he has a limited resistance to cold/friction. His eyes can handle wind better, though he prefers goggles while flying fast. One could argue that he simply also affects the surrounding air molecules with his powers, thus lessening the issues he would have. He does get cold if he goes high,

and flying can get chilly even on a lower altitude. He has gotten a cold or two by overdoing that.

Lord Ember has a thing for Lady Argent; does he have some one-sided rivalry with Herald due to his media relationship with her?

No, he thinks nothing of Herald. What a useless softie.

Would Herald's past with fire affect how well he's able to face pyrokinetics in a fight, or considering the rescue work he performed for the United California fire, has he managed to keep that part of his trauma under control?

Herald has actually gone to therapy and worked hard on dealing with his traumatic memories of fire. As a flier, he is often one of the ones who really can do the classic save people from a burning building if he passes by. It still bothers him though, but usually afterwards, once the adrenaline and focus has passed.

Argent's nanovores don't deal well with fire, but how about Steel's armor? Are they built to be fire/heat resistant?

It varies. Most are at least somewhat, but some are made for it.

How long between two doses of boost does it become two distinct boosts and not just an extension of the first one (such as in microdosing)? That is to say; what is the refractory period? I assume it's just "the first boost is fully metabolized before another dose is considered the second one" which then makes me wonder if microdosers have to be careful to not wait until it fully metabolizes before taking their subsequent doses.

I would say that the boost power has to fully set in first, which would be a few weeks. But microdosing is generally done at least daily, in order to avoid this.

How exactly does the eye color variable continuity work (in terms of Heartbreak, Hollow Ground, etc) for Sidesteps that got green eyes after the Void encounter?

It won't matter at all for Heartbreak. For Hollow Ground, I guess it is just one more thing that is less identical between them.

When writing wiki entries, are you alright with us making references to Patreon only posts? If there is contradictory information in any of the Q&A answers, should we assume the most recent answer is the most accurate?

I would avoid large dumps of Patreon lore if you can, but some things are already out there and have been out there since the tumblr days so I can understand oversights. This goes more for the lore posts than the QnA's. However, I wouldn't be terrified of referring to facts (apart from certain discord only secrets). As long as you don't reproduce massive parts of the text, and refer to the patreon post as a source, I can see it being alright. Like, for example, who are in the Guardians, lists of other Ranger teams and so on. These are facts that will come out eventually, and it might make some people aware that the Patreon exists, so it's not just a bad thing. Just use your judgment, and be aware that I might change my mind about facts as they go in the book.

Is Blaze at all good at baking? Given the needs of his boost. Does he have a sweet tooth?

He has a sweet tooth, but I think he buys things instead.

What does the Handyman see in Owl to have fallen in love with her?

He loves her drive, dedication, and sense of humor. Not many see the latter.

Is Void blood only able/more likely to grant powers that are related to Void's own powers?

I would say not.

Would eating Catfiend flesh have similar Boosting properties as Void blood?

Gross, but I could see it.

HG only cares about a few people, some Sidestep's only care about a few people. Just because they care about each other doesn't mean they care for each other's people, could that be a problem?

I think we can safely say it will be a problem.

If Sidestep is super suspicious at the gala does part of Ortega already know who it is they are fighting, even if other parts try to deny it?

Yeah. Sometimes you don't want to face the truth.

If Ortega knows who the villain is would they be more hurt/insulted by them going all out in a fight or holding back?

Holding back for sure.

After Sidestep's nano and Void TBRs would people familiar with their telepathy be able to feel a difference when they're in their mind?

Hmmmm. Hmmmm. I would say tentatively yes.

If Nocturne could safely be boosted again, but doing so would make her immune to threading, would she do it?

No bloody way. She loves her threads.

Are infants more or less likely to survive Boosting?

Less likely. The greatest chance is somewhere in the 10-15 bracket, right before/during/right after puberty.

How good are the Rat King compared to dedicated armor control mods?

Not as good. Yet.

Do ReGenes, or maybe some cuckoos, have their fingerprints burnt off?

No.

how would ortega react to a low daring sidestep getting misgendered on purpose? i love protective ortega im sorry but its true

Oh Ortega would be PISSED.

Since Argent's a movie buff I need to know for my own personal judgement what is her stance on the Lord of the Rings trilogy theatrical or extended cut? Now that I think about it what is her opinion on all the smoldering crap remakes most of which are Disney movies? I think my opinion is plain to see. What's her opinion on Netflix death note? Sorry for reminding people that even exists.

EXTENDED CUT OF COURSE! I don't think she would ever watch a live action Disney movie, nor Death Note. (Mainly because I have not seen them, so...)

What is Sunstream's civilian name if it's not too spoilery? My brain decided to hyperfixate on her and I'm running purely on hc

I honestly have never decided that. Nothing has really felt right.

Is the drug that stops telepaths from reading minds called Numbers (as in making you numb) or Numbers (as in 1 2 3).

The first. It is numbers, as in feeling numb.

Also, this is more of a retribution question, but does Hollow Ground always know Sidestep's secret identity? Or is there some variable I'm missing?

It varies slightly, but a sidekick Sidestep might remain unknown. Then HG's fact checker have not picked up on who they are because they have not been deemed important.

Ignoring everything else relating to things like security feeds and patrol sweeps, would Nocturne notice if one (or more) of her luxurious clothes/items was replaced with a perfect forgery, that's nonetheless considered worthless in value to the original?

By definition she would not notice a forgery if it was perfect.

Would Themmy vs Catastrofiend have been a total stalemate or would one of them have the upper hand?

I would say Themmy would have, but they would never be able to catch the Catastrofiend, so it would just leave.

Did the Farm know that Sidestep was their runaway cuckoo before recapturing them? If so, was part of their mission at HB to recover Sidestep, or was it just pure chance that it played out the way it did?

Pure chance, Sidestep was an unexpected bonus, that was not why they were there.

Has Ortega ever had a discreet same sex romance, or would Sidestep/Puppet be the first?

I would say there was some experimentation/kissing during teenage years, but nothing beyond that. So I would say that Sidestep/Puppet would be the first.

Does Dr. Mortum have a pretty friendly relationship with any of their other clients, or is the Puppet an exception?

Oh they have. Both Dove and Sky-Raider are what Mortum would consider almost-friends, and there are others. A romanced puppet has come closest though, that's a line Dr. Mortum usually don't cross.

If the MC actually goes to the auction, it looks like the outcome ranges from chaotic to total bloodbath. What was the death toll during all of that? Anyone of note lost?

I would say that in the upper levels of chaos (manipulated guards and the like) the death toll would be in the dozens. High enough to trigger the "massacre" tag. I think there was some minor celebrities and rich customers there, but none that Sidestep deemed important.

If Sidestep brings the full weight of their mind to bear on a regular person, could they destroy it completely and send them into a vegetative state?

Yes. Whether it would be permanent depends on the mental strength of the individual.

Other than the Void, has Sidestep definitely killed anyone or is that player determined?

Player determined.

What caused the Phoenix massacre? Like, did the Catastrofiend just lose it and go on a rampage or were there circumstances leading up to it?

Oh there were circumstances alright... might write about it one day, we'll see.

We know a little about the Big One and the nanosurge and Heartbreak, but zooming out from Cali and going global, what is the biggest disaster caused by a single individual villain? In terms of death toll or economic damage or just impact on history.

The biggest disaster caused by a single individual is something called the "Belgian Mass Anomaly." While there are many conspiracy theories about this event, these are the facts that most agree upon. In the early nineties, a Belgian man injected smuggled boost drugs in a last attempt to extend his life. He was severely ill in cancer at the time, and it is speculated that he hoped for either a quick death or a cure. Neither happened. Instead he became ground zero for what might be the largest and most gruesome display of boosted ability on European soil. While it is speculated (hoped) that the man died soon after boosting, his cancer did not, and grew exponentially and out of control. Before it was finally destroyed, it had taken over most of the city of Brussels. While many citizens were evacuated, it is estimated that almost half a million were overwhelmed and incorporated in the growing mass. Some claim that most of those half a million dead came from the massive firebombing needed to destroy and sterilize the mass, but the official stance is that everyone in the targeted area was dead already. Others claim that this was not a random boosting accident, but a deliberate attack on EU leadership. Who would be behind it depends on the political affiliations of the one who proposes the theory. Yet others claims that it was a terrorist attack. Regardless of the cause, the horrifying effects of this event helped strengthen EU regulations and fears of boost drug use.

How about the biggest caused by a hero (accidentally, presumably)?

Most of those are classified, as they happened during wartime deployment (if they could be counted as heroes) but one of the more horrific accidents was when the Soviet hero Baiqoñyr lost control of his massive armor during an arms trade exhibition and over a hundred lives were lost during the barrage or trampled by the crowd as they tried to squeeze out of the display area. It is said this was due to a faulty IFF unit, which determined the onlookers to be targets, rather than the dummies he was supposed to practice on. Some claim it was sabotage in order to ruin soviet arms sales, others that it was an early experiment with artificial intelligence that went rogue.

What was Ortega's bi awakening if they didn't date/crush on a same-sex/nb sidestep in the past?

I think it was one of those things that was vaguely there, but never acted on, and just pushed down at not important.

In the same vein, what was herald's bi awakening?

Oh that was absolutely Sidestep if applicable.

Does vera have a favorite breed(s) of pigeons?

Egyptian Swift.

You've said before that the threshold for major telepathy fuckery is having 80< in either of the stats. Does that mean that even if you get it up even more to 90< or even 100 the effects will be the same in-story?

I do have some cutoffs at 81-83 as well I think. You can't ever reach 100. And I would say that anything above 85 would be treated the same. This is not a game focused on stat hunting.

What is going on through Ortega's mind if you walk away in anger from then at the park?

Deja vu. It has happened before. Probably cursing themselves afterwards for letting it happen again. A bit of a panic that it will be for good.

Any change Sidestep can find out what Arde's unspoken plans are? Either Arde telling voluntarily or Sidestep discovering through their telepathy?

Most likely.

What did Ace consider their best/worst quality to be?

Not caring about people. That's for both of them.

In earlier version of Retribution in the Anarchist path there was a choice to be able to "kill people in power" regardless whether Sidestep had or hadn't killed before, but now you can only choose that if Sidestep is a known killer, is there any particular reason for the change?

It wasn't really enough specific content for that path, so I folded it into the others to simplify.

How would have things gone if Ortega had not run into the MC at the diner?

Then the first meeting would have been the fight at the museum, which might have gone similarly, but possibly with a lot stronger Sidestep reaction during the Ortega fight.

If a powerful/active immune reduces survival odds when Boosting, does that mean bats, infamous for being asymptomatic carriers of terrible diseases, have the highest Boosting odds out of the nonhuman animal kingdom? Bat king when?

You know what? You're right. You're absolutely right. Lucky for everyone that bats are not a common animal when it comes to experiments...

Do intake method like ingesting vs injecting affect Boosting survival odds? Could you snort the powdered form?

Technically you could snort the powdered form, but I am doubtful you could snort enough for it to work as intended. If you did it repeatedly and often enough, it might work as a microdosing boost option, but I think that's rare. It's not pleasant. It is theorized that ingesting increases survival odds, but there are so many other variables it's hard to be sure.

Could a commercial water filter remove the Hero Drug from a faucet?

If it included active carbon, I think it could help.

Is Project Stripes still ongoing?

Yes, but no new active sites.

Is there increased incidents of cancer in areas that were affected by Project Stripes?

Oh yes. But there are so many of those areas on the west coast, due to lax environmental regulations.

I'm guessing that in spite of all the boosts and mods in FH's America, there's still no force powerful enough to make the US adopt the Metric system?

Nope.

Of the ROs, who would be easier or harder to romance as an outsider rather than sidestep? By how much?

I have no idea! No idea at all.

You've mentioned before that, of all the cast, Herald would be most likely to have gender thoughts if he had a puppet. Do you ever intend to explore that side of him in the games, or do you see him staying a basically gender-conforming cis dude the whole time?

I won't bring that up in game I think. No time, and this is just my view on things. If it's not in the game, people can have their own headcanons. Technically I haven't said he's cis in the game either, I've just not said that he's trans. Everyone but Mortum is technically Schrödinger's gender conforming.

A tech savvy Step can ask about Mortum why they are using titanium connectors when they interrupt their work after the nightmare/therapy. Mortum responds its titanium because its meant to go under the skin. Is this a mod? Are they making it for themselves or a client?

Indeed it will go under the skin. It is a mod for a client! I don't know more than that.

How far do Cuckoos travel for their missions? Since they're a higher escape risk, does the Farm prefer to keep them in the West or is it possible that some Steps have traveled all over?

It is possible, and maybe even likely that Sidestep has been all over. Even the east coast. However, Sidestep would not really have seen much difference, they were only given as much information as they need for the mission. Mostly about the people they needed to interact with, rarely about where it happened.

Assuming Argent gave up being human shaped, how small of a space could she fit herself into?

Anything a pre-teen child could fit into I think. Her core is still the same, she'd just lose some limbs and bulk.

From Ace's perspective, what were the chances that they would leave their meeting with Shroud without getting hollowed out?

Very, very slim.

As a recap for those with swiss cheese brain or can't stand patreon/tumblr search functions, what are the things that you plan to change, remove, add, or edit in the rebirth patch? Is there anything or some things in particular that you are excited to do for it? Anything that might lead to a patch for Retribution as well?

There are a number of things going into the half-finished Rebirth patch. Lots of minor things, like being able to cover up Argent with your cape after you beat her in the sewers, and some gender/sexuality tweaks, secret crush fixes/contents and some other stuff. No major parts, just a lot of little things.

And i believe it was mentioned at some point that you hope to add a route in rebirth where sidestep transitioned/came out only after heartbreak. Do you still plan to add this route if you are able?

I still want to try to fit that, yes.

What does (or would) Arde, Ben and Vera think of Spoon?

Everyone loves Spoon, that's the law.

Do the cats in Chen's neighbourhood all live in fear of Spoon and his lust for the chase?

Spoon is leashed in the neighborhood, so they are safe!

Excluding secrets/mysteries like nanovore symbiosis or whatever Pyroclast's deal is, is there any consensus on who amongst all the Ranger teams past or present would be considered the strangest in terms of power?

To be fair, Pyroclast really freaks everyone out once they start thinking about it. Probably the one,

Would Step's neutered nanovores consume the ink in a tattoo on a person? Would they eat the ReGene tattoos?

No in both cases.

Have any Regenes been captured by foreign powers?

I would say probably not, unless I realize that will be cooler for the story in the future.

Has Blaze or Lord Ember ever tried cooking food using their bare hands and their powers?

Oh yes. And it works quite nice.

For Zephyr, is their perception of time slowed down constantly because of their speed or is it only altered when they are moving fast consciously?

Only when consciously using their powers. It is an effort to keep up, and not something can be done indefinitely.

We know that daniel misidentifies his gravity powers as flight. Is his first instinctive use of it as such because of his personality, and could it have been the opposite? Basically, if he had a different personality and received his powers in the same manner, could he have started crushing everything around him instead of flying?

Yeah, that is pretty correct. If he had started with different base assumptions, the "core expression" of his powers would be different.

Does anyone in the main cast do journaling? & if so is it strictly professional or do they keep a personal diary as well?

Hmmm. I don't think either of them does, the closest would be Dr. Mortum's meticulous documenting of their experiment, which sometimes also includes personal notes.

would ortega have as much (or more) information as chen does about project stripes?

I would say less.

How does Argent feel about a saving villainStep considering she is a hero that, on occasion, kills?

She'd be very sympathetic towards them, even if they might be an annoyance.

For guilty Sidestep scenarios, does Chen tell the rest of the team about Sidestep helping him save people in Carter's mansion?

That is something that will be revealed in game, right now you do not know...

Which ranger has the best emergency medical skills?

Chen. He's been in the army. But all have training, he's just got more experience.

Is Argent more at ease that a Step, who isn't lying about their telepathy being on the fritz, is around given they have a proven track record with the nanovores should she lose control?

Yeah. She really is. And also less at ease because Sidestep can get into her head. So... gain some points, lose some points.

Charge, Herald, and Argent have been popular Rangers of choice for movies where they're a villain's love interest: either redeeming them, or turning over to the villain side themselves: but what about Steel?

Sadly, Steel was never leading man material for the big screen. This was in part because he was not deemed "conventionally hot," partly because he was not the type to have chemistry with villains, just beating them. There was also a wariness of stressing the Rangers' military background. While you could have made a very cool movie in the military/action style with Steel, that might not be in the interest of the Rangers' media team. Something that suited Chen just fine.

Is Lord Ember jealous that HG has Nocturne as a hot lover/co-leader? Does that jealousy also extend to them having Jake in their bed?

I don't think so, Lord Ember underestimates Nocturne badly and thinks she's just arm candy. As such, he has equally hot lovers, and more of them too!

I'm not sure if I worded this in a way that makes sense but do boosts have a tangible affect on the individuals mind(scape)? For example, since Ember is a fire boost does that mean their mindscape is burning hot & could potentially destroy something that isn't a natural part of his mind? Like say a red thread?

Some boosts might. It is not unheard of that physical boosts have mental effects as well. That could be true for Lord Ember, it is not a bad theory, but I will avoid specifying his mindscape right now due to... reasons.

Did The Crack have any connection or knowledge of anything related to Project Stars and/or Stripes?

Nope.

Was Dread Reactor already up and running while Cavalier was active?

I would say yeah, I am not exactly sure of the timeline but it would at least have been in the testing/deployment stage, though I am not sure if it had escaped yet.

What responsibilities does being Captain of the Guardians even entail? Alvarez seems to give the orders, after all.

Leader in the field, handling pr, managing the team members, being the symbol... a lot of things.

Has Blaze ever grabbed a water bottle after an intense fight to cool down: only for his hand to melt through plastic?

Oh absolutely.

Has there been any attempt to time a double Boost with a Traumatic Boost Response? Would the effects compound?

I think there probably has been experiments, and some would argue that a double boosting incident might BE a traumatic boost response in itself. Exactly what happen is too varied to be predicted, it is a rare thing.

Does Steel believe that sidestep is joking or exaggerating when they mention that Lady Argent choked them, or he just figures it wasn't serious since sidestep is intact and walking around? Or is any concern of that overshadowed by the urge to defend a teammate or change the subject?

At the time, Steel took it as exaggeration, making a mental note to check with Lady Argent later. It is only later, after other incidents might have happened (like the eye) that he would look back and feel bad for not investigating it more thoroughly as a sign of instability.

Could Argent, with her technopathy, manipulate the digital roulette games at Joes/other places?

Perhaps. The driving randomizer is quantum decomposition in nature, so she wouldn't be able to affect that. But it is possible she might affect the display area.

Are there any possible poly combos you know absolutely will not be happening?

Steel Argent and Steel Herald.

Shroud instantly recognized Ace if they scout the casino. Does she usually remember her victims? If so is that related to her powers or does she just have a good memory? Or was Ace just special?

She remembers her victims, some minor things remain with her.

Would Steps telepathy work on an AI?

No.

Does Lord Ember's organization have a unique name or is it just referred to as something like "the Ember/SF mob"? & if so does he get mad when people don't use it?

It is all focused around him, I don't think his group has a special name.

Were food diet pills really that popular back when the Hero drug was first sold?

Did people want to get thin during the sixties and seventies? Oh yes. Both Ephedra and Fenfluramine were launched in the seventies, and later withdrawn for dangerous side effects.

Was Cavalier ever patriotic? Or was his service just a job to him?

I think he was at the start, he was a volunteer after all.

Will it depend on Sidestep to reveal themselves to Hollow Ground? Or will Hollow Ground be able to meet Sidestep outside of a villain even if Sidestep doesn't show HG who they are? Sorry if I'm not wording the question right

I am not sure yet. Not ruling it out, but I'll have to see where the story goes.

IIRC the memories of soldiers are some of the most commonly used for regenes & some Discord exclusive lore makes it sound like regenes can be traumatized by implanted memories so I was curious:

— If the donor in question was traumatized by a memory the regene receives does the trauma carry over to the regene as well? & if so will they have the same response as the donor?

— Does this happen often & how does The Farm usually handle these situations?

Trauma can carry over, and sometimes be bad enough to entirely overwhelm the fresh mind. If so, the Re-Gene tends to be scrubbed and implanted with a new "memory mix," and if it happens often enough, the culprit memory is not used again even if it's efficient in other ways. Minor trauma is often lost as the Re-Gene's mind matures, forgotten or buried like childhood traumas might be. It can linger as various minor quirks, not strong enough to impact performance.

Could Ortega pull off a lightning redirection like some of the firebenders in Avatar: the Last Airbender?

Before Ortega had the generator, they had pulled off similar things at times, drawing energy from let's say an electricity outlet and releasing it as lightning when battery levels were low. However, never with a high voltage instant source like a lightning bolt. It would be theoretically possible, but the question would be how much it would damage Ortega/the systems.

Alright is the reason Danny's suspicion isn't tracked because it's literally just going to be a true or false variable? Like, the rose tinted glasses will either crack or his denial will just be too strong.

Yeah, at this point in time that is my plan. It would also be a middle "suspicious" value that wouldn't last long. Daniel would confront Sidestep at the earliest opportunity.

Is Vera's capacity for facial expressions at all limited, considering birds generally not having the facial muscles to do them?

Not in her human form. As a bird, yes.

does hollow ground interact with the outside world beyond their inner circle and new recruits

On occasion, but less than Nocturne or Jake.

How connected is the rat king to sidestep? Is it a bit like they're watching a movie when sidestep uses the suit or can they feel/taste/smell what Sidestep does?

The latter, but not fully. So... maybe in the middle? More with the telepathic subsystems.

In terms of Ortega and Chen, how much of their mods is actually for use and how much of it is just fail-safes and buffers to keep it from cooking the meat bag it's been stowed away in? For example, do some mods require synthetic organs because they're just too hard on the body otherwise?

OH yes. A lot of the mods are for supporting the body. For Chen, that's a lot of structural mods to support his artificial limbs. For Ortega, it's a lot of energy and heat dispersal.

Who all is apart of the Guardians? We know of Blaze and Zypher, is there anyone else?

Current Guardians lineup as of Revelations:

Captain Blaze, team leader. Boost. Controls heat, and can set fire to things. Charismatic. Flamboyant. He was a former member of the Long Beach Heroes before they dissolved. Possibly dead.

Zephyr, official second in command. Boost. Some variation of speed and possibly air powers. Sharp. Impulsive. They were in the Long Beach Heroes with Blaze before joining the Guardians. New leader if Blaze is dead.

Temerain. Boost. Telekinetic. She was a vigilante for many years before joining the Guardians, and closing in on 40, she's the oldest of them. She's clever, and still a bit of a lone wolf.

Porthole. Mod. What could be described as a brain in a jar, connected to a robotic body. Very little is known about them.

Bumblebee: Boost. In her early thirties. Former vigilante. She can fly, and lift heavy things, not fast but maneuverable. During her vigilante days her weapon of choice was her stingers, which started out as a taser, but was upgraded into proper multi-use weapons after joining the Guardians.

XXX: A mysterious new, unnamed recruit.

Has any Ranger family member / civilian friend been successfully kidnapped or harmed? How accessible is their personal information?

Probably once or twice, but the repercussions tends to be dire for anyone trying. The personal information is kept under wraps, it takes effort to find out things.

Did Ace have friends or family prior to boosting or were they always a loner?

They were a loner, not really that personable. Tended not to trust people, and see them as just trying to use them.

Did Anathema and Owl get along, or did Owl have similar feelings towards them as she did to sidestep?

Owl wasn't very fond of Anathema, she saw them as naive.

What would a modern non-general Ai like Chat GPT feel like to Argent?

Just another machine, a bigger version of an auto-correct. It would be nothing interesting to use there.

Did Ortega ever practice confessing in the secret crush route?

Hah. Ortega doesn't practice.

Does Argent regret some of the features she's taken on? Like, does she ever have thoughts like "I wish I'd made my nose a bit softer"?

No. She had at the start, a lot of the time, which led to her losing control of her features. Now she has to tell herself that what she has is perfect, and spend a lot of time visualizing that. No room for doubt.

What does Argent like best about Ortega and vice versa?

They both share a taste for risk taking, action, and improvisation. A look before you leap attitude, but with enough experience to make risks calculated instead of stupid. I think they both feel that there's no effort being around each other, they are comfortable keeping secrets and doesn't pry.

Do Chen's siblings ever miss him?

I think it's far to say that they did, especially at first. Family fallouts are always complicated.

Will Ortega ever kiss Villainstep while not knowing it's Step? I need more angst in Ortega's love life.

I have no idea!

Can they do this while dating the puppet? I need Ortega to fall for all of Step's alter egos.

Still no idea!

Can Ortega tie a cherry stem with their mouth? Would they ever do it in front of romanced or crushing!Step?

I mean it's not that hard!

Will there be a line about Charge and Sidestep 2.0 teaming up together again if we can ally with them or save civvies together or something?

Possibly, not sure yet.

In the spawning pond, are Re-Genes allowed to enter the area? Or is it just staff in charge of Re-Gene development?

That is staff only, but I suspect there might be a few "staff re-genes" who are not sent on assignments but kept on the farm for their useful boosts that might be allowed there for medical purposes and the like.

Is it a safe place to be in? Or does the nature of boosting make the 'nursery' dangerous to visit?

The force grow incubation area is not dangerous. But the part where the actual boosting takes place, the "ignition area," is. It is heavily reinforced and protected, and only one Re-Gene at the time is boosted. Things can go explosively wrong. Once that part is over, the now boosted Re-Gene is moved to a safer, more general area once more,

What's Australia's deal in FHR? What are they up to?

Caught in a tense political situation. With their closest historical allies (the Brits) so far away, they are navigating between the US, China and Southeast Asia and trying to position themselves as rather neutral. Do not ruffle any feathers. By being neutral (not as neutral as the Swiss, but maybe Sweden in the cold war), they are a useful trading partner for companies wanting to trade with the opposing political blocks. Combined with a strong mining industry, Australia is doing pretty well, but always feels like it's one political misstep away from messing everything up. SO far they have kept mostly everyone happy.

Is it possible that a boost who can teleport across the universe potentially spark some interest space travel, or are the people in FHR stubbornly disinterested in exploring the cosmos?

A boost that can teleport across the universe would most likely die, and not come back. But yes, the space race might still happen, some might argue it is starting now that the first satellites have launched.

What was the original purpose of the lab Snowball was found in?

Developing controlled and stable boosting procedures, trying to control both the result, survivability, and the nature of the boosts.

Could someone with super senses hear or smell the nanovores Argent has?

Possibly, yes. If they knew what they were perceiving. However, most would probably think it too improbable and just think it feels similar. Sidestep didn't pick it up either at first, even though the hints were there.

We know Sidestep would be pretty rancid for another telepath to perceive, but what would Argent look like to another technopath?

Hold would Argent look to another technopath? Would she avoid them?

Oh another technopath would pick up the nanovores immediately, at least as being machines. If they had not seen nanovores before they wouldn't come to that conclusion, but they would think of it as nanomachines. Argent would avoid them like the plague.

What's the most Argent has shaved off of a single meeting by messing with the digital clock?

Probably fortyfive minutes.

What's Mortum's preferred villainstep career before they know puppet and villain are the same person? Does it change after finding out?

It depends on other factors too. I think in general, things like Thief feels safer and more useful to them, while Anarchist might be the riskiest.

Will we get the chance to gently bully Ortega into shaving in book 3?

Will we ever get the chance to forcibly remove Ortega's facial hair, either with a razor or possibly as consequence of a heavy attack by the villain?

No more facial hair mods planned right now.

If Step gave a platonic facial hair suggestion, and later a romanced puppet gave a facial hair suggestion, which would win?

No idea!

if HG tried to thread someone through a super sheer fabric, would it work? How about a mesh?

It requires skin contact. If it was sheer enough that there would be skin contact through the threads, like in a mesh, it would work. If the fabric was thin but tightly woven, no.

Is there someone at the Farm who as part of their job has to examine celeb magazines to see if Sidestep has turned up in one of Ortega's photos?

No.

Ortega and Herald both want Sidestep to go back into the hero business. Do they start to doubt the feasibility of that after finding out Step is Regene? (Like it would be mighty suspicious if a vigilante very similar to Sidestep showed up working alongside the rangers) Or have they not given consideration to this?

That has thrown a spanner into the works, but the dream is still there.

Is Hollow Ground wanting or needing for Sidestep to be their younger sibling? How far are they willing to go to make excuses as to why Sidestep is their sibling? Would it stop if Sidestep tried to put their foot down?

That is spoilers for book three! Not gonna tell you.

Could anathema breathe underwater or need less oxygen than most? Survive extreme temperatures?

Surviving extreme temperatures was no issue. And they could survive without oxygen for long periods of time, though I think the maximum they ever tried was a couple of hours.

What's Nocturne's Ljungstrand number?

Don't think she would count.

Considering all the ports across Ortega's spine, how safe would it be to give them a back massage?

Considering that you work the muscles, it should be safe enough.

Does Ortega think that Step is being used as a distraction by Hollow Ground? Either because Ortega thinks they're getting close to something or as a more general distraction for the upcoming gang war?

I don't think Ortega thinks that.

Blaze can generate heat: but can he ever go the opposite way? Bleeding the heat out of the room to create a colder environment?

Potentially, but I don't think he has ever used his powers that way. Probably need a traumatic boost response to get there.

Did Jake ever struggle with phasing through the ground when he'd use his powers? Was that something he had to master or something that he knew how to do innately when he got his powers?

Yes. That was a big issue at the start. Still can be when he loses focus.

What did Herald and Argent think happened during Heartbreak prior to Book 1?

We'll get into that in this book!

Can we call Arsenaux by a nickname? Preferably one that cuts out the 'naux' from her moniker?

Not gonna implement it in the book, but I see what you did there... ;)

How would the rat king react if we approached Psychopathor and they sensed that he had made a new rat king for his canon?

Psychopathor can't make a rat-king, he stole it!

If they knew they were going to get an honest answer, what is one thing Argent, Herald and Steel would like to ask Step?

I really have no idea! That's such a what-if question.

How disappointed is Ortega that Step can't offer critical intel on the inner workings of HG's organisation when it comes out they're a regene?

Very. Ortega's gonna try not to show it though.

Does Herald do any extra research into a Lupin villainstep that he doesn't do for the other careers?

Maybe. But not much.

Has Ortega ever consider that Sidestep could have amnesia and not know they're HG's sibling?

Nope, Sidestep is obviously actively hiding their origins.

Does ortega, in their tinfoil conspiracy, ever think that HG thinks ortega "got back" at HG killing hood by causing the death of their younger sibling? Does this sort of fuck ortega up?

No, that has never crossed Ortega's mind.

Does Black Friday exist in the FEZ?

I think so. It makes sense.

What power would Nocturne want if she could choose?

Telekinesis!

Sidestep seems to avoid manipulating people while they're asleep, claiming that it makes the mind unpredictable and dangerous. Is this the same for Hollow Ground? Is their power more likely to fail on a sleeping mind or have increased likelihood of a rebound?

Fail altogether. People can't hear you while asleep. It might feasibly work if HG keeps at it, one one of those "listen to this while sleeping to stop smoking" tapes. But that's a lot of time invested for little effect, and HG likes to avoid effort if they can help it.

Additionally, what does a telepathic rebound look like for Hollow Ground and how often have they experienced one?

I would say it's similar to a brutal migraine. It has happened a few times.

How did they test Ortega's powers after their initial modding surgery? Was the lightning always a part of it or was it just to make them stronger and faster at first?

It was just to make them stronger and faster at first, but the lightning was step two. It was included in the original blueprints as sort of an electrical touch, and then expanded upon.

Since “Mods, meet nanovores” can change Chen & Ortega’s outlook on the villain does that mean all the Rangers are aware it happened? If so did it have any effect on Argent & Herald’s?

It is something all Rangers would be aware of, but it doesn't affect Argent and Herald personally in the same way. To them it's just a gruesome killing.

Has Ortega alluded to Step's tinfoil past with Argent & Herald given they both give meaningful looks at Step when talking to Step about it? Or is it more that Ortega got more frantic since Step came back and they've noticed?

I would say it is a combination of both. Ortega haven't revealed anything, but both Argent and Herald can read between the lines enough to know something's up.

Will finding out Step is a regene cause Ortega to ease off on their HG investigation?

Slightly, yeah. Less of an acute priority.

Will pupstuck steps be getting the Void flashback dreams (and the opportunity to set voideyes)?

Spoilers.

What do the Rangers sound like? If I remember right, Mortum is the only one (with their French accent/southern droll) that gets a voice description

I really don't know. I am very bad at voice descriptions or voice claims.

Have Vera or Ben been to any of Mortum's Halloween parties?

Yes, repeatedly.

When someone in the Farm's staff leaves the job, how closely are they monitored to make sure there are no potential leaks?

Very closely. But like many in high risk/secret occupations, few quit, and if they do, they often move into similar positions. The pay is good, and you're already security classed.

Has HG ever entertained the idea of creating a doppelganger HG and letting Ortega get them so that Ortega will finally stop pestering their organization?

No.

If our Villain wasn't causing so much trouble, would Chen have considered retirement?

Not yet. He's got things to do first.

Does the Farm have any specialised equipment or procedures for cutting off a Re-Genes parts to surgically transfer to another? If it's a common practice, especially for Re-Genes with tougher, more durable parts.

Not more than any other surgery/modding department.

What question would Argent or Herald ask if they were present in a truth game like the one in the snippet? (The one where everyone was asking the question they didn't want to answer.)

I don't know! And it would probably vary a lot depending on the playthrough.

Theoretically, under extreme, immediate threat with a clear way to avoid said threat with telepathic interference, would sidestep's telepathy be able to overpower numbers or dampeners?

Yes. Sidestep is already pushing that limit with the help of the Rat King.

What is the specific reaction for the HG Trio to getting to know a low presentation, tunnel base Sidestep who is actually loaded with spare funds?

"Damn, you live like this?" -insert meme here-

Does Tia Elena know Sidestep is a telepath?

Yes.

In scenarios where HG considers Sidestep family what is their opinion on each of Sidestep's potential partners?

That's a very long list, and I am not sure yet. That's a thing I need to write to figure out.

and would there be any conflict in the books over it?

You bet, especially in some cases.

Does the fanclub include a significant number of Green Sky/Cult of the flesh members?

I wouldn't say so.

Would you consider starting a Kickstarter for a Visual Novel remaster/remake once the series is complete?

I have no idea, but that would be a humungous undertaking that I know nothing about.

Maybe this has been asked before, but what were the major themes you wanted to explore for the original book? Do you feel like that story is still being told?

What would drive someone who started out trying to do good into actively doing bad instead. What trauma and alienation does to people. How GOOD it feels to just destroy things when you're hurting. Self destruction as collateral damage. And... yeah, mostly so. It's expanded a lot, so in some paths it is more diluted since Sidestep is different.

Unrelated question, has anyone (most likely Finch) suggested Sidestep try antidepressants or something? Would that kind of medication even affect them? I'm not sure how much of their telepathy is all 'woo, mysteries of consciousness' and how much is chemical make up.

Oh yeah, antidepressants came up early, and was shot down by Sidestep. They don't want to be drugged.

Is Shroud happy in the work she does now or does she have other ambitions?

Shroud is not happy, period.

[New Demo is up, finally!](#)

[Oct 12, 2024](#)

Alright, first of all apologies. My illness did not pass as quickly as I thought, instead it did the usual nasty thing and moved down into my lungs. Been coughing them up for the last two weeks, which has led to very little sleep as I keep waking myself up. It is getting better now though, still coughing, but my brain has returned. A bit annoying at having to cancel everything I had planned, and even more annoying to ruin my updating schedule. Especially since Choicescript IDE gave me issues with testing (my new computer did not want to install/update it properly) so I had to break out my old one with the broken keyboard just for testing. So glad I didn't hand that off to recycling yet, that was a lifesaver. I am not in the mood for handling tech issues while recovering...

Anyways, the demo is now finished and tested.

This demo covers three different puppetstuck paths, namely 2.3, where you rescue your body but end up being arrested by Steel, 3.3 when you crashed the car as your puppet and is stuck in the hospital under arrest as a criminal, and 3.1 where you crashed the car but was rescued by Dr. Mortum. I had planned for more of them there, but I am late enough already. I will add more as we go.

Demo stats

85 400 with code

67 100 without code

Average playthrough varies a lot, but 18 900 according to randomtest.

Since I cannot vouch for my brain, it might not be as proofread as I wanted it to be, but I'll bugfix and update as we go.

This demo will remain patreon exclusive for four weeks before going public on November 12, please avoid sharing it until then! Everyone will get it eventually.

Thank you so much for your support, and once again, sorry for the late update!

<https://dashingdon.com/play/malinryden/tgghalwehbuu981/mygame/>

[Questions for the month!](#)

[Sep 28, 2024](#)

After my parent's visit last week, I have spent the whole week feverish in bed unable to do anything productive, even reading. Feeling better now, still weak as a kitten tho. SO close to getting the puppet demo done, but it will go up next week instead of this one. So apologies for the slight lateness.

In the meantime, what are your questions for this month?

[Project Stripes](#)

[Sep 15, 2024](#)

As I promised, here is an overview of the history of Project Stripes. Feel free to draw your own conclusions from what is presented here. This is all you get for now.

...

PROJECT STRIPES

An excerpt from the unpublished manuscript of Professor Ira Deerborn, titled "Project Stars and the Rise of the American Dream."

In order to adapt to the evolving battlegrounds where wars were prosecuted by small, elite forces rather than the logistical nightmare of large armies, the US armed forces choose a joint approach. Rather than focus solely on the technological aspects like the USSR, it was determined that "the Chinese approach" would be more advantageous. While officially research into the so-called boost drug was prohibited, work continued behind the scenes.

This new and innovative branch of the military-industrial complex soon yielded several successful projects, though they proved to be difficult to scale up for military use. The human cost of producing even a single super-soldier was seen as unpalatable even for the normally callous weapon developers. There was an inherent conflict in the military's express wish to transform mature, trained soldier into something more than they were, and the high lethality of the boost drugs. The fate of the infamous Unit Gold was seen as a warning. This was a volunteer company of one hundred men who had agreed to submit to the boost drug under a newly developed, reputedly safer regiment. While things seemed to be going well at first, the compound eventually was destroyed in a massive explosion yielding only one survivor. The survivor, Soldier 71, is still the crowning achievement of Project Stars, but has so far not been able to be reproduced.

In contrast, the bionic and cybernetic branches of Project Stars had great success, with the exception of the ██████████ debacle. While some useful research came from the boosted side, especially regarding transplanting enhanced organs, on the whole it was considered too erratic to rely on. Indeed, most people today are unaware that many boosted individuals serving in the military are a product of homegrown research, and not people volunteering to serve as an expression of patriotism. Several side projects were spun out from under the Project Stars banner, which will be dealt with in later chapters. For now, let us focus on the Unit Gold experiments as an example of the grandiose visions the project directors had for the future American Super Soldier.

...

Excerpt from an intercepted letter between █ █ ██████████ ██████████ and █ █ ██████████ ██████████. Ex.1WA2b

I've told you again and again that I don't care about your moral qualms. They're killing Project Stars turning it into just another damn weapons manufacturing program. You and me both know it can be more. Should be more. The American of tomorrow is not some cyborg monstrosity, they are the superman. You've seen it. What we can be. We just need to figure out how this works, and until then, how we can administer it safely. If you want to spend the rest of your life dosing cloned organs and staring at petri dishes, you need to tell me now. I'm doing this. I've got the funding, just don't ask me where I got it. Neither of us want to be associated with those NF weirdos. In fact, you'd better burn this letter once you've read it. They're controversial, even over here. Not that I think the kidnapping children rumors are true, but you know how it is with fanatics. They never look good in the press. We need to be smart about this.

...

A letter between █ █ ██████████ ██████████ and █ █ ██████████ ██████████. EX.2WA1g

You're insane. What are you planning to do? Sterilize what remains of the coast? You know there's no future in your goddamn superman. They're a weapon, a bomb, a tank. They can't even have kids for fucks sake, you can't even consider doing this on a grander scale. Consenting adults is one thing, and I'll admit that the fetal experiments did yield some interesting data, but this? This is madness. By the time you're getting this letter I've already turned over our correspondence to the Feds, chances are you won't even get to read it because you're under arrest. I guess I just wanted to write this out anyway. Get it off my chest. It will be entered into evidence in the end, I suppose, so you'll at least get to hear it at your trial. Fuck you ██████████, that you'd even consider this.

...

An excerpt of a transcript of the October 25th meeting of the ██████████ ███ ██████████ ██████████.

Through this presentation I will refer to the various compounds used under their collective description as "boost drugs." Please refer to the included handout for detailed product descriptions. I am doing this since, regardless of how some producers wish to separate themselves from the competition, the active substance is essentially the same and the efficiency is similar. While there is a decision to be had which variant would be most suitable, this is not the subject of today's discussion.

Now, we all know that there are two major drawbacks when it comes to application of the boost drugs. The first is the high chance of a life-threatening reaction, the second is that so far it seems to render subjects infertile. Since the exact mechanism to how this compound works its changes on the body is not yet fully explored, we are left with empirical evidence only. As I assume all present are familiar with the current state of research, let me summarize what the consensus is:

1. Death occurs either through mechanisms similar to anaphylactic shock as the subject's immune system attacks the boost drug, or as a result of bodily changes that are inimical to life.
2. The chance of death is greatest among healthy adults, which could be seen as an immunal overreaction to the drug comparable to what occurs in pandemic influenza.
3. The chance of death is lowest among older children and younger teenagers. The current theory is that the body is already prepared for massive pubertal changes, which helps to mitigate the shock.
4. The chance of survival can be increased by putting the patient in a medically induced coma, lowering their body temperature drastically, and introducing an immunosuppressive drug regimen.
5. A gradual introduction of boost drugs in the system has shown to increase survival, though possibly at the loss of potential power.
6. Even low levels of boost drugs leads to miscarriage among female rats, even if no boosted changes are observed in the mothers. This has not officially been tested in humans, for understandable reasons.
7. So far, there has been no reliable evidence of a successful pregnancy with a boosted individual involved. This correlates with animal testing.
8. While certain genetic lines have shown a slightly greater chance of surviving the boosting process in laboratory animals, there is not enough studies to ascertain if the same goes for humans.
9. The nature of the boost remains unpredictable. While some speculate that physical surroundings or the psychological state can influence the resulting boost, any evidence is circumstantial at best.
10. While the original diet drug only provoked a reaction in a fraction of a percentage of the subjects, further refinement have increased this chance to nearly one hundred percent at recommended dosage levels. This level can vary from person to person, but there is no clear connection between dosage, success and the power of the boost. As far as we know, if the level of drugs needed to flip the boost drug are there, the change starts. The best analogue would be an on/off switch.

As you see, the unpredictable nature of the boost reaction makes it hard to draw firm conclusions, and while animal research has proven useful, the results are not always transferable to human subjects. In order to rectify this, I propose we take a step back and focus on base research rather than the utilitarian approach of Project Stars. Before we can have a reliable transformation of soldiers into super soldiers, we must understand more of how the changes work. As I can see some doubtful faces in the audience, let me assure you that Project Stripes needs nowhere near that kind of budget, it is very cost-effective. All that is needed is time. If we want to win the Future, we need to start working towards that now.

So, Project Stripes. What I am proposing is the largest-scale human testing experiment ever done on the continental United States. Efforts will of course be made to minimize casualties, but I would argue that what can be learned justifies the sacrifices made. I have here a map of several possible sites located within the newly established Free Economic Zone. The lack of regulation and government oversight means that we can operate beneath the radar, which we all have agreed is a necessity when it comes to this kind of research. The inhabitants of the site consists mostly of settled criminals and refugees, the usual kind of rabble which has been drawn to the west coast. While more research is needed if we agree to pursue this, let me describe a typical site, and what the project will entail.

Site 3 lies on the northern edge of the old Los Angeles ruins, near what was once San Fernando. It is currently a small settlement consisting mostly of re-immigrants, but with a modest investment it is believed that this can become a stable community thanks to its groundwater supply. If an enterprising company locates a facility nearby and offers a steady source of blue-collar work it is believed that most of the inhabitants will stay put, and thus make the study more reliable. Money for this could be siphoned off the rebuilding funds allocated if needed. There is already a local council established on the site, which will make things easier. As work is already proceeding to refurbish the old water-treatment plant, our work is halfway done.

The project will demand two things. The first one is to place staff at the water-treatment plan and modify it so that a minuscule amount of boost drugs can be added to the water supply. This level will be far below what is needed to produce a change in an individual, but high enough to possibly affect a developing fetus. The second half is to establish a local health care provider which can keep track of how this affects the populace. While the intake of water can vary between individuals, this will still enable us to run several studies in order to ascertain necessary parameters for further research.

1. Will microdosing boost drugs during pregnancy lead to the birth of naturally boosted children? If so, is there a level of microdosing boost drugs where the amount of miscarriages and fetal deformations can be seen as acceptable compared to the chance of giving birth to a boosted child?
2. How will this affect the cancer rate in the community compared to surrounding areas?
3. Will there be spontaneous emergence of boosted individuals? If so, how will their power compare to other boosts? At what age will these changes begin to show?

4. Will people born in these communities have a higher survival rate when subjected to a full boost dose later in life? See also "Inoculation Theory."
5. Will this affect the fertility of children born and growing up in the community? What about the number of pregnancies and children born to people moving into it?
6. Is there a difference when it comes to genetic heritage or race?

As you can see, Project Stripes could be the answer to many of the questions we have. These issues must be resolved if we are to move forward, and I can assure you that similar research is most likely already going on elsewhere. You've all heard the rumors about the Chinese, but I doubt they are the only ones. Thereby I propose that, pending your agreement, we begin work on Project Stripes as soon as possible. We cannot allow ourselves to be left behind in this human arms-race, regardless of lingering ethical concerns.

[August's questions answered!](#)

[Sep 14, 2024](#)

Not spending much time on social media lately due to brain issues, but here are questions answered! Hopefully the Lore post will come tomorrow, and then I'm back on working on the demo. Only one final big scene left before I need to tie everything together and make the character creator.

So IRL the Russians invented bionics to compete with early cybernetics research in the late 60s but eventually gave up on the field of study altogether in the late 80s when cybernetics R&D made so many breakthroughs it was clear they could never reasonably compete with bionics. In a lot of ways bionics were far better than even current day publicly available cybernetics or prosthetics. Some current prosthetics are actually based on bionics research. Did bionics ever become popular or keep developing in the Fallen Hero world? Look into some of the old bionics research projects it's incredibly interesting might even give you some good ideas.

Honestly, in the FH world I think the concept of "mods" includes both cybernetics and bionics. At the core you modify the human body in some way, this can be done with metals and wires, electronic systems, with vat-grown biological tissue, or with combinations of all of the above. It can be done to enhance the body, but it can also expand and change it into new configurations, and add functionalities that was never there before. These can be inspired by nature, or coming from people's imagination.

Did Argent ever have doubts about whether her stealing the nanovores was due to her own connection to them or outside forces?

No, she was sure it was an outside influence (the alternative was too terrible to even consider).

In the code Dr. Mortum uses `$(mhe)` etc., M for Mortum, which makes sense, but Charge/Ortega uses `$(he)` instead of `$(che)` which Sidestep and Themmy use instead, why is that?

Ortega used the most amount of variable pronouns in Rebirth, so I wanted them to have the base one since that makes writing easier. Both Themmy and Sidestep has their pronouns used very rarely (and it is the same), so I decided on `$(che)`. The C stands for Character, since Sidestep is the main character. I never considered until now that might be seen as standing for Charge...

There's code in rebirth for a variable called `puppetargent_friendship` which was never used and it doesn't appear at all in Retribution; was Argent supposed to have met the puppet in Rebirth before you changed your mind on this?

Yeah. Originally I had planned to have puppet/argent interactions to build for a thing that happened near the end in the original book, but as I wrote I realized there was no natural way for this to happen in the story without adding an entirely new branch, and at the time I was already wanting to finish the (as I thought at the time) massive project. I forgot to remove the variable afterwards, there are a few other orphan variables in there I think.

Is there an incredibly autistic super genius solving random mysteries in the Fallen Hero world?, like a slightly lazier L from death note because I think it'd be pretty funny if there was some random who could solve pretty much everyone's problems but is just to lazy or disinterested to bother.

Look, nobody will ever know. As you say, there might be some very intelligent super genius out there who is currently putting their mind to use by studying the migratory patterns of birds post-eruption, or the changing ant population in the cascade mountains. You will never know.

How does Arde feel about cuckoos? Do they feel cheated out of their unique experiences or something else?

Spoilers. We will explore that in game!

What's going thru Chen's head when a "villain?" Step admits to going to therapy? How come he gets more sus?

I would say that his line of reasoning would be something like "Things have to be REALLY bad if Sidestep of all people are going to therapy. Huh. I wonder what brought that on."

Does Spoon have a favorite spot to nap?

The couch.

How did Locus get access to the boost drug at only 13?

She and some older kinds stole the wrong (right) bag.

Danny seems to still be learning the extent of his powers. How often does he push the limits?

Not as often as he could, he tries to find other ways to solve things than through extravagant displays of power.

Step's second escape was a mess for the farm. How long did it take to get things back to normal/functioning?

Several months, though some might argue that it's not back to normal even now...

Could an empathetic step with a good relationship with HG play a softening role to their methods?

I can imagine that.

Has HG ever had a point in their career where they regret what they've done or think they've gone too far?

Most people have, yeah. HG has done things they have regretted after the fact.

Has Argent avoided her family for reasons other than the nanovores?

It is mostly the nanovores, but there is also some fear of revealing that they are related to a hero. That's always a risk.

Did Elena notice Step's secret crush back in the day? How about now if they're healing at the ranch?

I would say that Elena at least suspected strongly, even if she never knew for sure.

If there was a way to keep their abilities intact while removing their mods/healing their bodies would Ortega, Chen, Argent jump at the opportunity? If so what would be the limit of their willingness to take a hypothetical deal? Say if a known & proven miracle worker(for lack of a better term) was offering. I know I basically asked this question a long time ago so no hard feelings if it's ignored.

I mean their abilities wouldn't be intact if their mods were removed, or if Argent's body was healed. But for the sake of argument, Chen would take it immediately. He would be all too happy to just put in a new armor-interface port and have all his biological bits back. No hesitation. Argent would take it, she wants her body to be whole. Her technopathy would be intact, but it is doubtful she would risk using the nanovores even if she technically could on the outside of her skin. They would go into storage, even if she would feel bad for her friends. Ortega... oh boy, that is a pickle. That would depend on if they feel they had finished up their business or not. Most likely not.

I would love to be able to reveal to argent that step was the one who put them up for the women's university award. Will we be able to tell her this and get her reaction? I think it would be delightful to see how annoyed she gets with this.

I'm going to try to remember that, because that would be fun!

Also would like to know if HG would feel as though step is their long lost sibling and if so is there a possibility of becoming attached to them as if they are a sibling?

All signs point to yes.

Im at home with COVID (just sniffles and isolation not major) and was wondering how would the ROs treat a sick sidestep? Do they get pampered or is it a 'oof hmu if you need something?'

Well, we will certainly get to explore that with broken bones Sidesteps. I know Herald pampers, but some of the others I am more unsure of. It will be interesting for me to write out!

Does Ortega have any major regrets with their epilepsy? I can see them going crazy at a rave/clubbing.

Raves and flashing lights is a regret yeah. They loved that pre-accident, but not something they can enjoy after it. Also, the medication isn't always fun, though the dosage is adjusted to have a minimum of side effects by now, they are still there.

In Retribution, at Ortega's apartment, when Step is reflecting on how the Farm tried to convince them that their friends never really cared about them, there's a line "Was it an accident that they left that paper in the office, the front page showing everything you feared?" -- what was on the front page? (or is that headcanon/spoilers territory?)

I think I have vaguely detailed it in discussions earlier, not sure if it was on tumblr or on one of the discords. The details might vary depending on the Sidestep (especially romanced or not), but essentially it showed Ortega being out and having fun, moving on. Some comments to the press that mentioned Anathema

would have wanted them to move on in response to a question, but no mention at all of Sidestep. If Sidestep was romanced, they are in a new and happy relationship.

When Sidestep talks about the Farm raiding their mind until it was in worse shape than their body, what does the Farm use to do that? Do they have like, telepathic imaging tech? Or would they use another telepath to extract the information/memories they wanted?

It was done with the help of the Core, which is the machinery used to implant/extract memories from the AI chips of Re-Genes among other things. It is telepathic in nature.

Since DARPA have been testing thought imaging tech for over forty years in black sites IRL, I would really hope that the directive has invested in that same tech. Otherwise they'd basically be at the mercy of a cooperative telepath which I can't see as acceptable to any group of maniacs playing god on the same scale they are whether or not they see it as playing god.

Oh there is a lot of government testing going on, and things like telepathy, remote viewing, psychometry and mind control are at the top of that list. Incidentally, that's how drugs affecting telepathy like Thalomid and Numbers were developed, as well as dampeners. You can bet that the cutting edge technology has not trickled down to civilian use yet.

A lot of characters can make comments about an alcohol steps habits, coming in book 3 (depending on ending ofc) would any of them try to stage an intervention of sorts? Or if step is staying and healing with a Ranger/RO would any potentially try and cut them off?

Some of them would absolutely have a talk with Sidestep about it, most likely Herald or Steel.

Given that there will possibly be HB talks coming up, will Steps have a chance to define their feelings/relationship with Anathema pre HB?

Yeah, we will get more into that.

So I'm curious, is Argent actually a naive idealist like she occasionally comes off as or this that just more acting?

I would say it is more acting, but it is also an aspiration. She really want to be, because it would be so much easier to be a monster.

Could we get up to some truly unethical anarchy & chaos generation in the book 3 like say hitting large scale food production facilities, taking out water treatment or power plants? Don't forget changing out medicine for either placebos or other substances? I mean proper anarchy is remarkably unfortunate for most people & if the people of the nation are busy fighting for their survival than technically that only benefits a Sidestep dedicated to self preservation, as the government would by default be close to or already in shambles at best.

Hmmm. I am not sure if it will be in book three or four, but doing things like attacking food or water supplies to bring Los Diablos to its knees will certainly be possible and not necessarily tied just to the Anarchist path. I can see Boss Sidesteps finding that useful as well. The scale of "acts committed" will escalate as the story progresses, so you will get there eventually. Chaos and desperation can be important tools.

You mentioned that Psychopath and HG worked together at one point or at the very least agreed not to mess with each other, how did they both feel about that agreement?

Neither of them were too happy about it, they are different people and really don't go well together. Psychopath feels HG is weak, HG thinks Psychopath is a showy brute.

Given that HG's empire takes advantage of and preys on communities that need help the most... how does Jake feel about it, given he had no real choice but to resort to crime to provide for his family? Especially the families/people that suffer for it?

Jake does have the occasional qualms, but it is easier to overlook since it's not HIS community.

Is a blue Re-Gene's hair affected by the blue tint as well? Or does it look like normal hair?

Normal hair.

Does Jake's family know what exactly he does as a job nowadays? Being a hitman is rather different to being a drug runner. How do they feel about it? Do his nieces/nephews know? His siblings/parents?

They don't know more details than that he has a cushy job in the US that lets him send back a lot of money. They knew he was involved in illegal shit back home (and didn't approve) but this looks to be a lot more legitimate. His grandmother still suspects this is not entirely legal, but at least it pays well, and people with money are rarely affected by the laws.

Will it be up to player choice whether or not Sidestep killed people during their second escape from the Farm?

Yes.

Also, a bit of a delicate topic, but for Sidesteps that were sexually abused by the Farm, will they ever come face to face with their abuser(s)? In a manner where Sidestep has their autonomy still, just to be clear. Or will it just be a "in the past" thing that's more about the effects and repercussions.

I don't know. I really don't. It depends on how I feel when writing it. It is a scene that requires a lot to work. If I don't feel I can do it right, I won't do it. But that is book four.

Is Arde's plan something that only affects them or is others too?

Others too.

What was Armadillo's name before they escaped? And why did they chose their current name?

Not going into detail about their previous name, but they chose their current name after the animal. They felt a kinship. Also they are cute.

How many people can actually withhold HG threading?

There are certain conditions apart from telepathy that makes it harder, but won't go into that because of spoilers. Also, willpower helps.

If it's not too spoilerish, what was Sidestep life like in the farm? I have gotten a picture they were kept pretty isolated but at the same time they are familiar with re-gene language and are aware how 'lucky' they were, compared to some of their siblings.

I will probably do another, longer, lore post about it in the future. They were pretty isolated, sure, but they also did some socializing with other Re-Genes. They (and other cuckoos) were seen as teacher's pets. They looked differently, got to do weird individual training, and were treated like individuals, at least to the Re-Genes eyes. Sidestep picks up on things faster than most thanks to their telepathy, Re-Genes were often used as test subjects for Sidestep to train on. That's where they picked up an understanding of the language, that's not something cuckoos normally are a part of.

Who are the most protective RO's ranked in order?

Huh. You know what? I don't know, and I feel that would depend on the Sidestep. Apart from Ortega, who we all know would be at the top.

How many people has Argent killed? Have her nanovores killed someone that she absolutely did not want to kill?

I'm not sure exactly, but I would say a few dozen. Her nanovores did kill people she didn't want to kill at the start, that was deeply traumatizing and one reason why she managed to bring them under control.

What's the most embarrassing thing Ortega has done that Sidestep has witnessed? Were they able to bully Ortega about it afterwards or does Ortega have no shame?

Being tipsy and silly at a party, and accidentally messing up while showing off and basically ripping their pants or dress to the point where their entire ass was hanging out. Ortega has no shame about things like that, the things that gets to them are other things. Not being the occasional fool.

Was Argent correct that Sidestep was very lucky to have survived invading her mind, or is she underestimating the strength of Sidestep's mental powers?

She is underestimating them.

Would Chen and a lesbian Sidestep feel a special kinship once they've become friendly enough for Chen to come out to her?

Oh I can absolutely see that.

Since the rat king's brains were removed at birth, was some kind of growth induced so they'd reach full size and maturation, or are they all still infant rat brains?

You said the rat king had their brains harvested as newborns. Does this mean the brains are still the same size or have the brains matured and grown?

Well, not directly at birth, but before their eyes opened. And yes, they were growing normally up to adult size, then they stopped. No growth inducing, but their final housing and storage wasn't completed until after they reached "adulthood." Until then they were kept in more temporary tanks for experiments. There were more brains from the batch originally, these five are the only survivors. They don't remember the others.

What did Owl say to provoke a punch from Ortega?

Probably bad Mouthing Sidestep.

Are there any traditions or holidays in LD that are considered sacrosanct by both heroes and villains? For instance, even the worst villains don't cause trouble on, say, a memorial day for the Big One (is there a memorial day for that?)

There is absolutely a memorial day for the Big One! But I am not sure there is one where nobody makes trouble. Even though most wouldn't do anything on days like that, there's always the outlier who takes advantage of it.

Will we be able to choose our Step's past relationship to the Farm? Whether they were fully subordinate or always had intentions to run?

Yes, that is my intention. Especially the first time, it might have even been half accident for some Sidesteps.

Will we be able to be more evil and antagonistic in books 3 and 4?

I don't like the term evil, but definitely more antagonistic. The less things there are to hide, the less you need to pretend to be civil. But remember, I also need to keep a lot of characters alive to book four, and also able to interact.

For Chen and Ortega who are almost certain they know Sidestep is the villain, is the *almost* part intentional? They're both savvy and capable enough that if they really wanted to they could prove their suspicions. So why haven't they?

I would say that both of them ARE working on it in some scenarios. You just need proof. Especially if Sidestep is romancing someone else. In other scenarios they might actively NOT be looking into it. They might not want to know the truth, especially if in a relationship.

Do either of them suspect that the other has also figured it out?

Nope. They both think the other is more ignorant than they really are.

Does Psychopathor have a civilian life? Could he go out into society and no one would think he's anything special?

At this point, not really. He's very distinct physically, and while he certainly is not above dressing up in a suit and go to dinner, it's not like people wouldn't recognize him. The question is whether anybody would dare to do anything about it.

How big a deal is Psychopathor? Is he a top tier villain, the best in his niche, or just one of many modded criminals?

I would say that he is an A-list villain, but he has been slipping lately. Now he has a certain air of the has-been, still dangerous, but not as cool as he once was.

Did Psychopathor's natural psi abilities have any effect on being threaded?

Yes, they break faster than they should, which is annoying for HG. But Psychopathor doesn't know he was threaded.

Are people with natural psi abilities more likely to develop telepathy from boosting?

Yes. A lot. Or related mental powers.

Could they develop true telepathy from a TBR without being boosted first?

Hmmm. I would say technically yes, but it would have to be very specific circumstances.

If Sidestep possessed another telepath would they be able to intuitively use and understand their telepathy?

Depends on how close it is in style. It can be as simple as driving a tractor when you're used to a sports car, or as hard as trying to navigate a sub, or a mountainbike.

If Sidestep really tried could they learn to understand their nanovores as well as Argent, or is their mind too tech for Sidestep to be able to make sense of?

Too alien and techy. Sidestep only has on-off and directional buttons, while Argent has an entire keyboard.

Is Argent willing to pursue a real relationship with Sidestep because she knows they can actually protect herself from her if she loses control?

Yes, that is one part of it. If she didn't trust that, it wouldn't matter how much they liked them.

Was there a time after Argent got a lock on her nanovores symbiosis that she reveled in being a brand new, very powerful person. Is there any of that still left or has the novelty worn off?

Once she had gained enough control to make her new face and venture out of the sewers, she absolutely went on a total powertrip. She felt reborn, powerful, dangerous and hot. She still get those feelings when she's completely in sync with her nanovores and everything just flows. The best feeling.

Is Catfiend maxed out? Is his regeneration so powerful that he can't undergo TBR, be boosted, or be modded anymore?

Yeah, it has reached peak Fiend.

If there is still a person deep down inside Catfiend, could Sidestep find them?

Yes, if they would dare to go deep enough into that mind.

Can HG unthread himself? If they said "I won't leave this room until I finish my work" and then something urgently required their attention can they say something like "I can leave now" and undo it?

Yes, HG can always undo their own threads.

Has HG ever accidentally threaded themselves in such a way that was dangerous and/or disadvantageous to themselves and they just had to wait it out and hope nothing bad happened?

I think at the start there might have been misjudgements like "I'm not sleepy" and then being awake for three days straight working until they collapsed. But not these days.

Does HG consider their power weaker than their older brother's?

If you ask them, NO. If you read their mind, oh yes.

HG only cares about a few people, some Sidesteps only care about a few people, how much of a problem can it be if the only people they both care about is each other?

I mean... that depends on how bad they are for each other.

Jake is proud of his position in HG's organization and insecure about how he got there. Would he be angrier if Sidestep treated him like HG treated the puppet or if they treated him as HG's sidepiece?

Oh they would both be equally bad, but the latter one would also insult his manhood. So, probably the latter now that I think of it.

How much work does Nocturne do independently of HG, does she meet with people on her own or only with HG?

I would say that about 60% of her work is without HG. She's independent, and HG is slightly lazy.

Does Nocturne hate her power? There is no proactive use for it, it's mostly useless to her if everything is already going her way. Does it remind her of how passive and incapable she used to be?

I wouldn't say she hates it, but she certainly does think it is fairly useless. It is good defensively, which is nice, but she has been pondering trying a second boosting experience. Hollow Ground is absolutely against that, they're not sure she would survive a second time.

Did you expect fans to latch onto and be so interested in the HG trio even though they've only really had one appearance so far?

No. I did not. Not at all. I thought that would be a book three thing.

In rebirth step was really scared about the void cage breaching during the fight. Does that mean that even if neutered, the nanovores are capable of doing another (inorganic) Nanosurge?

I mean Sidestep is sitting inside a very inorganic, massively expensive armor that would most likely be the nanovores first dinner...

Are you planning to push out the b1 update before the demo or is it a case of "whichever one will be ready first"?

I want the demo first.

Sorry if this falls under "elaborate what-ifs" but I'm curious: if Ortega knew about the puppet body, and step was in it, would they still want to have sex? (If you're romancing them obv)

I mean it would be a bit skeevey but... Ortega is a bit of a bastard, and if they truly believed the body was just an empty husk there's no harm in it, right?

I imagine we'd get to bring Ortega a gift for their birthday. Will one of these gifts be a new mug? (To replace the broken one and come full circle.)

I plan to have some options, but a bug would certainly be poetic and affordable for broke Sidesteps.

Did the farm force sidestep to sleep with their targets? for information gathering or whatever else? Because the Ortega apartment dialogue makes it seem like step does have a sexual history they just don't consider it "real" because it wasn't with someone they cared about.

No. The tattoos were there. What Sidestep can be thinking about is having a sexual history in their puppet body. There it is up to headcanon whether they explored those parts or not.

Do we continue to train herald in b3? If we do, are we going to get dedicated scenes like b2 or is it more summarized flavor text of how he's doing?

You can, and there might be a small scenes. Especially for things like if Herald knows you are the villain, but you are still doing this. We'll see. Otherwise it will be more general text and references to offstage events.

Was the Regene Sidestep saved/killed/didn't meet apart of Ardie's batch/team?

Nope.

HYPOTHETICALLY the Castrofieynd's (the Kitty Cat as I call it) can heal and regenerate itself forever. But it seems that not the mind can, or not well. Could Sidestep rip out Kitty's mind or turn it to mush to kill it? Or take control of its body if you void the mind entirely like the puppet?

Ehehehe Sidestep absolutely could... with some help. The Catastrofieynd have an ace up its non-existent sleeve, even if Sidestep dares to engage with that toxic, corrosive mind.

Does Argent know that her powers come from Project Stripes?

No. And... well... okay. You know how sometimes things that are meant to be secret sort of slips out of containment, mostly by me not remembering what is secret or not. Project Stripes is one of those things. It was meant to be revealed in book three, there have been birthday questions about it, and I have answered some non-descriptive questions here, which has led to even more confusion for people who has not been around long enough to pick up the nuggets I can sometimes drop when I've had a beer or two too much. So, for everyone curious, this month's lore post will be all about Project Stripes.

I hope this never happens because I love the girls, but what would happen if one of the rat brains that makes up the Rat King dies? How would it affect the surviving girlies? What would happen to the effectiveness of the Rat King? Would a telepath on the lower power end notice?

At this point, they are so integrated with each other that I don't think they can survive a loss of one. Mentally, yes, physically? No. I suppose there might be the possibility to save the others through emergency surgery, but the result would be like suffering a major stroke.

Could Jake phase through Anathema?

Yes, no issues there.

Per the timeline:

1997: Mount Hood is one of the founding members of the Los Diablos Rangers, as is Sentinel.

1999: Mount Hood becomes Marshal Hood of the Rangers.

Who was the original Marshal? Or did they just take some time to officially declare one?

The first Marshal of the Los Diablos Rangers was not a boost, or a very powerful mod. Her name was Captain Katherine "Kat" Connors, and she was an active military officer in the US army. While well-trained in tactics and leadership, she only had minor mods, only rarely joining the team in the field preferring to rely on directing the action from afar. Her main role was to be a liaison with the US Government, most of the starting teams had a similar command structure. She died in action in 1999 during an attack on the Rangers' HQ, and there was a big discussion about the safety of essentially non-powered active members. Hood had been working as her field commander, and he was put into the Marshal position in her place. It was decided that it was too much of a risk to have normal humans be involved. Let the boosts sort things out. Few people remember these first human Marshals, they didn't have flashy codenames, and many fan-sites and history books leave them out, or only have entries about them as a precursor to the real thing. Many would claim that Marshal Hood was indeed the first Marshal, and say he was acting as one in anything but name.

What changes to her apartment would Argent make once she's healed?

Depends on how things works out, but she's always wanted big windows and a balcony or patio.

How small can Snowball make her explosions? Is she smart and accurate enough to make small, innocuous looking sabotages?

Hm. I would say it's less about smarts and more about the wonderful thrill of large booms. She can make smaller explosions, but I would say the minimum is about a hand-grenade or so.

Has Anish Kapoor, creator of the Chicago Bean and all around prick, attempted to sue Argent for stealing his style?

Going to clarify, do you think that the fictional version of Anish Kapoor who exists within the FHR-verse(because the Bean also exists) would sue Lady Argent for the similarities in her appearance relative to the aforementioned Bean?

You know what? This world's variant probably did. However, the Rangers have good lawyers, so that didn't go far. Normally I don't drag real world people, but I'll make an exception in his case.

Are nanovores specialized within the swarm? Like how ants have foragers, scouts, soldiers and queens? Or is any single nanovore capable of everything that any other nanovore is capable of?

They are all capable of evolving into any role as needed, but there are variants within the swarm, yes. I haven't detailed it, but I always saw it that, for example, when the nanovores swarm and breed, some of them change into the procreating versions, putting out tons of 'drones,' so the center of the swarm seethes and grows as the edges expands.

Can Ace's precognition be used to guarantee successful Boosts? Like they watch a patient, see the future, then give the go ahead to Boost or postpone for tomorrow?

I mean technically yes... but so far Ace's precognition has mostly been focused on themselves, not on others.

What would happen if Shroud tried to drain the Void?

On nom nom.

How many times has the Catfiend been TBR'd? Did its time in the void gun count as one prolonged TBR?

Oh I have no idea, at this point there's really no point in keeping count, it has reached the maximum extent on where its boost can go.

Did any of the mechanics who've helped repair the Catfiend's mechanical parts survive the encounter afterwards?

Yes, especially at the start. Lately accidents have happened...

Does the Catfiend prefer its hero drug in the powdered or liquid form?

Liquid! A quicker fix.

How does Argent dispose of acculumated dead nanovores? How does she hide the nature of the disposed garbage?

There's not a lot of it, well cared-for nanovores last a long time. Some inert ones gets repurposed as hair, but most gets filtered out by the pool cleaning systems. She makes sure those filters are destroyed regularly, the Rangers have access to facilities for destroying toxic and dangerous waste. She makes sure the log-in system and cameras never records her going there and dumping things.

Does Jake making himself more solid also affect his actual density? Would he sink faster in water when "solidified"?

Yes, it does, and yes, he would.

Did HG and all their siblings share the same mother?

Yes.

Without Nocturne in HG's corner, how much damage would Ortega have been able to do to their organization?

Probably more than they have done now, Nocturne is good at her job.

Who has more assets(people, tech, money) to call upon in a punch, the Farm or HG?

I am going to leave that unsaid.

So how are lost and broken teeth fixed in the Fallen Hero universe? Is there better tech/more options for repair and replacement than what exists currently in real life?

Yeah, they have the teeth-regrowing tech already (google it, it is approved and going to trial). Gold teeth are still used, but mostly for show, and teeth modifications (like small fangs or pointed teeth) are not unheard of. Some prefer fully artificial teeth due to durability and the ability for even weirder modifications.

Has any particularly adventurous nanovore escaped Argent's apartment yet?

No. She keeps tight control over them.

Does the Catastrofiend feel pain?

Yes. And it has mixed feelings about that.

You mentioned in the last QnA that tallstep putting things on the top shelf would only annoy Argent, but wouldn't she be able to tentacle arm and just grab it that way without much issue? She's used that move in front of camera crews so it's not exactly a secret anymore that she can do that.

Argent doesn't like doing things which breaks her "ideal body" integrity. She does in a fight, sure, but a lot of that is instinct and adrenaline. It takes a lot of effort to keep her form constant and perfect, she can't just go and change things up willy-nilly. The pattern in her mind needs to be strong enough that she can exert as little effort as possible over the nanovores, the more she adjusts and change the body, the harder that becomes. If she was stretching on a regular basis, she would have a harder time being herself. So she would most likely clamber onto the counter like a disgruntled raccoon.

Can telepaths merge their brain vibes to strengthen their overall output?

Some can, others can't. It's all about trust.

Has there been any attempts to make a targeted anti-Boost agent? Like a pathogen or chemical weapon that only effects Boosts?

Of course it has! There's always human-first supremacists, and some boosts are dangerous enough that the army has been deeply invested in trying to find something. In a way, boosts level the violence playing field where only nations and the rich had been playing in so far. So, they are dangerous to the status quo. So far, nothing has been successful. The changes the drug makes on the body is far too variable to have a common cause.

Are Dr Mortum's Halloween parties invite only, or if you make a big enough name for yourself in the villain world you can attend? Is there anyone we know on the Do Not Invite list?

Have any of Dr Mortum's Halloween parties been disrupted by meddling heroes?

Invite only! But Mortum invites a lot of people. The Catastrofiend is on the DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, list. I don't think any parties have been attacked, but there have been the occasional hero infiltrating by posing as a villain. Mortum doesn't mind as long as they don't make a mess and has a good time.

If a cuckoo got the power of superintelligence (like Sister Sage in The Boys season 4), how would the Farm react, given that while such a re-gene would be able to plan and plot in ways that would out-think a city's worth of people, they would also be far too smart to believe in any of the Farm's propaganda about them not being human?

That kind of Regene would not be made into a cuckoo. Indeed, they would most likely be integrated into the Farm proper, as part of the machinery, if normal control measures failed.

What does the Hollow Ground organization like, actually do? What are their principle rackets? Drugs? Guns? Sex? Most of that isn't even illegal in the FEZ, so I'm not quite sure what there is for a criminal syndicate to do in Los Diablos beyond robbing banks and picking fights with heroes for fun.

Ah, yes, you are right! Crime is a little bit different in Los Diablos. But one important thing to remember is that the council that runs Los Diablos is interested in lax regulation for THEIR sake, not for that of the citizens. Thus, anything that threatens the orderly progression of capitalist dystopia is illegal as hell. This is just like saying "oh there is no taxes on the west coast!" but in reality, the number of fees and insurances needed fills a similar role if you want to be part of civilized society.

Some examples: Lighter drugs like marijuana, nicotine, alcohol and the like are legal and easy to buy. Others, like amphetamine and cocaine are legal if bought from a licensed dispenser, but those prices are high enough that only people with money can imbibe without issue, others settle for cheaper street-side substitutes. More destructive drugs, like heroin, crack and the like are illegal since they destroy the obedient workforce. In In Los Diablos, this includes the boost drug, the companies want control over that. You can sign up to be a test subject, though. Sex work is legal, guns can be easily obtained, BUT the kind of guns that can take down boosts or heavy mods are not. Military weaponry, armor, and more exotic tech is all illegal and highly lucrative. See the auction for example. In short, if you are wondering if something would be illegal, try to imagine if it would threaten or harm a powerful company's bottom line. If it would, then it is most likely illegal. If not? Probably not, unless someone on the council has a deep personal issue with it. For example, being a member of a union is illegal, but you can pick up a bag of amphetamines at the dispensary to be able to manage long working days.

As for where HG's focus is, I would say that at the moment it lies within the spheres of weapons smuggling, illegal tech, industrial espionage, and boost-related products. Also tons of money laundering, extortion, embezzlement and other white-collar crimes. The big money comes from playing cat-and also cat with the companies. That's not to say there's not also some drug dealing, and things like underground boost fighting rings and the like.

Other things about the law: There are traffic rules, but things like driving under the influence only matters if you crash/cause a disturbance. Then the penalties are much higher. No law needing seatbelts or helmet. No environmental protections. Quite heavy media censorship and privacy laws to protect the wealthy and famous. Murder is seen differently if the victim is an upstanding citizen or an undesirable. Police and licensed heroes have the power to kill and destroy a lot before it becomes an issue. Handle it nicely and nobody will care. Technically the Rangers are only subject to US law, and can't be touched by local Los Diablos laws. That also means they should follow US law, but in practice nobody checks or cares unless they want to get rid of a Ranger.

We've been told about the minds of dogs, and a few zoo animals, but how does Sidestep perceive the minds of cats?

Mutual quiet respect, occasional mirroring. Cats' minds are quiet and pleasant to be around, but they can sneak up on you.

On a similar note, would cats make reliable telepathic security cameras given their propensity to loaf and watch the goings on around them for hours on end?

That is now the cutest image in my head, so I would say yes.

If The Void or Heartbreak trauma boosts never happened but they still managed to meet would Sidestep's presence still have the same effect on Lady Argent's nanovores as they do now?

Yes.

Can Ortega be swayed to the villain's side without knowing that they're sidestep? If the MC wants to convince Ortega purely through their arguments and not through their bond.

Yes.

Would Nocturne's power work on Argent?

Hmmmm. I will say that is spoilers since it might be important in the story.

Does plating or other material padding interfere with Argent's technopathy?

No.

Due to volcanic ash over the FEZ, does this complicate agriculture? Do they have to import from the US?

The central valley is nearly back to normal, but it took a lot of time and work. The winds were favorable at the time, mostly blowing the ashes east. But starvation was rife in the nineties, and food is still somewhat of an issue now that the population is beginning to rise. Importing food from the US is very hard, they have even more of an issue with this due to larger population and the devastation of the midwest. The FEZ imports mostly from Canada and Mexico, the biggest food import by far is grains, mainly maize, wheat and soy-beans. The biggest change to the standard US diet would be that red meat is expensive and rare now, most things that would have been beef is now chicken, pork, or vegetable meat-replacements. Both chickens and pigs can be raised in a factory-farm setting and are not as reliant on grazing lands. Fish is generally ground to protein pellets to feed the chickens and the pigs, there is still a superstition about eating fish due to the many dead washed into the sea after the Big One. Not that there is fishing going on near Los Diablos, but there is elsewhere along the western shores.

Does the US participate in the Olympics, what about the FEZ? Did Los Diablos win the bid for the 2028 Olympics just like LA did?

There are no Olympics in this world!

Would a romanced Argent ever confess to Sidestep about her dislike for her birthday and maybe even its real date?

Possibly, this is another thing they share.

Now that she's made a name for herself, if Argent saw a woman who she thought was beautiful, with some features that she thinks are better than her own, would she be inclined to adjust her appearance?

No. She doesn't dare. This is her "ideal form," she needs to keep it in order not to confuse the nanovores, or risk the equilibrium.

How does Sidestep handle the minds of children? Kids are weird, their brains are still developing, and Sidestep believe themselves to have never truly been a child. Is the mind of kiddos something alien? Overwhelming? Is there a greater risk of their telepathy damaging a child's mind?

Yes, Sidestep avoids children if at all possible, apart from the more general things like the "don't notice me" field. They are mutable, unpredictable, and not yet socialized enough to be easy to understand. Also, they make Sidestep feel weird.

If they were to play a D&D campaign, which classes/races would each of the ROs be drawn to playing?

Doing a reprise of an earlier answer: Ortega would play evocation wizard, but forget to max out their con so would be very brittle and swear a lot. Argent would be the bard that seduces everything, because this is just make-believe so of course she can. Daniel would play warlock, maybe with a faerie patron. Would be fun to play around. Chen would play a battlemaster fighter because all of the others are brittle as fuck and someone needs to pick up the slack. He would grow bored early on, and multiclass with rogue to get some versatility. If Dr. Mortum was the DM, then nobody would ever figure out the plots, and the good doctor would soon realize that whatever was planned would devolve into craziness.

Do you think there's any boosts that would make the rangers villainous? We know telepathy wouldn't be good for Ortega's mental health, but what about the other rangers?

I don't think so on top of my head, but anything that requires hurting other people to live (Like Shroud's boost) would be very much in danger of a slippery slope.

How common would you say is it for non-Regene Farm personnel to be Boosted?

Very rare.

Do the Environmental Modification Convention & Geneva/Hague Conventions exist in FH & if so has the presence of boosts, mods, & power armor changed it significantly? Also do heroes like Blaze/Hood/Sentinel ever cause outrage just by virtue of their powers or "if it's illegal to use in war why is it perfectly fine for law enforcement?" questions similar to the use of tear gas?

No, neither of these exist in the FH world. The thing that keeps things in check here is the balance of power between the various blocks, not any international treaties.

Back in their villain days, what was Dr. Mortum's reputation in the villain community? Did they always try to thread the needle of "well-connected but uncontroversial", or did that only come later?

They didn't have that much of a reputation. Mortum was always more focused on the goals than the rep, and I think most would have seen them as Vitruvian's junior partner.

Has Sidestep run into anyone else with epilepsy? A quick Google search shows that 1 in 26 people develop epilepsy in their lifetime. With that in mind, it seems likely they've run into other people with naturally static minds. In those cases, does Sidestep's 'don't notice me' trick even work?

Oh yes, Sidestep has run into quite a few. Most of the time they never really notice unless they try to read that specific mind. The "don't notice me" trick is still useful anyway because people are pack animals. If all your friends don't pay attention to someone, chances are you won't either. If you are the only one to point and stare you start feeling silly pretty quickly.

And as an aside, major props to this concept as a whole! I love the idea of epilepsy being a natural counter to psychics.

Thank you!

How does Sidestep, or any telepath for that matter, know with full confidence that their thoughts and feelings are their own when they socialize? We've seen the dangers of mob mentality for Sidestep but what about one on one, regular interaction? I'm curious if a telepath can be unintentionally (or possibly intentionally) manipulated by the thoughts and feelings of those they regularly hang out with. We see how impressionable regular people are. Is that more extreme for telepaths?

The honest, and frightening, answer is that they don't. This is why Sidestep often avoids crowds and keeps their shields up as tightly as they can. It is more extreme for a telepath, and some telepaths move into seclusion in order to get away from things. A weak-willed telepath is even at risk of being puppeted by their surroundings.

And if that IS the case, how do non Ortega romances deal with that? I can't imagine any of the romances liking the possibility that their thoughts and feelings have the potential to influence their telepathic partner in such a direct way.

Oh they wouldn't. I think the romance that will deal with that the most is Heralds. Argent keeps herself so very tightly in check due to her nanovores that she barely makes a psychic ripple, while Chen is very deliberate and careful in his own emotions in a way that wouldn't affect much. Herald on the other hand is open, and in fact, almost actively willing Sidestep to see themselves and the world in a better light. Sidestep's will and shields are strong enough to keep that out, but it can be an effort for some, and Herald would be horrified to learn that fact.

Argent was an alien in the original book, right? Any fun facts or interesting tidbits you can share about that version of her?

Honestly I never got into her backstory in that book, and I have forgotten any ideas I had.

I have to ask. Is Sticky Sticky Bang Bang a reference/nod to a similarly nicknamed (Sparky Sparky Boom Man) character of Avatar the last airbender?

Nope, the old Chitty Chitty Bang Bang movie.

Have Anathema or Argent ever used or would be open to using the fastball special? It's a combination move where a strong & usually bigger character uses a close range oriented & usually durable character as a javelin, the iconic combo being Colossus & Wolverine. Could Ortega also do it or are they too squishy & would they feel left out if so?

Anathema was usually the projectile of choice for Sentinel, they had some very good teamwork going there. I don't think Argent has ever been a part of that, and she might be a bit insulted at the thought. As if it was a dig at her being tiny. You might think that Ortega would have been very into that kind of thing, especially with Sentinel, but nope. Too many memories of their first accident. They like to remain in control, and in the air, they are not. Ortega doesn't even like going flying with Herald, though they will never admit it.

If Ortega returns to the hospital to find sidestep missing, do they assume the special directive has kidnapped them?

That is at least one dark thought at the back of their head.

In the past someone asked if Hollow Ground could use their powers to improve someone's chances at survival; could they use their powers to make someone die faster?

Yes.

What does Arde think of Sidestep in the demo where they help save them?

Not telling you that, that's spoilers.

When he gets sick, can Blaze raise his internal temperature to speed up the recovery process by killing viruses/bacteria? Or does it not help much?

You know what? That probably helps a lot! Thank you, I hadn't thought about that.

Would Arde accept bonuses from a rich Sidestep after saving them?

Why, though? They already have all they need.

Does Arde like physical affection, or do they prefer not to be touched much? Have they made any friends beyond Vera?

Physical affection is for family. There are some acquaintances apart from Vera, but they don't get out much.

What sorts of presents/gifts would Arde accept and like?

Food!

Wait, does Snowball have the same Boost as Cavalier? Limited enhanced durability, improved longevity and telekinetic explosions? hates the government

That sure does sound strangely similar yeah.

What kind of explosions do Snowball and Cavalier make? Like combustion? Or just an invisible force splitting things apart?

I see it as not tied to oxygen or fire. Just a sudden splitting apart of molecular bonds leading to an explosion. Haven't gotten into details in my head more than things go boom.

This is going to be grim and the answer is most likely going to be spoilers on all fronts. Was there anyone in the military who proposed to add a remote switch to Ortega's Reactor that would make it explode? Was that proposal accepted? Could Argent detect and disable that switch?

I don't think that was suggested, the goal was to make it NOT explode as thoroughly as possibly.

Does the Eternal Monarch of the UK still have their corgi collection?

Yes.

If so, do the corgis share in that eternity, or are they as temporary as any other corgi?

The corgis have normal lifespans.

How strong was Sidestep's telepathy at the time relative to Heartbreak's on the day of the event?

I would say around 30% of Heartbreak's strength.

Did HG ever have the ghost situation Ortega had, where they thought they had spotted their sibling just passing by on occasion?

No.

How secure would the rangers + mortum + hollow ground's passwords be? lets say for non-critical access, personal use. Who does super complicated generated ones and who does password123?

The Rangers are mandated to use a governmental password generator (except Chen because he doesn't trust like that, and Ortega doesn't for his personal files). Dr. Mortum has complicated passwords based on obscure facts and puns, which can occasionally lead them into trouble. Hollow Ground tends to be stuff that's easy to remember but switches often, like SeasonMonthYear. This frustrates Nocturne so much.

Do Argent's nanovores, when they are about to reach the end of their life, go to her scalp like some kind of elephant graveyard deal, or do they die wherever they have been "stationed" as part of Argent and then it's up to the surrounding nanovores to carry them up to her scalp?

The first, most of them go there to settle in and become part of her hair. The ones that fail gets washed out in the pool.

Has Sidestep been muzzled before? How would the ros take learning that if yes?

Yes, and they'd all hate that.

Is Mortum boosted?

As can be learned from last month's lore post, yes they are.

Does Ben have an opinion on how Sidestep presents themselves? Such as high presentability vs kinning with a rat who got dipped in fryer grease.

Hmmm. I'm not sure I know Ben enough yet, though a rat dipped in fryer grease sadly does sound like his style...

Does Hollow Ground?

If you want to be a part of the family you could at least make an effort.

Would Ardie wear bad t-shirts with Sidestep? Properly adjusted to fit them, of course. Would Vera join?

I think Arde would be fascinated to learn about the cultural significance of bad t-shirts. Vera would laugh her ass off.

Does Spoon have a favorite toy?

The one in front of him!

Is Arde's genetic donor anyone important?

No.

If the regenerator hadn't been stolen by anyone or sold to anyone, would HG let a sibling-coded Sidestep have/make use of it?

Of course.

Actually come to think of it, besides Argent, Shroud and Sidestep, were there any other parties interested in buying or stealing the regenerator?

OH yes.

With all the mods available on the market, are there any to suppress / rewire neurological issues? Like correcting brain damage or dampening the effects of sensory processing disorders, etc?

Yeah, there are some, but it's always iffy with neural mods. They are not as easy and cheap as some others.

can the Core run Doom?

Maybe the Core IS Doom.

How rare is it in LD to come across someone like Argent with obviously non human features besides regular mods like a tail or wings or horns or something?

I would say about as rare as running into someone extremely tall. It does happen, and the chances increase if you hang around certain places like basketball courts, but it is rare enough that it will be remembered and noted.

Given Step's propensity for biting people, was asking Mortum to fit a mechanical jaw on Step's armor ever a consideration?

It compromises the integrity of the helmet, but I am sure some Sidesteps did suggest it.

Are the boosting clinics monitored by the SD or does the risk involved with kidnapping Canadian citizens outweigh the reward? And on a related note do prisoners of war disappear often

I think the risk of foreign citizens outweigh the reward. Prisoners of war are always at the risk of disappearing.

If Sidestep had failed to recover the Rat King, were there any backups planned for the nanovores cage?

Yeah, Sidestep can technically handle it themselves, but it would require a lot more active concentration and consideration of the risk.

Are assets like Chen's robot suit still housed under the 5 traditional branches of the US military(Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard) or has there been a new branch added for Enhanced warfare?

No, the enhanced are in all four branches.

Does Ortega own any picture of Sidestep (without mask)? Or would Sidestep have avoided having their picture, even a personal one, taken out of fear of the Special Directive? (assuming this doesn't depend on personal headcanon)

I will leave that to headcanon. Ortega has at least one picture, but whether that is full face or with the mask half on is up to you.

If Argent was a telepath instead, would she survive the Nanosurge?

Impossible to say.

Can Argent mess with devices that are powered down, but attached to a working power source? If yes, what shenanigans has she pulled with this for shits and giggles

She can power them up and turn them on, yes. She doesn't use this for shits and giggles, that's how you get caught! (She has sabotaged the occasional printer when she's mad at Chen though, because that's just how printers are so it wouldn't be weird)

What is the most powerful boost that anyone has gotten? (If it's spoilers, what's the most powerful one that we're allowed to know about?)

Recycling an old answer: It's always up for debate, but there are three people generally considered the strongest boosts in the US (the placing varies depending on who does the ranking.)

One of them is, as you might have guessed, the Catastrofiend. Active villain. Still... alive? The one everyone likes to pit imaginary heroes against. Powerful, but limited. Usually seen as number 3, unless you've seen footage of it in action.

Another one is actually stationed in Washington, and works directly for the White House. Her codename is Skybright, and she's a powerful telekinetic. Flight. Shields. Tossing tanks like toy cars. The works. Her names come from the glittering halo effect when she uses her shields. Usually seen as nr 2, though people point out that she's never really got to cut loose.

The top one, Cavalier, is believed dead, but rumors of his return are common. He was a military boost, one of the early ones. He served a lot overseas, and unlike many boosts, were involved in actual combat. There has been footage released of him in action, and if it hasn't been doctored, it points to massive destructive potential. It is rumored that Cavalier was a double boost. One part is classic boost powers, very strong, very durable, and very, very fast. Not flight capable. The other part was explosive. It seemed that he had the ability to induce explosions in objects (or people) at moderate range. A famous video shows him blowing up a tank by gesturing at it. He returned home a war hero, but turned villain almost immediately. He is believed to have been killed as he tried to blow up the pentagon twenty years ago. He only partly succeeded, but his actions led to boosted registration and banning on the east coast and the midwest.

What would the Rangers think of precognition? Is someone with that ability worth recruiting in some capacity?

Oh that might be useful, though the Rangers central organization would love someone like that more. Too useful for a field agent.

What are gun laws like in Los Diablos? Does the average citizen adhere to them, if there are any? Curious because I can see some types of people arming themselves to the teeth in a world of boosts and mods while others would just be like, 'a gun is just going to make me a target to these weirdos.'

Normal guns and rifles are accessible and not licensed. You can conceal carry. Military equipment is outlawed, they don't want people to be better armed than the cops. However, it's not that hard to get hold of illegally.

Is Nocturne's skill at 'seeing people for who they truly are' spawn from her history of being severely bullied?

I think it at least ties strongly into it.

Can Sidestep's telepathy (permanently) boost someone's neural load capacity? What about HG's?

Not permanent, but it could help train it. HG's could, as long as the threads remain.

So Ortega thinks the whole villain thing is hot... who else among the ROs are of the same opinion? 🙄

Look, they are all freaks, we know this already.

What does over-threading feel like for HG?

A combination of hangover and a bad case of the flu. Whole body and head hurting.

Expanding on to this, do you have plans for a pupstuck step to be able to "defect"/enlist the aid of the Rangers in wrangling their original body (and maybe engaging in some heroics of their own)?

Not telling.

Outside of Hollow Ground's inner circle, who does Nocturne see/interact with most?

Her personal shopper.

if ortega had managed to get into the same room as HG (post-Heartbreak) and started talking about their sibling who had been Sidestep, would HG actually have believed it? Or would they have assumed it was some ortega bullshit?

The latter.

If Ortega got boosted and got something like regeneration, would they be able to retire/quit since they wouldn't need their mods to walk anymore, or would they continue to still work as a Ranger?

Ortega does like the danger, and it sounds like regeneration might mean they'd be able to get into even more danger.

Has HG ever accidentally killed anyone before realising that they need to pace themselves with their threading?

No.

Have the Rangers ever done one of those sexy pose calendars for charity?

Oh yes, of course.

Would other telepaths like Locus and Thunderhead, who would have had a defined before and after date at which they developed powers, be interested in Step's worldview in relation to telepathy since Step had it from the tank onwards?

I think many telepaths are interested in other perspectives. Locus definitely would be.

Would the Argent or Herald have any questions for someone who lived their whole life with powers?

I can't think of any right now.

In universe, who among Chen, Ortega and Sidestep had the account of HB that most closely aligned with "reality"?

Ortega. Though it depends on the definition of reality.

Can Sidestep just... chill for a minute in that place between mind jumps? Have they tried exploring it? Does the amount of people or objects between them and the person they are trying to possess influence anything?

They haven't so far. And other objects between then doesn't matter.

how aware is Chen of his own 'i can fix them' brainworms?

Sadly he is. Not enough to stop.

Is HG's sibling's name something that will be settable in game or preset based on other factors?

Set in name, just like HG's name. This is to account for variable ethnicities.

Is Project Stripes and the thing Step is preparing for related in any way?

Tangentially.

Would Chen think Merle is cute 🐶🐶

I mean... yeah.

And vice versa does Merle think the Marshal is kinda cute?

I think Mortum has so far only seen the Marshal on the job. So, not cute.

How does Mortum interact with dogs? Would they get along with Spoon, and love him very much?

Hmmm. I honestly don't know. Mortum and pets have not come up in my brain yet, I need to wait until I write it and see.

IRT mods and gender affirming treatments: What kind of options are available in FHR that aren't (yet 🙌) in the real world? Are top and bottom surgeries done differently in any way, or are they mostly still the work of plastic surgeons? Any newfangled fancy ways of getting hormones?

Hormones would be pretty similar to our world, but I do think the most common way if you have the money would be an implant that releases a constant dose (refill once every few months), so you don't have to keep up with cremes and shots (which are cheaper and available over the counter). As for surgery, they are similar, but with more reliable results, faster healing, and less scarring. The biggest difference would be for male bottom surgery, where there are several methods to achieve realistic looks and full erection capacity, all depending on how much money you have to spend and whether you wish to go the mod-route or the transplant route. As erectile dysfunction was always something men of wealth were prepared to pay for to fix, you can bet that those methods were quickly co-opted into gender affirming surgery.

You said the US has plans to disavow the Farm in the worst case, does the Farm have plans for its staff to go to ground, or defect to other countries?

Spoilers, but so far the Farm acts like the US wouldn't dare to do that. For reasons.

How far into the future was Ace seeing when they were dying?

Either book three or book four.

Did HG ever try or consider trying to thread Sidestep like they did to Chen to throw Ortega even further off?

Sidestep sure was a fan of wearing as much clothes as they possibly can, maximum skin coverage and not showing their face made that a moot point. HG never even saw their face.

if HG found out that a threaded Sidestep was dating Ortega or Chen would they decide for Step that such a relationship is too risky and use the threading to try to force them to break it off with the ranger?

Spoilers.

Does HG also pick up information from their target when they thread? Or is their version of telepathy only capable of "sending" information?

Only sending.

During the most recent snippet (shopping therapy) the puppet in Sidestep's body robs a pharmacy. Are they looking for anything specific?

Spoilers.

Do the ROs have any (non-work-related— No HG for Ortega and no villainy tech for Mortum!) pet research or special interest-adjacent subjects that they spend a lot of time getting into or keeping up with?

I honestly have no idea! If it comes up in game it will come up in game, otherwise this is headcanon.

Will Sidestep have a choice to be repentkill at some point in book 3?

Yes.

I can't remember if this was answered before, but in a Retribution auction scene where Sidestep pulls Argent into their mind, if they are not able to maintain their form very well in there and Argent gains clue, what is she actually seeing that makes her suspicious?

Ehehehe spoilers.

Was Hollow Ground a character in the original novel?

OH yes. The main non-hero antagonist.

Is the farm aware of mortums boost?

No.

What would Vitruvian have thought of Mortum's Boost, if he had been able to learn what it was? Would he be disappointed, or happy with any result beyond failure?

Both.

What was Vitruvian's power?

Super intelligence and some perception boosts.

What were Void and Green Sky's feelings towards Regenes (or what WOULD they had been if they hadn't known of their existence)? Would they have any strong feelings on Step being one?

Hmm. Honestly I am not sure.

Who among the cast is very flexible? Are any of them on contortionist or advanced levels of flexibility? 🙄

No literally contortionist level of flexibility, but the most flexible one is Vera. She's pretty close to that. Both Argent and Ortega are also very flexible, but Ortega less so than when they were younger (more muscle mass now).

Since Anathema's invulnerability boost protected them from damage did it protect them from physical pain? Do they still feel impact? Thinking about the scene in Rebirth where Anathema can take the gun from the cop but they still get shot in the face. They flinch but was that from discomfort or the sound?

They still feel some manner of pain, a gunshot would be like having a stone thrown hard at you.

How common are boosts with meta powers? As in, boosts whose powers are to do with other powers, like supressing the powers of others, boosting the powers of others, innately knowing what powers every other boost nearby has, that kind of thing?

Extremely rare.

Does Argent ever wear natural fibers? Do they make her nanovores act up?

She does, it is a good way to keep discipline up.

Does Spoon like to eat fruits and vegetables? If so, what are his preferences?

On occasion, his favorites are watermelon on hot days, and apples that Chen throws that he can chase (decored of course).

Since the nanovores are her eyes what's Argents view of the world like? Step could see wiring through walls when they possessed her & she can see a temperature change on Ortegas face & recognize it as blushing, is this something she can turn off or does she just not have normal vision?

She doesn't have normal vision, or eyes. However she has worked very hard on trying to approximate it.

If you just had to put out a number what would you say is the average Ruthlessness within the hero, villain, & vigilante community in LD respectively? Alternatively what's the general vibe on a scale of (Extremely/Very/Fairly/Slightly + Ruthless/Empathetic/Neutral)

Impossible to say, and I prefer to only present Sidestep's view in game on this.

Was Nehal ever a fan of Sidestep growing up?

Who? No, she didn't really pay attention to them.

Could Psychopathor sense the rat king in our armor since he was psi-sensitive enough to use them in the first place?

Oh yes.

How did Angie pick up on everyone's crushes on Sidestep? Does Herald pick up on it as well but just choose to be quiet? Do they think it's funny how obvious Sidestep could/can/is be to it?

Herald picks up on it as well (with the exception of Chen mostly), and they both think it is funny/sad that Sidestep does not.

How would Chen take it if Sidestep just points out how bad his "i can fix him" complex is? He, Ortega and Herald should start a construction crew for Sidestep at this point.

He would just sigh "I know."

If Chen had a crush on Sidestep as, well, Sidestep, did he realize before HB? What if it was after? Was the initial reaction to blame Sidestep in their telepathy screwing with him?

I'll leave some to headcanon, but in general Chen didn't get interested in Sidestep before Rebirth. If you want there to have been a vibe before, I won't contradict you though.

Does Ortega suspect Sidestep is dissociating a lot (from the dock scene talking about the nanosurge?) Did they notice if they dissociated pre-hb? Did Themmy or Steel?

Ortega noticed. Steel did not. Themmy was probably dissociating with them.

IIRC Sidestep mentions chapped lips after kissing her so is Argent worried that getting close to Sidestep will make the nanovores less scared of them & go back to acting normally?

Yeah, she is.

Would Ardie like it if Sidestep called/thought of them as a sibling? Would they let Sidestep sleepover with them if they have a good relationship?

If they get to that point, yes.

What does Ardie think of Sidestep's ROs? Any option they would like best? Who would they get along with the best?

I have no idea yet, I need to write them interact first. Except Vera of course, who is the best.

Is information gathered through boosts like retrocognition admissible in court?

Psychometry and similar can be used to FIND evidence, but it would be considered heresy to just say that something happened.

Since the ocean is apparently crazy now, is seafood some sort of hot commodity? Are reality shows like the Deadliest Catch a lot more intense now with crab fishers fending off laser dolphins?

The ocean around Los Diablos is, but there's still a thriving fishing industry elsewhere. But as I said about food above, many have a suspicious relationship to seafood after the number of dead ending up in the ocean after the Big One.

How did Sidestep just grab the nanovores even while possessing Argent? Unless they somehow accessed her technopathy abilities without realizing, I'm really surprised Argent alone can just grab the nanovore case and walk out with them. You'd think a weapon that could theoretically cause an extinction event would be under the kind of security that requires multiple key holders to access. Especially considering Ranger's HQ is in the middle of a metropolitan area with a bunch of villains and mad scientists.

Sidestep accessed her technopathy powers without realizing it, the way they experienced it was that Argent had access and knew it. They didn't delve too deeply into HOW she had access, and wrongly assumed that all the Rangers did. It was indeed VERY securely held, together with several other dangerous items.

What are Ben and Vera's biggest personal flaws? Do they think of them as flaws/acknowledge that they have them?

I don't know yet!

are all the noticeable physical differences between Regenes and your average human — like extremely tall ones or those with extra limbs — a result of mods or boosts? Or has the Farm actually gotten far enough with the biotech involved to have added to/ otherwise altered the genetic code to where this stuff is congenital? Any noteworthy or interesting variants we haven't heard about yet?

It's all mods or boosts. The Farm can genetically code things like tails, or webbing between fingers, but there's really no advantage to doing so.

What buys the loyalty of the mob boss crew? Money? Respect? Blood?

Depends.

What's Vera thoughts on cats since ya know bird?

Cats are cool. Just dangerous.

If Ben and Vera are romancable for all MCs, how long have they been aware of their bisexuality and come to terms with it?

I think for Ben it came after he had left the army. It was too complicated during those years, easier to go with the flow rather than deal with the fact that some guys in his unit were hot. Vera has known since her teens.

And for my own personal amusement: would any of the ROs take a somewhat well put together MC or a particularly pathetic wet cat of an MC?

That is up to your particular headcanon.

When Ortega first saw Steps face and assumed their relation to HG did that hurt their relationship at all? Did Ortega ever think Step was a spy or did they always assume they broke all ties with HG?

Oh Ortega got mad suspicious at first. But Sidestep had been so utterly against integrating themselves in the team at the start, and fought Ortega tooth and nail to try to stay away that the suspicion faded almost instantly. Nothing in their behavior made sense as a spy.

If not for their accident would Ortega ever have considered getting modded for any reason?

Probably minor ones, yeah.

Over the course of the rest of the story, do you think there's potential for missions, story arcs, or trips outside the FEZ? Outside the US?

Not in the scope of the planned games. Or. Well. There are some planned in book four, but not outside the FEZ.

Will Sidestep have an option to train their crew against telepathy?

Don't think so, that would make them less useful.

Do you think evil Sidesteps or good Sidesteps are more interesting?

Both evil and good (I hate those definitions) Sidesteps can be interesting trainwrecks.

Does telekinesis fall under psi-sensitivity? Particularly re: Mortum's?

No.

And, was the regimen they offered the puppet about improving the puppet's precognition abilities after the Ace revelations derived from trying to figure out their own powers?

Their own, and others. This is an issue many new boosts have.

During steelsnap, is Steel more worried about high strength or high subtlety?

Not saying.

In the good day, bad day snippet a wall falls on Argent without issue. Is it at all possible to hurt her with blunt kinetic impact while she is static? Or is the only way to mess up her insides to suddenly decelerate her from speed?

Argent's outer shell, if we call it that, is very good at protecting her from impact as long as she can brace herself. But yes, sudden deceleration can hurt her soft insides, which ironically means that if she, for example, is falling from a height, it would be in her interest to become a narrow point and try to penetrate things like rooftops and the like for a more gradual slowing down. The nanovores have penetrated deeper into her form as well, so they can help brace things somewhat, just not as efficient as the shell.

In the opening of the art gallery scene the puppet can get a weird feeling while getting ready in the bathroom, the type of weird feeling that usually precedes a vision or something bad happening, but the actual stakes during this whole scene are pretty low for Sidestep. Since nothing bad happens what triggered this feeling for the puppet? Was something supposed to happen and didn't?

The weird feeling is that Herald is there. But the threat didn't resolve into anything, thus it went away.

HG always asks someone to forget their face but would someone particularly clever be able to remember their suit or the rings they wore if they met HG again in the same outfit?

Yes.

if the moment wasn't as tense as it was, would Ortega have cheered when Sidestep confessed their love in the apartment scene while revealing they're a re-gene? Especially if Ortega has a crush?

If if if. I don't know, because I didn't write that scene.

If Villainstep had managed to start controlling groups of Argent's nanovores at the gala, would that have scared her off of the idea of following them into the sewers for round 2?

Yes. But I am not sure Sidestep could have at that point.

what's Chen's opinion on a steelcrush->steelsnap->steelrival pipeline?

Sure fucked this one up.

you've said before what Chen thinks of each of the armor combinations, how would he react to all four at once?

I don't know, probably upgrade the threat category.

Do you ever plan to allow Argent/Steel to get an "Afraid" relationship with Villain!Step

Yes.

Is there some unspoken rule between heroes & villains about things like ripping off masks, low blows, etc.? Ortega strikes me as the type of person that would do the Johnny Cage split punch so I got curious

I mean there are unspoken rules like that, and ripping the mask off is one of them. Not all follow them, but those that don't are usually seen with suspicion as loose cannons.

Can Arde feel through their scutes (poreon?) ? Can I scratch them with a big brush like they're a turtle and they feel it?

Yes, absolutely! They probably have those big, rough brushes like you use for horses and the like for grooming.

Does shifting heal Arde or are injuries consistent between forms?

The injuries are constant, so Arde doesn't shift out of their armor form until the injuries have healed (heals faster there) unless they need surgery or have something removed, then the other form is better.

Does Argent finding out the villain she loves fighting is a Regene complicate things for her? (Without taking the helmet off)

No, it doesn't complicate things for her, but it does make her curious.

In a 1v1 arena match with no outside support, who would win in a fight between Armadillo and Charge? Asking for science.

Armadillo can take a lot of electricity, but I would hand it to Charge due to experience. Close, though.

If a cat decided that the Rangers' HQ is a fine place for it to move in, how would the Rangers/staff respond? Would they adopt an office kitty, or would they try to find some way to get rid of it?

They already have an office dog (Spoon). They might accept an office cat.

Does the farm use any sort of lab grown/synthetic proteins to supplement regene diets? Is the technology to grow edible meat in labs viable in the future?

It is viable to grow synthetic meat, but not economic really. Easier with chickens or pigs, as long as you have the room. Which you do at the Farm.

If a decent percentage of Boosting fatalities are from the body destroying itself, are immunocompromised patients more likely to survive Boosting?

Huh. You know what? I think they are.

What does Chen think if you tip an imaginary hat to him during the mansion fight?

Smug bastard.

Would Argent want to take on the role of a housewife if the regenerator worked?

No, she just likes the aesthetic.

What does Argent actually plan to do with her nanovore colony if the Regenerator works? She certainly can't just let them go unless she suddenly got ok with a lot of dead people.

Spoilers.

Will Daniel ever understand Step's humour? Or be forever lost to ignorance?

I don't know yet, we will see!

If a new villain showed up who was able to effortlessly floor her, would Argent keep trying to fight them or would she swallow her pride and avoid them?

Oh she would ABSOLUTELY work out how to take them down. Are you kidding me?

what do the regene uniforms look like? how do they function when a regene needs to go to the bathroom? is there a zipper or flaps?

I would say general coveralls during daily life. There are zippers. And yeah, this is more annoying for women.

Does Regina ever think that her position might cost her her safety one day?

No risk, no gain.

Could Sidestep feasibly use the grappling gun they occasionally mention to slingshot themselves at/drag people to them or is it limited to real world movement uses?

I expect they can, depends on what I write.

How does Vera feel about the history of pigeons being domesticated then abandoned by humans?

A little bit sad, they are such wonderful little beasts, and they still like humans.

How much control does Ortega have over their mods when they're taken off guard? For example, if someone were to come up behind them and pat their shoulder when they weren't expecting it, is that person at risk of getting zapped?

When Ortega is on edge there might be static electricity, yes.

Do Regenes sweat in the areas where they've been tattooed ? Or is it like grafted skin where the loss of sweat glands prevents this? I've read that it can make the rest of the skin sweat more to compensate as well as make people with extensive skin grafts more sensitive to warmer temperatures. Is that something the Farm has to consider for Cuckoos when they have to hide their tattoos in hot weather?

The tattoos have sweat glands! They function like normal skin.

How would you rank the rangers in terms of 'keeping it together,' mentally speaking? As in, who is the closest to having a break down? Or is that too dependent on Sidestep's choices to really answer?

It would depend on Sidestep's choices, but let's say this is pre-Rebirth with Sidestep not in the picture. Closest to breakdown to most stable is: Ortega, Argent, Herald, Steel.

Is money within a bank being insured against things like robbery still the uniform practice? Is it different in the FEZ than in the mainland US?

It is different in the FEZ, it is not a uniform practice, but all major banks has it. That's one of the risks with using minor banks. Easier to get loans and bigger interest rates, but also less protections. Insurance costs money.

It seems like Sidestep's internal monologue uses Ortega as a measurement against a lot of other people, does Ortega have the same inclination of using Sidestep as a measure?

Nope.

Does Sky Raider ever miss anything about being a soldier?

The companionship. It's a strange thing, both good and bad.

What does Chen think if you skip going to visit him in the park after steelsnap/running away from him?

Spoilers.

In Book 2, when Chen finds Sidestep at the dog park, was that the first time he had seen them there? Or was it more like, he had see them there on prior occasions, but didn't realize or think the familiar stranger was Sidestep and approach them until after Ortega "found" them?

I think this was the first time it clicked. There might have been earlier sightings in the distance, but nothing close enough that either of them would pick up on each other.

Is there protocol specifically meant to aid the occasional cuckoo in their re-acclimation to being dehumanized as a Regene after long undercover missions? Or are regular debriefs with their handler prioritized even if it places their cover at risk?

Yes, there are protocols for that. The Core used to be vital to ensure that went smoothly.

Will we get to see any of the ROs' reactions to learning Step doesn't like to see themselves in mirrors? Would any of them have stronger reactions than the others?

We all know Herald will have the strongest reaction... other than that we will see in game, some have thoughts. Especially Argent.

Given their own electric abilities, does Ortega prefer traditional combustion engines for their cars or do they like EVs?

Oh old fashioned combustion every day!

Have there ever been Green Sky enthusiasts employed at the Farm?

No. That would be a security risk.

Does Steel get a reinforced foldable chair at public events? Is it provided by the event or do the Rangers have one in the back of a van? Have any incidents prompted this?

Chen often prefers to stand. But, it does depend a LOT on what kind of mods or armor he has. The event at the Mayor's which was referred in game was when he was prepared for duty. Not in the fully loaded power armor kind of way, but in more discretely augmented ways. He has access to very unobtrusive armors which can be worn underneath roomier clothes like a loose uniform. A bit like a better flak jacket but for the whole body. He often uses this when he needs to look civilian, but have some protection. He uses it less these days since his legs are mechanical, now he mostly need protection for the body. Without added armor, he is heavier than he looks, but much depends on which legs. Both his work legs, and the ones that imitate fully human legs are quite heavy. Combine that with the shoulder, and the internal structures needed to support the prosthetic, he weights a bit. No plastic chairs, but he doesn't need massive concrete chairs or anything either.

Did 9/11 happen in Fallen Hero? Do the twin towers stand? Were they ever built at all?

The twin towers were built, but 9/11 never happened. They still stand.

How would Hollow Ground feel if Sidestep put 200 mini ducks around their home?

No. NO. Absolutely not!

If Heartbreak wasn't killed would they ascend to a mad psychic entity or would the place be even more scared at a psychic level?

SPoilers.

Was Ortega ever smug at the thought that they were/are dating Hollow Ground's sibling?

You know they were.

What's the state of the La Brea tar pits?

The museum is opened again, and excavations continue.

If the Farm team at HB hadn't found Sidestep conveniently laid out on the sidewalk, would they have settled for a civilian corpse? Or was anything short of a living sample exposed to the HB influence considered a failure?

If Heartbreak could not be procured they preferred a living specimen, but a body with a well-preserved head would have been better than nothing. Strange that so few of them had...

Was the US government or the equivalent authority for the LD FEZ aware that the Farm had sent agents to HB?

Spoilers.

Were Regene team deployments considered as a response to HB?

Yes. They were being prepared if the Rangers failed.

Considering his desire to be a hero: Does Vincent feel guilty over neglecting people who need help in favour of following Alvarez's orders/waiting until threats become big enough to cash in on bigger bounties?

His life is a constant source of guilt one way or the other.

How would each of the Rangers handle complete immortality (stop aging, unable to get harmed or die at all)?

I have no idea!

Does merle wear cute bunny slippers too or does he have other fun novelty slippers like mirlene?

I would say that Merle is not above a pair of bunny slippers.

[Time for the questions of the month!](#)

[Aug 29, 2024](#)

Have at it! Just be mindful that I won't give game spoilers, explore elaborate what-ifs, or fill out massive lists of odd facts about a dozen characters.

[Heart to Heart](#)

[Aug 26, 2024](#)

This will probably be pulled into Revelations at some point, but I woke up with this discussion in my head and now I am sharing it with you. Dr. Mortum and the puppet sharing secrets.

....

Some time in the unspecified future, a late night in Dr. Mortum's lab. The lights are mostly off, only a corner of the on-site living room is lit up, the well-worn couch partly covered by blankets. The books and magazines normally stacked on the table have been moved aside, leaving room for a bottle of whiskey, two glasses, and a bowl filled with ice. A lava lamp bubbles incongruously in a corner, meditative in its mellow glow. Many secrets have been revealed over the months that Dr. Mortum and Eden has known each other, though most have come from Eden's lips. Ace. Sidestep. Re-Gene. Masquerade. Betrayal. Reunion.

It is time to even the scores.

"It is still too late to back out, mon coeur." Dr. Mortum puts down the bottle of whiskey between you with a cautious smile. Nervous. On edge. Curious.

"That implies that I can't back out in the middle in case things get too intimate," you reply, pouring each of you a glass. You take yours straight, but she takes a moment to drop a cube of ice in hers.

"You know that's not true." A cautious sip, the kind that tells you that the good doctor is not used to drinking her liquor undiluted. "It felt like the polite thing to say."

"It felt like a dare," you retort with a wink and a sip of your own as you lean back in your corner of the couch.

"Perhaps it was. Aimed at both of us." There is a brief pause as she looks at you straight on before she seems to remember how uneasy you are with direct eye contact. It's better in this body, but old habits die hard.

"On account that we're both secretive bastards. I get it." You do, things have escalated to the point where you both are deep enough in this together that trust is all you have. And with trust comes an itching willingness to share. To reveal. Maybe a bottle and a challenge just makes it more palatable. Interacting like two normal human beings was never really how you did things.

"Secrets are safer," she agrees. "But to be fair, most of mine are less about hiding my deep, dark past and more about being able to maintain a suitable mystique for my station." She swirls her drink as she leans back, the warm light playing over her bone structure.

"Don't want to ruin your villain rep by admitting you shuffle around the lab in bunny slippers and a bonnet in the morning, huh?" You keep a straight face. Barely.

"They. Were. Cute." Her indignation is mostly fake, and the smile that peeks out makes you smile in return. "But yes, that. I need people to respect me. And when it comes to villains, they are bound to imagine far more interesting and dangerous things than I could come up with."

"So are you saying that in reality you are boring and safe?" You wink and take another sip, not waiting for a reply to your teasing barb. "You or me first?"

"Age before beauty I suppose." Dr. Mortum swirls her drink, the ice cubes making a soft clinking sound. "I'll answer the first question."

"What makes you think you're not beautiful?" When did you get this smooth? Maybe when you learned you could get such wonderful responses. "Because you are."

"What..." She nearly spills her drink before adjusting her glasses. Flustered. You got her there. "That is not a fair thing to ask right of the bat. I'd thought you'd ask me something simple, like my name."

"And here I thought your name was Dr. Mortum," you say with a chuckle. "Your real name, I mean. But fine, I will bite. What's your first name?"

"Mirlene," she says, her accent turning the name soft in her mouth. "But it's been years since someone called me that. My usual false name is Jay."

"Like the bird." You smile. "Which one would you prefer I call you?"

"I'm honestly not sure." Dr. Mortum's gaze grows distant. "It's been too long since someone did that on the regular. I suppose you could try them both and see how things feel. Mortum have been what I've lived and breathed for decades." There is a pause, and then she continues. "Do you mind that I keep calling you nicknames instead of your real name?"

"I... don't know." You frown, trying to sort out your feelings. "Names are complicated. Nicknames are easier. And then there's the whole definition of what my real name even is." You take a deeper sip then. What would your name be? Your Farm designation? The one you picked after escaping? Sidestep? What you named this puppet body? Ace? You don't even know if that was a name or a nickname. "And I do like that it's a name only you call me. Makes this feel more personal."

"I'll continue then," she says with a nod. "And you let me know if that changes."

"I will." You refill your glass, not worried about Dr. Mortum keeping up. The bottle is here for show and liquid courage. This is not a race. "Is Vitruvian off limits? That was the one dead end I ran into when I researched you before hiring."

"Is he..." She pauses, looking down at her whiskey before taking a resolute sip. "No, I suppose he's not. I'm surprised you went there though. What do you want to know? We weren't a couple, if that's what you're worried about."

"I didn't think so," you lie, there had been enough rumors that you couldn't rule it out. "But there was always something about him that bothered me. In the way you talked about your past interactions. Everything else is always so straightforward. It's only when he comes up that you grow uneasy."

"I killed him." The confession comes so easily neither of you bother to act shocked. "But I guess you suspected that already."

"I did," you admit. "But what I don't understand is why. You worked together for years. You admitted that you still don't understand how he pulled off some of his gadgets, I feel like even if he was the most insufferable man alive, you'd keep him alive until you had figured out his secrets."

"You really know me too well." Dr. Mortum laughs and pours herself more whiskey. "Part of me is still angry about that. I should have. Would have saved myself some sleepless nights. But truth be told it really was a crime of passion. Not the erotic kind, but I did act without thinking things through."

"I have noticed you do that on occasion." You wink.

"Well, I am sorry for having held you at gunpoint in the past." Her face grows serious once more. "But I suppose if there's anyone who would understand, it's you."

"What happened between you?"

"It was always a partnership of convenience." She takes off her glasses, leaving her face vulnerable. "He was brilliant. The first person I'd met to really challenge my way of thinking. The way he saw the world was a revelation... as long as it came to physics. In everything else he was garbage. I don't know if your research revealed that he had been a Green Sky sympathizer?"

"I never found proof, but the name alone was a bit of a giveaway."

"Yes. He was a believer, but not one to think himself a mere member of a cult. His ego was too large to commit fully I suppose. He did subscribe to the whole "homo superior" agenda however. That surviving the boost drugs meant that you were one of the one percent that really mattered. The chosen ones. I laughed it off at the time, you know how it is with villains. And at least he wasn't overtly prejudiced in the ways I was used to struggle with."

"A black woman in STEM."

"Exactly. What I didn't know at the time was that the reason he was so accepting and helpful in our partnership was that he was convinced I was a boost all along." Her mouth twists cruelly. "That the reason for my brilliance was drugs."

"A black woman in STEM," you repeat, echoing her grimace.

"Eventually the subject came up, I can't even remember how. I might have said something in passing. He was shocked, of course, but I didn't think anything would come off it." She shakes her head at her past folly. "If anything, I hoped that it might get him to tone down the boost supremacy talk, we were in the middle of developing our teleportation system and quite frankly it was becoming a distraction."

"I take it that didn't happen." You pull your feet up on the couch, keeping your attention on her.

"It most certainly did not. But I never thought he'd do what he did." Her face grows serious, and you reflexively lean over to give her hand a squeeze. Her smile flashes in return, like a fish rising to the surface before returning to the bottom of the murky pond of memories. "He tried to kill me. No." She shakes her head. "That is unfair. I am sure he saw it as trying to help me."

"Did he try to feed you the boost drugs?" Your eyes grow big, that's as close to a death sentence as you can get.

"Or something very similar. He kept calling it a sacrament." She makes a dismissive gesture with her hand, and you doubt she picks up on the shiver down your spine.

"A sacrament. That's what they called the blood of the Void." You volunteer the information, isn't that in the spirit of this talk? "The leader of the Green Sky. They used their blood to boost people instead of chemicals. It's supposed to be excruciatingly painful, but safer. Especially if it has been filtered through others first." Supposed. You add that for plausible deniability.

"It was." Dr. Mortum locks eyes with you, but it still takes you a moment to realize what she's saying.

"He did it? He actually dosed you? And you lived?" The implications come slow, an initial pebble cascading down a slope until the avalanche of possibilities hits you. "You're a boost?" Nothing in your research had indicated that. Dr. Mortum had always been very vocal about their humanity.

"He did. Spiked my coffee with paralytics, then dragged me to the freezer while I lay there nearly senseless. He'd said the cold would help me through the process, that he'd do his best to keep me safe. Guide me." She empties her glass, and you pour her a new one without waiting for an invitation. "He hooked me up to a portable sensor array, poured cold water over me to get my body temperature to drop and then... he injected me. You're right. It did hurt."

"I'm so sorry." You can imagine the helplessness, you've been there. Paralyzed. In pain. Cold fury the only thing to cling to. "I'm so sorry."

"So would he be, eventually." The words sends a chill down your spine. "I survived. If I'm being honest, he probably had a hand in that. Kept track of my vitals, injecting me with I don't know what to counteract me going into shock. I got the feeling he had done it before."

"He probably had. The Green Sky went through a lot of people to find the few ones that lived. I'm glad you did."

"So am I. I don't remember much, thankfully. When I finally regained my senses I was wrapped up in blankets on a mattress, with a space heater blowing hot air at me and him hovering like some worried father. I pretended to be confused, which wasn't much of a stretch." Dr. Mortum runs both hands over her face, careful to avoid smudging her makeup. "I pretended to be fine with it. I pretended to be grateful. I had lived. I was a boost now. One of the chosen ones. It wasn't hard to lie to him, he wanted to believe what I told him too badly."

"People like that do." How many times have you played people just by acting like they imagined you would? "Too used to being right to look beneath the surface."

"I killed him the same night." The confession carries no guilt. "Shot him while he was setting up an experiment to help me pinpoint what powers I had got. I still feel bad that he never saw who did it. I would have wanted him to know it was me before I pulled the trigger, but I didn't dare to take the risk."

"Monologuing have brought more powerful villains down," you agree. "You've kept this a secret though. Nobody has even breathed any suspicion that you might be a boost."

"There's not much boost to brag about," she confesses with a laugh.

"Can I ask what it is?"

"It's adding up to a pile of questions from me at this point, but sure. You've shared enough in the past. It's nothing grand." Dr. Mortum looks to the side, and the glasses she removed earlier gently rises from the table. They hover in the air for a moment, before they slide back on her face. She pushes them back with a finger and smiles. "I tend to call it tiny telekinesis."

"Why tiny?" You can hardly hold back a laugh after the traumatic retelling earlier. "That looked like impressive control." Telekinesis was an uncommon talent, and not everyone managed to be delicate with it.

"Oh my control is excellent," she admits. "But the range is hardly more than my own physical reach. A couple of feet, depending on weight. And I can't exactly lift much. It helps when moving heavy equipment and such, but the heavier a thing I move, the less precise I am."

"Is -that- how you control your hands-off equipment." Suddenly things start making sense. "I thought you had implants, either for neural broadcasting, or simple fingertip connectors."

"I do have a neural plug." Dr. Mortum nods. "It helps interfacing with my car. But yes, this talent is handy around the lab. Especially when it comes to working at the smaller scale. That's how I dared to work at your nanovores from the start. I could keep them securely sealed and still modify them through the containment field."

"Your control is that precise? Through a solid screen?"

"Indeed. As long as I can see. I might have to view much of my work through a microscope, but I can manipulate things physically without bothering with miniaturizing tools. And tools are always the limiter at that scale. I am currently experimenting with direct molecular manipulation, but the inherent uncertainty of observation and effect on that scale makes it difficult."

"Damn," you say, impressed. "That explains a lot. I gather that's where you've focused rather than working on your strength?"

"I have no use for heavy lifting or fisticuffs." She looks pleased with your reaction, there's an openness to her face that wasn't there before. A relief that you know. "But I will admit that it has been handy in my work. Though I'd hate to give him that credit."

"He's dead, you don't have to." Your smile grows thin and cruel. "And when you finally figure out what made his teleport technology tick you can claim credit for that as well. He owes you."

"That is some excellent academic cutthroat arguments." Dr. Mortum laughs. "Thank you. I mean it. Just don't tell anybody what I can do. I like being underestimated."

"I am good at keeping secrets," you assure.

"Speaking of which... has any more memories come back?"

"From this body?" You shake your head reflexively, then sighs. "That depends on what you mean." The whiskey in your hand is familiar and strange at once. "There's glimpses. Like this." You sip the drink. "Whiskey tastes better in this body. There's a comfort in it, a habit. Not to get drunk, but..." you try to pinpoint the exact ways in which the taste makes your neurons fire. "Focus. Getting ready. Steady my hands. Get in the mood. It feels like a ritual for a productive night out. Ace was a gambler, I can only guess this was a way of getting in the right mood."

"Not enough to build a narrative off exactly."

"No." You run your forehead. "And you know what the worst thing is?"

"No, mon coeur, that's why we are here, remember?" She reaches out to pat your arm.

"Point." You empty the whiskey and pour yourself some more. "I can't even be sure what I am remembering. My head... my memories." How can you explain this without sounding deranged? "There's no either or."

"I don't understand." Dr. Mortum sounds patient, as if she's expecting an explanation that makes sense.

"Before we even take this body into consideration, I am a telepath. And a Re-Gene." It feels strange to talk about this so openly. "We're seeded with memories when we are decanted. There's a chip... they call it an AI chip, though it doesn't do any thinking. That's just to sell us as inhuman robots. What it does hold is a cocktail of memories of useful skills. Education. Language. Weapons' training." You look down at the glass in your hand. "Stolen from reliable people. Soldiers. People used to obeying orders without question. That speeds up the training, you see. When they start working with us out of the tube, the memories we keep using gets embedded in our brains and neural matter, while the rest... well, fade. Like childhood memories no longer needed. But occasionally they pop back up. A brief flash. And I have no idea what or where it came from."

"I never considered what they had to do to you to make forced growth work." She looks both horrified and curious. "How do they even translate memories to silicone?"

"I don't know the details," you admit. "There's a central processor, they usually call it the Core. Telepathic in nature. But that's the heart of the project. Without it we'd just be full-grown bodies with the minds of infants. Useless."

"There were rumors of experiments with translating memories and personalities into fresh bodies," Dr. Mortum muses. "But as far as I know, they all ended in madness and death."

"That amount of implanted memories? Not surprising. What we get is carefully curated down to the bare essentials. It would be counterproductive giving us anything to make us real."

"And so you can't be sure what the source of your memories are."

"Bingo. And add to that the problems with being a telepath. I read other people's minds. On occasion strong memories or feelings linger. I excise them as best I'm able, but early on I wasn't as good at it." That's the reason you found your sense of self. The notion that you were worth something. The concept of escape, and the outside world. Being able to say no. To think freely.

"I'm amazed you have as solid sense of identity as you have. It sounds like it would be easy to get lost."

"It is." You run a finger along the edge of your glass. "Sometimes it's hard. You..." your face twitches. "I prune." You make a snipping motion with your fingers. "Block off. Shut down. Make myself forget. There are things I shouldn't know. That I can't know. Not if I want to survive. Or stay sane."

"Like a trauma response." She sounds horrified. "You can control that?"

"Somewhat." Another nervous laugh. "It's not an exact science. It's like cutting off an infected limb. You lose something, but at least you're still alive. My head is full of holes, and at this point I don't even know if they were always there, or even who I am supposed to blame. Did they burn them out in the Core when they tried to reprogram me after my first escape? Or is this something I did to myself? All I can do is try not to trip into the craters."

"Oh I am so sorry, mon coeur." Dr. Mortum reaches for your hand, and you let her grab it. "And I made it worse with my speculations. I didn't know."

"I don't blame you. It was a fair question, and I wish I could be sure. It's not like I have many other telepaths to talk to and compare notes." Have you ever met one? Not on your level. Not that you can remember. You pull back your hand, rubbing it.

"Well..." She frowns, looking thoughtful. "Do you think that it would help?"

"I don't know." Would it? It's not like you would dare to let anybody into your head regardless. That's where you keep all your secrets. "It's a moot point. You said it yourself, there's not any telepaths around these days."

"I did say that, yes." She nods. "But there is still the issue of you being stuck in that body."

"I'll handle it." You will. You have no choice at this point.

There is nobody else that can help.

[Shopping Therapy](#)

[Aug 24, 2024](#)

Alright, the demo is growing but still with no closure, so here comes the text! Nearly 20 000 words. We have Dr. Mortum and a rescued puppet with broken legs hanging out in the lab and things escalating from there.

Once again, thank you for your patience, the puppetstart demo is turning into a beast like the Auction chapter of Retribution. But, that also means that once that is done it is only one demo, instead of all the fragments from the other paths.

.....

*label brokenlegwakey

[b]Some weeks later, Dr. Mortum's laboratory.

The bed is a soft cloud, supporting your bruised body with minimal effort. Support for your back, a remote at hand to shift it into what configuration you want. Laying down. Sitting up. A massage function that makes you grit your teeth but probably is good for you, and a light vibration that reminds you of sleeping in a moving car. Restful. Safe. Someone at the wheel, someone you can trust, but that's a dream that always fades when morning comes. Faces pushed back. Forcibly unremembered.

*if ace

Are they your memories or \${puppet_name}'s?

*if puppet_name != "Ace"

No. Ace's

That's \${phis} name, isn't it? \${!phis} real one.

*if puppet_name = "Ace"

Did you know when you picked it? Was there a hint of a whisper in your ear as you named your new body?

It makes you feel queasy. Since watching the video with Dr. Mortum, you have got more and more glimpses of what happened. Not memories. Maybe fantasies. Holes in your mind filling in what came before. You have no way of knowing whether it's true or not. And yet you can't dispel the ghosts that haunts

your nightmares.

*else

You never slept in this body before, could the shifting memories belong to \${puppet_name}? There's no active thoughts you can find or focus on, but what about the subconscious? Dreams trapped in long unused brain cells. Did \${phe} dream when you left the body behind? You don't know. All you know is that ghosts now cling to you every time you wake, like spiderwebs brushed from your face come morning.

Things are different. How long had it been since you slept and remembered sleeping before you got stuck here? How long had your mind continued functioning on an eternal loop? Morning to morning, no darkness in between?

Now that darkness consumes your nights. You need to get your body back before it starts to spread. It's bad. You wish you could articulate exactly what that means. Something has changed. Something that shouldn't. Like this body is changing you somehow.

Cellular memory. Could that be it? You know they talked about that on the Farm. Whether traces of someone's personality could survive in transplanted limbs and infect the new host. That was the draw of clone-transplants. No risk of things like that.

Superstition. Far more likely that your dreams are just telepathic remnants of minds you've brushed against in the past. You didn't sleep enough to remember anything but the worst nightmares. The ones that wouldn't let you go, clinging to your mind until you had no choice but to give in and sleep rather than just shift bodies to escape them.

A safety valve. A curse.

Maybe you should be grateful they haven't followed you here, instead leaving you with these vague and uneasy memories come morning, more like what dreams are supposed to be.

Normal. A normal brain. One you're stuck in. Giving you time to think.

*if mortumknows

You think you're safe here. Dr. Mortum didn't need to break you out. You're surprised that \${mhe} did after you told \${mhim} the truth. Maybe \${mhe}'s as lonely as you. Maybe \${mhe} looks at you and still sees \${puppet_name}. It's hard not to.

Because isn't that just you these days?

*else

You [b]are[/b] safe here. You know that by now. Dr. Mortum has proven \${mhim}self time and time again. On your side. Willing to take risks \${mhe} would be smarter to avoid. For you. No. For \${puppet_name}.

But isn't that just you these days?

*fake_choice

#My other life feels more and more like a dream.

Your other life feels more and more like a dream. Like some strange fever fantasy conjured up by a mind desperate to escape the confines of your body. It's not true, of course. You know that. No matter how human you currently look, you are a Re-Gene, lacking anything close to a human experience.

But it would be so easy to forget. Fool yourself into denial. Isn't that what you so often did to people telepathically? Nudge them to take the easier path, if they don't see you they don't have to raise the alarm, they can keep dozing off, nothing is happening. Inaction is addictive.

You could let it go. All of it. The struggle. The pain. Just drift away, start a new life, walk away from your past. You could do it.

*if ((motivation = "justice") or ((anarchist) or (prepare_them)))

If you didn't know what was coming.

*elseif motivation = "fate"

But you doubt you'd be allowed to. Fate isn't finished with you yet.

*elseif (((motivation = "revenge") or (motivation = "anger")) or (hunter))

You could try. But you'd let them win. Give up. And you'd be damned before you give them that satisfaction.

*elseif boss

Give up everything you worked for. Your ambitions. Your new life. Run. Be a coward. No. That's not an option.

*else

A new life. A better future. Run away from the storm that is coming and convince everyone you care about to run with you. A pipe dream.

#No. I'm trapped, but that won't last forever.

You're trapped in this body, intimately familiar, and yet not yours. A pause. A stepping stone. This won't last forever, you refuse to accept that possibility. You'll heal enough to get back on your feet, and then everything will get back to normal.

*if ((motivation = "justice") or ((anarchist) or (prepare_them)))

You have work to do. Work that can't be done in this body, you need power. Influence. And laying here, you're painfully aware that the clock is ticking.

You're running out of time.

*elseif motivation = "fate"

There is a lesson in this somewhere, you know it. A reason why you're stuck in this body. But it's a puzzle to solve, not an inevitable future. And yet you keep wondering.

Why are you here?

*elseif (((motivation = "revenge") or (motivation = "anger")) or ((hunter) or (boss)))

You've got work to do. Work you can't do in this body, weak and helpless in comparison. All it does is heighten your frustrations while at the same time refusing you an outlet.

You wish you could heal faster.

*else

Maybe you should try to think of this as a vacation. Some time to heal. Rest. Of course it's hard to do that when it's not a choice, with your body stolen and this one stuck in a hospital bed.

Worst vacation of your life.

#The body doesn't matter, I am me no matter what.

You're stuck in a broken human body, with no telepathy, but that doesn't really change who you are. What you are. Your thought. Your mind. That's what's important. Your memories. Your core.

That's what always set you apart as a Re-Gene. You knew. You weren't blank. Little by little you could chisel away at implanted memories and orders and make a core that was just you. Will. Purpose.

*if motivation = "anger"

A seething anger at your enforced fate. You would be free.

You will again.

*elseif motivation = "fate"

Fate.

You were meant for something bigger than what they made you into.

*elseif motivation = "justice"

Truth. They kept lying to you with their mouths, but their actions told you the truth. Their fears. You weren't just a tool, but something more.

You all were.

*elseif motivation = "life"

Joy.

You weren't supposed to experience that.

*else

Revenge. No, that came later, when you finally understood the extent of what they did to you.

Never again.

You let out a breath which turns into a sigh, adjusting the bed to find a more comfortable position. Restless. Itching. You can't relax. Your body crawling with impatience. The unease overtakes you, so you shift positions hard, reckless movement despite your injuries. A jolt of pain spears you from legs to spine, turning threatening shadows into bright white and red.

Good. Pain. It's something you're used to.

You need to heal, you tell yourself. Can't rush that. You already have the best medical technology Dr. Mortum's contacts can get their hands on. You know you need to rest. You know this inaction is needed. And still you can't help being reminded of being back at the farm. Stuck in a tube, sedated as your body recovered. Forced healing hurts as much as injuries, they didn't sedate you to spare you, they did it to shut you up. Screaming bothers people no matter how ruthless they are. What Dr. Mortum uses on you is more gentle. Less prone to lasting damage or lingering cancer decades later. Deep tissue stimulation. Vibrations. A drug regimen strong enough to knock you out for the rest of the day after every session. But, no tube.

Not unless you count the therapeutic casts, with muscle-stimulants to make sure you won't be too weak once healed enough for rehab. You should be grateful. No, you are grateful.

*if epilogue03

But, you're also aware that while you are recovering here, your body is not. You still can't believe it, though you were shown the drone footage Dr. Mortum has shot as \${mhe} scouted your apartment. Your own body. Moving about. Shooting the drone.

The thought still makes you nauseous. No wonder you can't go back. Someone's stolen it. Like you stole this once empty husk.

*if epilogue07

You didn't tell Dr. Mortum the truth. Not yet. How could you, helpless like this? Instead you lied and said you had no idea why your boss had wanted you to pick up the body of \${name} \${surname}. Or why they weren't comatose as you had been promised. It was easy enough to play up your very real fear and confusion, speculating out loud whether this had been a trap for you all along. Begging Dr. Mortum to let you stay here while you healed. That you were afraid. Alone.

Of course \${mhe} let you.

*else

And what's worse, you're starting to wonder if Dr. Mortum is doubting your story. You can't blame \${mhim}, this doesn't make sense at all. Either you are playing some game with \${mhim} and leaving this puppet body only to try to ambush \${mhim} later, or somehow both bodies are moving at the same time. Which shouldn't be possible.

You have a feeling Dr. Mortum might be formulating some sort of theory but is afraid to spring it on you. There's something in the way \${mhe} looks at you. Not threatening. Almost with... pity.

And you hate that.

*elseif ((epilogue04) or (epilogue05))

You just wish you could relax. But you can't. Not with the texts you've been getting from @epilogue04 Pelayo|

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!{hhe}} found your body, just like you had said. Out like a light. You were high enough on painkillers at the time you nearly cried from relief. This would be over soon.

And then. Then the texts started coming. Texts that didn't make sense. Sharing the good news that the boss had woken up. Was okay. Nothing to worry about. You asked what @{epilogue04 Pelayo|

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!{hhe}} didn't seem to understand. Asked when @{epilogue04 he|

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{hench_name}} had written it, none of the concern or the little tidbits of life that had been in the others. Three words.

[b]I need you.[/b]

You haven't opened your phone since. You need to bring this up with Dr. Mortum eventually, but you're not sure where to start.

*else

You're also still stuck. You had hoped a night or two might fix things. Or that going without painkillers for a while would. Nothing. And what was worse, you knew that the clock was ticking, there's only so long your body could last without water.

In the end you had no choice. Contacting @{epilogue04 Pelayo|

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!{hhim}} to bring your body here seemed to be the choice with the least amount of risk involved.

*if apartment != "your base"

*if heraldregenereveal

Herald would take care of your body, but you don't want him anywhere near Dr. Mortum, and you need the good doctor to try to figure out how to get your body back.

*if argentreveal

Argent would understand the need for secrecy, but you're not sure you could trust her. Not when you probably need Dr. Mortum involved too. A Ranger would complicate things.

You risked a call, it would be easier to explain things in words than text, and at this point you had recovered some of your facilities. Dr. Mortum had promised the phone was secure, and you figured @{\epilogue04 Pelayo}{hench_name}} might be the type to pick up even from an unknown number. You were right.

It went... badly.

Sure, @{\epilogue04 Pelayo}{hench_name}} was happy to hear from you and know you were still alive, but then there was a voice in the background asking who was calling. A voice you recognized.

Your voice.

\$_{name}}'s voice.

You don't remember much after that. Just the panic. Heart racing. @{\epilogue04 Pelayo}{hench_name}} talking to \$_{chim}. To you. Not you. The anger in \$_{name}}'s voice when \$_{che} demanded to talk to you.

You hung up. Turned off the phone.

You haven't turned it on yet. You need to bring this up with Dr. Mortum eventually, but you're not sure where to start.

You need a plan, but the first step is getting back on your feet. Which will take a while. \$_{swear}.

"Good morning, \$_{title}." Dr. Mortum enters with breakfast, \$_{mhis} footsteps heralding \$_{his} arrival so you have time to collect yourself. Put your mask on. "I hope you slept alright?"

*fake_choice

#"As well as I could with these on." I gesture to my casts.

"As well as I could with these on." You gesture to the casts, they keep you trapped in the same position. No tossing and turning, because every time you try to roll over, the pain reminds you that you shouldn't. Hard to get a restful night's sleep like that.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Dr. Mortum puts down the tray on the small table next to the bed. "But if it's any consolation, you'll be out of them soon."

"Really?" You hadn't expected that, but to be fair, you've tried to keep your expectations as low as possible. Manage your impatience.

#"No," I admit. "The nightmares make that hard."

"No," you admit, at this point you're not afraid of showing some weakness. "The nightmares make that hard."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Dr. Mortum puts down the tray on the small table next to the bed. "Trauma rarely leads to good sleep, especially when you eschew sleeping pills."

"I want to be able to wake up when I want to." You hate being trapped in nightmares, and at least this body is able to snap out of them fast. You don't want to risk that just for being rested. "I hate feeling trapped."

"It is your decision." You can see that \${mhe} doesn't agree with it. Not that \${mhe}'ll push the issue. It's your choice. "But if it's any consolation, you'll be out of your casts soon. Perhaps that will help a bit."

"It certainly won't hurt." You hadn't expected it to be this soon, but to be fair, you've tried to keep your expectations as low as possible. Manage your impatience.

##"Didn't wake up screaming," I joke. "That's progress."

"Didn't wake up screaming," you joke, because at this point gallows humor is all you have. "That's progress."

"I suppose I can't argue that." Dr. Mortum puts down the tray on the small table next to the bed. \${mhe} doesn't seem to find it as funny. "But I really do think you should try to have a higher bar."

"If it was higher I couldn't reach it trapped in bed as I am." This time your joke gets an exasperated chuckle in return. Good. You both need that.

"Well I have good news for you then." A brief pause for effect. "You will be getting out of your casts soon."

"Good, I've been nursing an itch there for weeks." You hadn't expected that, but to be fair, you've tried to keep your expectations as low as possible. Manage your impatience.

"My friend will come by and have a look later today, but last I talked to her she seemed to think that it might be time to start some very light rehabilitation work. If you promise not to overdo it."

"At this point I'll promise anything." You accept the cup of coffee \${mhe} gives you.

*if mortumknows

*goto impostertalk

*else

*goto bosstalk

*label impostertalk

"Good. Because I need you to promise to keep a clear head about this." Dr. Mortum pulls up a folded newspaper from the pocket in \${mhis} labcoat, handing it to you. "It's on page three."

"What's happened now," you mutter to yourself as you put down the coffee, unfolding the newspaper under \${mhis} watchful gaze.

It's not even a quarter-page article, so it takes you a moment to realize which one \${mhe} is talking about.

*if villainy < 50

[b]\${villain_name} Robs Pharmacy, Staff Injured.[/b]

*else

[b]\${villain_name} Robs Pharmacy.[/b]

It takes you a moment to understand what it is you're looking at. A blurry picture of \${villain_name}, the angle screaming security camera. Not many details, just another minor heist.

*if infamy >= 70

Minor. Heist.

*if rangersarmor

The Rangers were supposed to have your armor. What happened? How did they manage to lose yet another thing from their vault? How incompetent are they?

And, more importantly...

*fake_choice

#A pharmacy? The indignity!

Not only has this impostor stolen your body, they have stolen your armor. Your identity. And what's worse, they are using it to perform petty crimes.

A pharmacy. The indignity!

You scrunch the newspaper in your hand at the same time Dr. Mortum swiftly moves to protect the breakfast tray in case you'd throw it. So instead you take a breath, then another, putting the newspaper down with the same distaste as if it had been used to clean up after a dog.

"I. Am. Fine." Your smile feels more like a snarl.

"I am choosing to believe you despite all evidence to the contrary." \$!{mhe} shakes \${mhis} head with the thinnest of smiles. "Because we need to talk."

#How. How is this happening?

How. How is this happening? Is this impostor good enough to control the armor well enough to use it? What does the Rat King feel about that? Can't they feel the difference? Or are they coerced somehow?

This doesn't make sense.

You look blankly at the newspaper in your hand, trying to make sense of what's there. No details. Just that picture burning into your brain.

"This makes no sense." The paper falls from your limp hand, rescued by Dr. Mortum.

"It certainly is a conundrum." \$!{mhe} shakes \${mhis} head. "That's why we need to talk."

*if (villainy < 50) #People are hurt? \$!{swear}.

You read the article, trying to figure out the fate of the hurt staff. Serious but stable condition. That can mean anything. But above all it means that whoever this impostor is they don't care about hurting people. Or they are sloppy.

Neither is good.

*if ((nokill) or ((repentkill) or (saving)))

What if they kill someone? That would be on your conscience and reputation.

*else

Your armor is dangerous, even though the nanovores are neutered they could still cause a lot of damage with an inept user.

You look blankly at the newspaper in your hand, trying to stop yourself from imagining the worst. It's hard. That image is burned into your brain by now.

"What else have they done," you mumble as the paper falls from your limp hand, rescued by Dr. Mortum.

"Nothing major so far." \$!{mhe} shakes \${mhis} head. "But we need to talk."

#That's your armor they're wearing. [b]Yours![/b]

The absolute gall of the impostor almost leaves you speechless. That's your armor. Your name. Your reputation. [b]Yours![/b]

You didn't put all this work into crafting you a new identity for someone else to steal it right under your nose. As if stealing your body wasn't bad enough.

You scrunch the newspaper in your hand at the same time Dr. Mortum swiftly moves to protect the breakfast tray in case you'd throw it. So instead you take a breath, then another, putting the newspaper down with the same distaste as if it had been used to clean up after a dog.

"This can't be allowed to stand," you growl.

"I am not disagreeing." \$!{mhe} shakes \${mhis} head. "But we need to talk."

"Talk?" You run your hands over your face, feeling the bones underneath your skin. Yours. Still not quite. The brain inside nothing more than a receptacle.

*set pharmacy true

"Yes." Dr. Mortum looks awkward as \$!{mhe} sits down next to your bed. "And I suppose there is no easy way to start a conversation like this. Do you remember when you told me who you really were?"

*fake_choice

#"I'm not likely to forget. Thank you for saving me regardless."

"I'm not likely to forget. Thank you for saving me regardless." More than you deserved really, but you suppose you are not the one who should judge that. You didn't even ask for it, this was all Dr. Mortum. You're not sure how that makes you feel. Too many emotions to deal with right now. Or ever.

*if (mortum_flirting_puppet) #"I was so sure I was ruining everything." I smile helplessly.

"I was so sure I was ruining everything." You can't help but smile. This is more than you deserved, though you suppose you are not the one who should judge that. You didn't ask Dr. Mortum to stick \${mhis} neck out for you. Or decide to move forward instead of clinging to hurt feelings. Move forward. Not forgive. There is a difference.

#"Biggest risk I've taken in a long time," I admit.

"Biggest risk I've taken in a long time," you admit.

*if daring > 50

Physical danger is different. Risking your life, pain, loss, broken bones... all of that drowns in the adrenaline of a good fight. Even going up against dangerous opponents is more of a thrill. A chance to prove yourself. To show them. This was different. All emotions and guilt, neither of which you're fond of dealing with if you can help it.

*else

You prefer your risks to be calculated, no need to seek out danger without the deck stacked in your favor. Play it smart. Be patient. You couldn't do that here, there was no way to gain an advantage without making things worse. Owing up to your mistakes. Face your complicated emotions and your guilt. Not something you're fond of doing if you can help it.

But Dr. Mortum was worth it.

#"I still feel guilty about lying in the first place." I look away.

"I still feel guilty about lying in the first place." You look away instinctively, avoiding Dr. Mortum's gaze. It's still an open wound, though you've done your best to try to move past it. Both of you. Still, it's lurking under the surface like a sharp rock, ready to scuttle any mood. Guilt. Your least favorite feeling.

"I can appreciate the courage it took." \${mhe} pauses, visibly uncomfortable. "And I don't mean to undercut that, just hear me out. Please."

"It's not like I'm going anywhere," you say cautiously, unsure what \${mhe}'s getting at, but you can smell something brewing and you doubt it is good.

"I've been looking back at the events of the last few weeks,"

\${mhe} starts, looking for all the world like \${mhe} wishes he had a notebook \${mhe} could read out loud from. "The fact that \${name} \${surname} is walking around, to all appearances functional. The fact that \${villain_name} is still active—"

"Robbing a pharmacy," you interrupt.

"Yes. But the fact remains. While there haven't been any major battles so far, the armor does to all extents and purposes appear functional."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Have you considered that perhaps you have been telepathically manipulated into believing that you are \${surname}?"

"That I'm what?" Your brain feels cold, unable to keep up with \${mhis} reasoning. Or unwilling.

"\${surname} is a telepath. Like you said, powerful enough to jump bodies and puppet them around. Puppet you around." A momentary pause, but this time you let \${mhim} finish. "I just think that we need to consider the possibility that you might have been brainwashed into thinking that you are \${surname}. What better way to have an assistant utterly loyal to the cause?"

"That's..." you break off, shaking your head as you try to collect your thoughts. It's an absurd suggestion, you know who you are, you know what you've done. You're not some pre-programmed drone doing \${phis} job. Right? You'd know. Right?

*fake_choice

#But would I? How could I be sure?

You try to shut down the little voice of doubt inside you, but you can't. Telepathic programming on that scale would be a monumental effort, but isn't the same true for possession? Is really one vast powerset more absurd than the other. You try to breathe, try to think. You remember your past. Being a Re-gene. You remember...

Not everything. You hate that. You know there's holes in your memories, places cordoned off and marked with Entry Forbidden. Trauma. That's what you've told yourself. Some things are best forgotten, left buried, suppressed, trapped behind locked doors. You don't need to remember everything, just move forward, get on with the plan. Do your job.

Even if it kills you. You remember standing before Hollow Ground, that sinking feeling in your stomach that your time was running out. Your future was catching up to you.

Expendable. Is that it? Is that you?

Are you a copy of a copy? That's how Re-Gene minds are made, past knowledge stashed into an AI chip, seeding the host brain with everything needed to function upon decanting. Did you do that? Did \${surname} do that?

How could you ever know for sure?

*set selfdoubt true

#No. I am \${name} \${Surname}. I know that.

You take in the information, mulls it over. Are you a copy of a copy? That's how Re-Gene minds are made, past knowledge stashed into an AI chip, seeding the host brain with everything needed to function upon decanting. Did you do that to your puppet? Are you \${puppet_name}, cut loose at last, floating free?

You can see the logic of it. Especially to an outsider, who can only see the surface. But you know better. You know for sure. Even before you were implanted with borrowed memories, you saw Them. You felt their thoughts. You found yourself before anybody else tried to make you into what they wanted. You [i]know[/i] who you are.

Re-Gene. Tool. Hero. Villain. The body doesn't matter. The mind does. You've been through hell too many times to start doubting now.

*set selfcertain true

#I hate that \${mhis} arguments makes sense. I can't be sure.

You hate that there is a logic to this. It sounds like something you could do, though on a more ambitious scale than you ever have before. But, couldn't the same be said for your possession? Power. The audacity to manipulate people's minds and memories like clay. That's how Re-Gene minds are made, past knowledge stashed into an AI chip, seeding the host brain with everything needed to function upon decanting. Did you do that to \${puppet_name}? Did \${surname}?

Could this you be a puppet in more ways than one? A mind gone rogue, operating beyond it's calculated parameters. Is that it? Were you sent to Hollow Ground to die? No. There would be no reason to waste such a valuable asset, right? Unless... unless you were already becoming too much of a risk. Too real. What if the fact that you told Dr. Mortum was the issue? You blurred the lines between you. Risked ruining your usefulness.

You don't think it's true, but you can't be sure. Too many things add up.

*set selfdoubt true

#It doesn't matter. I need to assume I am myself.

It doesn't really matter what the arguments are one way or the other, and you can see the merit in them. Re-Gene minds are made in a similar ways, past knowledge stashed into an AI chip, seeding the host brain with everything needed to function upon decanting. Could that have been done to you? Are you \${puppet_name}, cut loose at last, floating free?

You shake your head. That kind of reasoning is a trap. You remember who you are. How you got here. What your goals are. The desperate need to get your body back, put everything right. That's where the truth is. In your emotions, not in any arguments. As long as you believe that you're real, you are.

Belief. Confidence. You could never have come this far without them. Focus on that and leave any doubts behind. They matter less than what you do.

*set selfcertain true

#I hyperventilate, this is too much. I won't think about it.

You can feel your heart rate increasing. Breathe. Quickly. Is this a panic attack? Maybe. Probably. Filled with anxiety and painkillers, this is not the time to...

The time to...

You press your face into your hands, feeling bones underneath you skin. You can't break through it to your brain. Can't examine it for faults or truths. This is too much, you can't deal with this right now. Not on top of everything else.

"\${title}?" Dr. Mortum doesn't touch you, but \${mhis} voice breaks through your gasps. Not sobs. Just breathing.

"I can't deal with that right now." The words sounds like they are spoken by a stranger, someone who is not on the verge of falling apart.

"We don't have to." `$(mhis)` voice is surprisingly gentle. Kind. "Forgive me, this is my fault."

"It's fine." You pull in a breath. Then another one. Holds it. Forces yourself to slow down. Does the count. Breathe in for three. Hold for three. Breathe out for four. Stop panicking. Ignore it. Focus on the present. Move forward. "You said I'd be able to get out of the casts soon."

"Yes." Dr. Mortum eagerly switches subjects. "Better to focus on the positive side. The rehabilitation process will be painful, but at least you will be mobile."

`*if selfcertain`

"I can see why you might be worried." You look up at `$(mhim)`, your thin smile filled with confidence. "But I know who I am. And what's more..." here you pause, face softening. "Are you sure your speculations are not just driven by wistful thinking on your part?"

"Ah." There's a shadow crossing Dr. Mortum's face, a look of hesitation as if `$(mhe)`'s second-guessing `$(mhim)`self. "I suppose that is a fair question. The oldest trick to fall for as a scientist. Be influenced by what outcome you want, rather than what the truth is."

"I'm not blaming you. Either explanation is strange enough to be true. But I know I'm me. In here." You place your hand on your heart.

`*if mortum_flirting_puppet`

"And I'm sorry if that bothers you. I know is the better looking body."

"That's not it, `$(title)`," `$(mhis)` voice has gone soft. "I want to get to the truth of this. No matter the outcome. Yes, I admit there's some adjusting along the way, but we can work this out. Somehow. I just don't want us to be blindsided by the unexpected."

`*else`

"Please trust me on that."

"I do trust you, `$(title)`," `$(mhe)` leans closer. "I just wanted to raise a possible issue so we won't get blindsided by the unexpected."

"I'm afraid that's already too late." You can't help but laugh. "This shouldn't be possible. And yet it is."

"What seems impossible often seems so only because we lack the facts to make it understandable. So we need more facts."

"And for that, I need to get back on my feet." You pat one of the casts.

"Hopefully that will be tomorrow. You just have to promise me to be careful building back your strength. It will probably be a painful few weeks."

`*if selfdoubt`

"I just don't know," you mumble unable to think straight. How would you even begin to prove that you are you? "I don't know what kind of answer you're expecting here."

"I'm sorry," `$(mhe)` says, voice softening. "I didn't mean to distress you. I just think we should keep an open mind."

"Hah." You force yourself to smile, you can't let this derail you. "Open mind. When dealing with a telepath. That's funny."

"It wasn't intentional," `$(mhe)` assures. "I just don't want us to be blindsided by the unexpected. Whatever this is, it's unprecedented. We need facts."

"Facts. I suppose that's true. No matter what the truth is, it all starts the same way. Getting me back on my feet." That's what you need to focus on. Things you can control.

"Hopefully you will be out of your casts by tomorrow. You just have to promise me to be careful building back your strength. It will be a painful few weeks."

"I don't mind pain." Right now it might even help you focus. Give you a goal. Something to do. Something you `[i]can[/i]` do instead of speculating. Spotting the look on `$(mhis)` face you quickly add."But I'll make sure not to overdo it."

"That's all I can ask for." Dr. Mortum smiles, and you turn to devour your breakfast.

You need to build your strength back.

`*page_break` Are You Running Out of Time?

`*goto rehabtime`

`*label bosstalk`

"Good. Because we need to start thinking of the future." Dr. Mortum frowns, hesitating slightly before continuing. "What are you going to do once you're well? Is it safe to go back to your boss?"

"What makes you say that?" The words come automatically, a reflex, deflection.

*if ace

"The look on your face when you talk about them, \${title}. Why you were sent to Hollow Ground in the first place. Do you think they know that you've got some of your memories back?"

"I don't know. I never said anything, but..."

*if known_telepath

Your face twitches in a grimace. "It's hard to keep secrets from telepaths."

"Is knowing who you are a risk to them?" From the sound, Dr. Mortum seem to think that it might be.

"Good question." You run a hand over your face, trying to think of a good answer.

*else

"The look on your face when you talk about them, \${title}. Why you were sent to Hollow Ground in the first place. The fact that you seem more eager to remain here than go back."

"Ah. That." You run a hand over your face, trying to think of a good answer.

Your lies are catching up to you, and right now there is no way you can tell the truth and be believed. No proof of the absurdity that is your existence. No, what you need is a bigger, better lie.

But what kind of lie can get you the help that you need? What kind of story can make Dr. Mortum assist you in getting back to your own body? Can you even come up with a believable one? Take that risk?

\${!{swear}}.

The safest thing would be to play along and pretend that your boss is a threat to you. That will make sure that you can stay here long enough to heal. Be protected. You'd have more time to come up with a solution later. Could you really do this on your own? You'd like to think so, if you can get close enough to your old body you should be able to take it back. It's yours. You know it in your bones. As long as you are back on your feet, you should be able to catch \${villain_name} unawares. Out of armor. Could you trick \${chim} into mentally manipulate you? If they are able to do that while using your body that would force a connection you could use. If not... well, then you'd need to improvise.

You could also possibly reveal that \${villain_name} is \${name} \${surname}. That would mean that Dr. Mortum would automatically be wary. A villain connected to the Rangers.

*if known_telepath

A known telepath.

*else

You should tell \${mhim} that \${villain_name} is a telepath in that case. It wouldn't surprise you of the good doctor didn't already suspect that.

One less thing that could come out of the blue and bite you in the ass. But it might complicate things in the future, is it worth the risk?

If you dare to tell Dr. Mortum who \${villain_name} really is that opens up more options.

*if ace

You already know you went through a lot of trauma at Shroud's hands. Could you claim that it's your boss that has kept those memories suppressed? Blocked off to make you dependent and helpless? That you want to force them to remove that psychic block?

*else

Could you come up with a story that your boss have messed up something in your mind? That you need help to take them down and force them to remove the psychic block or compulsion?

That would mean that you might have help capturing your body, though it could be an awkward discussion once you've changed back and your puppet collapses. You probably need to tell the truth at that point, but if you're back in your own body it would be easy enough to switch back and forth to show \${mhim}.

All of your options includes some risk, the question is which one you'll pick.

*fake_choice

#I will say little but the fact that my boss is after me.

It's better to preserve what secrets you can. It's not like you can do anything until you're healed anyway. Dr. Mortum has not been the prying sort so far, you both have your secrets to preserve.

*set huntedbyboss true

#I will reveal who my boss is, but insist on handling it myself.

It's better to prepare for all eventualities, Dr. Mortum needs to know that there might be a telepath hunting for you. A telepath and former associate of the Rangers turned villain. That's going to go down well...

*set huntedbyboss true

*set mortumknowsvillainid true

#I will reveal my boss and say that I am suffering from a psychic block.

You might as well skirt as close to the truth as you can. You are a victim of \${villain_name}'s powers, aren't you? A bit of sympathy wouldn't go amiss, and it would explain any holes in your story. Besides, Dr. Mortum needs to know that there might be a telepath hunting for you. A telepath and former associate of the Rangers turned villain. That's going to go down well...

*set huntedbyboss true

*set mortumknowsvillainid true

*set psyblock true

"I'm sorry," you continue, as the pause has stretched into uncomfortable silence. "I never wanted to cause you any trouble."

"Well, I have more or less volunteered myself for that," \${mhe} says with a chuckle, which fades as soon as \${mhe} sees the serious look on your face. "What's the matter?"

*if mortumknowsvillainid

"I didn't plan to tell you this," you admit, doing your best to sound as tired as you feel. "I wanted to keep you safe. Out of it." The laugh is a surprise, it takes a moment to realize it is yours. Hurt. Cynical. "I wasn't supposed to find this out. Maybe that's why I was sent to talk to Hollow Ground. Maybe \${che} wanted to get rid of me. Found out that I knew."

"Knew what?" The worry is real now, Dr. Mortum listening with rapt attention.

"Who \${villain_name} really is." You rub your face hard, as if trying to chase away tears. "I mean I had seen \${chim} without the armor once or twice, but I didn't add things up. I didn't recognize the face. Not at first. It's not like \${che} posed for picture when active."

"I get the feeling I won't like this." A nervous twitch.

"You won't." You pause as you try to decide which feeling to focus on during the reveal.

*fake_choice

#Fear. I am afraid.

"\${villain_name} is a former hero," you admit with a nervous glance at the door. "And a powerful telepath. \${che} must have found out I had figured it out. Added things up."

"A former hero?" Dr. Mortum sounds surprised, as if \${mhe} hadn't expected that. "Who?"

"Sidestep." You swallow, voice quiet and nervous as if you were afraid of being overheard.

*if villain_name = "Sidestep"

"The real deal. Didn't even change the name." You shake your head.

"\${name} \${surname}. A former, and current, associate of the Rangers."

"Merde. Are you sure?"

"I mean..." you pause, as if you're considering your sources. "As sure as I can be." Your voice cracks without provocation. "I must have realized I knew and hoped that Hollow Ground would do this dirty work for him."

#Anger. I feel fooled.

"I should have realized something was wrong before." You gesture in annoyance, anger directed at your own gullibility. "I felt like I had seen *him somewhere before. I should have done my research faster. Maybe then I would have been better prepared.*" You let out a sigh, finally looking at villain_name is a former hero."

"You can't be serious." But it sounds like he believes you. Have he already had suspicions? "Who?"

"Sidestep." You spit out the name as if it was a curse.

if villain_name = "Sidestep"

"The real deal. Didn't even change the name." A bitter laugh.

he surname. A former, and current, associate of the Rangers. And a telepath."

"Merde. Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," you snap. "I checked and double checked. he must have realized I had figured it out. That's probably why I was sent to Hollow Ground. Must have hoped I'd get killed."

#Control. I am just about keeping myself together.

"I need you to understand that what I am telling you here will be a great risk for you too." You keep hold of Dr. Mortum's gaze as you continue. villain_name is a powerful telepath. And a former hero."

"A hero?" he shakes his head. "Who are you talking about?"

"Sidestep." You sigh as you speak the name.

if villain_name = "Sidestep"

"The original one. Didn't even change the name." A shake of your head.

he surname. A former, and current, associate of the Rangers."

"Merde. Are you sure about this?"

"I checked and double checked. I didn't want to believe it at first either. I should have run as soon as I suspected it, he must have realized I knew too much. That's probably why I was sent to Hollow Ground. Must have hoped I'd get killed."

else

"Oh nothing much." Your face twists in a pained smile. "Only the fact that my boss is trying to kill me. I've been thinking about it, and that's the only thing that makes sense."

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who has come to that conclusion. After what happened to you." Dr. Mortum gives you an awkward pat on your leg.

"Yeah. villain_name must have figured out I would end up in trouble if I went to Hollow Ground in his stead." You don't even have to work on your bitterness, you are angry at your own miscalculation there. "I think I have to assume I was meant to die there."

"It is safer to assume that is the case," Dr. Mortum agrees. villain_name

if villainy <= 30

doesn't have the most vicious reputation, but..."

elseif villainy >= 70

is as vicious as they come, and..."

else

is a villain, and..."

"...I am a risk." You finish his sentence with a sigh. "I can't risk being found."

*if ace

"I'm so sorry." \$!{mhe} shakes \${mhis} head. "I can't help but feel I set this in motion when I showed you that tape."

"I think this was a long time coming." You give \${mhim} an awkward smile. "Once the armor was done, I was expendable."

"Well, you're safe here." Dr. Mortum looks like \${mhe} is planning some extra security measures just to be sure. "We'll figure out where to go from here once you feel better."

*if ((psyblock) and (ace))

"I can't keep but wondering..." you touch your forehead, carefully as if you were worried it might break. "My past. Ace. What if \${villain_name} has been keeping that part suppressed? To keep me amnesiac? Dependent and loyal?"

"I wasn't going to say anything." The sigh is sympathetic and heavy. "I have been considering the very same thing."

*if ((psyblock) and (not(ace)))

"There's something else too," you continue, holding up a hand to assure \${mhim} it's not an immediate emergency. "I think \${mhe} might have been manipulating me. Not emotionally, but..." You touch your forehead. "Telepathically."

"Oh that's not good." Dr. Mortum frowns. "And yet, it sounds like you remember things that pose a risk to \${chis} interests?"

"Yeah," you admit. "Maybe \${che} didn't have time. Or thought it was necessary since I was sent to an early grave. But there are things missing." You touch your head.

*fake_choice

#"My past. I don't remember. Things don't add up."

"I don't remember my past. Not fully. There are bits and pieces," you admit, letting your words come from your heart. "But there's enough missing that things don't add up. It is blocked away, and I don't know why."

"And you think that \${villain_name} did this?" Dr. Mortum frowns, worried now.

"I'm sure of it. The more I try to remember what really happened back then, the more things fall apart. My actions don't make sense. I don't know why I did the things I did, nor how I ended up here." A nervous laugh. "\${che} must have done it. I wouldn't have forgotten things like that. It's important."

#"Something's been stolen from me, but I can't remember what."

"Something's been stolen from me." You touch your head, your voice finding words without effort. "I can't remember what. It's like a missing tooth, I can feel the hole, but I don't know what was there. Only that it's gone."

"And you think that \${villain_name} did this?" Dr. Mortum frowns, worried now.

"I don't see who else would have. Unless we have more telepaths running around messing with my head." A nervous laugh. "No. \$!{che} must have done it. There's nobody else."

#"I don't feel right. My emotions are wrong."

"I don't feel right," you start, hugging yourself. "My emotions are wrong. No, not what I feel for you," a quick look of assurance at Dr. Mortum. "You feel more real than I do right now. If you weren't here I don't know what I'd do. Who I'd be." The words are strange, but you let them flow regardless.

"I am here, \${title}. And I'm not going anywhere." \$!{mhe} is frowning now, worried.

"I think \${villain_name} has done something to me. Changed things in here." You touch your chest. "Maybe to keep me loyal so far, I don't know. But it feels wrong. I feel... manipulated."

"That's a worrying thought." \$!{mhe} shakes \${mhis} head. "Telepaths are dangerous. Complicated." There's a twitch on \${mhis} face you're not sure how to interpret .

*if psyblock

"I want to be whole." Your voice gets stronger, as if you are trying to convince yourself. "There are so many things I don't know, about myself, about my past..."

"And only one person who might be able to give you the answers." There's a tenseness to \${mhis} voice sharp enough to cut. "I see what you're getting at."

"I'm not asking for anything," you lie. The seed has been planted, now it need time to sprout. "Just enough time to get back on my feet. I'll work something out."

"[i]We'll[/i>] work something out, \${title}." \${mhe} smiles and for a moment you almost feel bad about the lies. Even if they are for a good cause.

The truth is a risk neither of you can handle right now.

*goto rehabtime

*if not(psyblock)

"Thank you," you say with heartfelt honesty. You mean it. Dr. Mortum didn't need to stick \${mhis} neck out for you, and yet here you are.

"Don't mention it, \${title}." \${mhe} smiles and for a moment you almost feel bad about the lies. Even if they are for a good cause.

The truth is a risk neither of you can handle right now.

*goto rehabtime

*label rehabtime

[b]Some grueling weeks later, Dr. Mortum's laboratory.

Thump, thump, thump, your feet hits the treadmill, the pain making you grit your teeth. No pain no gain. You're finally well enough to run, that's what matters. It's been weeks of rehab, tentative first steps turning into carefully curated stretching exercises. Dr. Halabi is good at her job, though far too patient for you. Pushing the limits of your body is what you do, even when said body is not your own. Familiar though. In the way it moves. Not back to your usual form, but close enough that you don't feel hampered.

You can move.

*if puppet_skill = "running"

It feels like freedom. Not being trapped in bed anymore, giving your body up to the slow rhythm of your own footsteps. Peaceful. Meditative. It makes you feel like you can finally move forward. No longer helpless.

*else

A burning in your lungs forces you to pause, turning off the treadmill so you can catch your breath. Your main focus was never on endurance training, that was just one part of the package trying to turn your puppet body into a balanced fighter. Not as good as your real one, of course, but good enough that you wouldn't feel helpless.

Helpless.

A sneer crosses your face, and you let it sit there for a moment, investigating why it appeared. Was it aimed at yourself? Your futile efforts of making this body into a replacement for your own? Or perhaps the mistakes that led you to end up in bed in the first place?

*fake_choice

#I can't turn this body into a weapon, I need to be smart.

You can't turn this body into a weapon, at least not one dangerous enough to threaten \${villain_name}. You know that. Even out of armor, your own body comes with decades of the hardest training imaginable, and that's before taking your telepathy into account. That's why you need to play this smart. Come up with a plan.

#I messed up once, I can't afford to do it again.

You messed up once when you decided it was a good idea to challenge Hollow Ground by disobeying \${hghis} instructions. A stupid mistake, you should have realized something like this would happen. You've been too used to be able to talk yourself out of danger by using your puppet's innate charisma, that's not the most reliable of weapons. You need to come up with a better plan this time, you can't afford to make another mistake like this again.

#No, this is about the bastard who's taken my body.

No, you decide. The sneer is not aimed at you or your own shortcomings, its aimed at the bastard who stole your body. Whoever did this will pay, one way or the other. You'll claw your flesh back if it's the last thing you do. All you need is a plan.

Dr. Mortum has hinted at being able to help, but \${mhe}'s been surprisingly cagey what that might mean. You don't think \${mhe}'s bluffing, it's more likely that you're not going to like what \${mhe} is about to propose. Or that \${mhe}'s worried that you'd try to push \${mhim} to act faster, before you had fully recovered.

Or, and this makes you pause,

*if puppet_skill = "running"

slowing down enough to grab a towel to wipe

*else

wiping

the sweat off your face, \${mhe} might be scared. Scared of facing \${villain_name}. Scared of what might happen.

*if mortum_flirting_puppet

Scared of losing you.

*if mortumknows

Scared of losing [i]this[/i] you.

"Don't wear yourself out, \${title}." Dr. Mortum smiles as \${mhe} walks past, still ignorant of everything that seethes within you. Secrets. Yours. So many times you have started a conversation only to break it off before it became too real.

"That's exactly what I'm trying to do."

*if puppet_skill = "running"

You finally slow down to a halt, turning off the treadmill. Out of breath, but not terribly so. Legs aching, but not in a bad way. Progress.

*else

You give the treadmill a look, tempted to get back on it. But you've had enough for now.

"Well, as long as you don't injure yourself further." \${mhe} looks you over, as if \${mhe} expected to be able to see all the aches and pains you're suppressing. "You've made remarkable progress."

"I know." You stretch, feeling your muscles pop. "But at this point this place is starting to feel like a prison. I need some fresh air."

Would it be it safe? At this point the Rangers must have given up on you. \${puppet_name} was never more than a cog in a grander machinery, surely not someone they'd keep actively hunting. As long as you avoid the areas you know they frequent, there's no reason you'd run into each other. And your body-snatching impostor... you doubt they know that you are stuck in this body. Nobody knew you you would be able to survive losing your own. That would be impossible to predict. Whoever the culprit is, they must think you're dead. Scattered to the wind.

*if pharmacy

They've been active as \${villain_name}. You've seen the occasional headline, nothing major, but enough to send you into a spiral of panic and rage every time. Pushed down. Buried. Used to push you through the rehab.

*fake_choice

#I need to get better fast to stop this.

You need to heal, that's what kept you going. Get well enough so you can put a stop to this. You're not sure exactly how yet, but you'll work something out.

#I feel more like the impostor every time this happens.

You feel more and more like an impostor every time this happens. That's \${villain_name} out there, not you. What if you're in the wrong here? What if that really is \${villain_name} and you are... nothing but yourself?

No. You push that feeling down again. You're you. You've sacrificed too much to get here to have your very identity ripped away too.

#I'll have my revenge soon enough.

Revenge is a dish best served cool, but at this point it feels like it will be frozen by the time you get around to it. Whoever has done this will pay, of course, you just wish you could do it faster. The fact that your body is flesh and blood is such an inconvenience at times, you never knew how good you have it being able to switch back and forth when one body was down for the count.

*else

They've been active as \${villain_name}. You've seen the occasional headline,

*if rangersarmor

though you have no idea how they've managed to pull that off. The Rangers were supposed to have your armor. What happened? How did they manage to lose yet another thing from their vault? How incompetent are they?

*else

rubbing salt in the wound.

No major heists, no, there's been minor robberies. Petty theft.

*if villainy < 50

Wanton brutality. Civilians ending up in the hospital

The last one was a pharmacy. An ordinary pharmacy.

*fake_choice

#A pharmacy! The indignity.

Not only has this impostor stolen your body, they have stolen your armor. Your identity. And what's worse, they are using it to perform petty crimes.

A pharmacy! The indignity.

#You have no idea how this is possible.

You have no idea how this is possible. Is this impostor good enough to control the armor well enough to use it offensively? What does the Rat King feel about that? Can't they feel the difference? Or are they coerced somehow?

This doesn't make sense.

*if (villainy < 50) #They are hurting people in your name.

You read the articles, trying to figure out the fate of the hurt civilians. Serious injuries. No deaths so far. Whoever this impostor is they don't care about hurting people. Or they are sloppy.

Neither is good.

*if ((nokill) or ((repentkill) or (saving)))

What if they kill someone? That would be on your conscience and reputation.

*else

Your armor is dangerous, even though the nanovores are neutered they could still cause a lot of damage with an inept user.

#That's your armor they're wearing. [b]Yours![/b]

The absolute gall of the impostor almost leaves you speechless. That's your armor. Your name. Your reputation. [b]Yours![/b]

You didn't put all this work into crafting you a new identity for someone else to steal it right under your nose. As if stealing your body wasn't bad enough.

"Fresh air," Dr. Mortum says, derailing your train of thought before it can run you down. "The air quality down here is quite superior to what's on the street up top. Less particles, far less stench."

"That's not what I mean," you start, but the hint of a smile on \${mhis} face makes you chuckle. "But than you for trying to make me cheer up."

"Joking aside, I do understand feeling trapped." \${mhe} gestures to the room, the normally open space cluttered with the equipment you've been needing to get back on your feet.

"I need to get some new clothes." You look down on your training outfit. Dr. Mortum has brought what you have asked for, but there is a difference to picking things out yourself. That was one of your simple joys in this body, to be able to go to a clothing store and dress up the way you wanted. No fear. No hiding. A beautiful reflection in the mirror. It had all felt like such a game, and now? Now the stakes were real.

"You're not a prisoner," Dr. Mortum assures. "I could have driven you to the store earlier if you wanted to do some browsing."

"Not on crutches." You look down at your legs. Shaky. But whole. "I didn't want anybody to see me broken."

"You're not broken. Just hurt."

"Same difference." You shake your legs, one after the other. Sore. Functional. "Besides..."

*fake_choice

#"... I didn't want to get you in trouble."

"Besides, I didn't want anybody to see us together." Your smile is softer than you meant. "I don't want to get you in trouble."

"I thank you for your consideration, but I can take care of myself." Dr. Mortum sounds flattered but amused. "Though I admit that seeing you work this hard has made me realize that perhaps I should try a little harder to stay in shape as well."

#"... it would have been bad if I was spotted."

"Besides, it would have been bad if I was spotted." You look down, avoiding \${mhis} smile. "Hard to escape on crutches."

"That is a fair point." Dr. Mortum chuckles. "And I am afraid I'm not exactly the type to carry you to safety in my arms. You are the one working hard to stay in shape."

#"...trying on clothes with crutches is not ideal."

"Besides, trying on clothes with crutches is not ideal." You stretch your leg, pleased that you've gained some muscle back. "Changing rooms are too cramped."

"That is a fair point." Dr. Mortum nods sagely. "Buying retail is more complicated than it needs to be at times." There is a look on \${mhis} face that seems almost haunted, though you're not sure what the cause is.

"Do you have a car I can borrow that's not your fancy one?" You wring the towel in your hands, trying not to look anxious. Despite your bravado you are aware that going outside is a risk. But you need to do this eventually, no time like the present. "And some money. I'll pay you back. I just need some clothes. And maybe a haircut."

"I doubt my finances will be ruined by that," \${mhe} says with a fond smile. "And if you want to, you can take one of the old trucks. The blue one should look presentable enough as long as you don't go into the fancy parts of town. I mostly use it when I need to haul goods incognito."

"I'll just hit up a mall." The words come too fast for thought, gratitude making you dangerously soft. The mall. Yes, why not. "Nobody will look for me there."

Nobody.

You suddenly feel lightheaded, missing what Dr. Mortum says in return. Nothing important you think, so you smile and excuse yourself. You need a shower now, that way you can hit the mall when the crowds get off work. Blend in.

Just another nobody.

*page_break A Perfect Plan.

*set mallsafe true

*goto mallmoney

*label mallmoney

[b]Silver Drive Mall.

You park the truck outside the mall, too far away for your liking but with the amount of cars here at least there will be crowds to hide in. This is a fairly central area, having been reclaimed enough that the mall is already starting to look worn down. Residential areas surrounding it. Several bus lines for people without cars. Silver Lake is surrounded by greenery, a magnet for

people without the means to relax elsewhere. You shouldn't look out of place.

Be normal.

You've chosen to wear your sportswear outfit, dressing down, with a cap shadowing your face. Nobody special. Shoulders slumped. A bag over one shoulder, a wad of cash burning in your pocket. Dr. Mortum has been generous, you doubt you'd be able to spend half of it in a place like this.

Out in the open.

*goto mallentrance

*comment fuse from elsewhere, chased to the mall.

*label mallentrance

*fake_choice

#I walk fast, keeping an eye out for anything out of place.

There's a tingling sensation down your spine, the sun is too hot, the asphalt absorbs the heat, turning the parking lot into a griddle. You walk fast, scanning the place for

*if mallmoney

anybody familiar. Anybody dangerous. You have no idea why, none of the Rangers would be caught dead here.

*else

pursuers. You don't see anything that looks out of place, no immediate sense of danger. No pursuit. Good.

You let out a sigh.

*if daring >= 70

Have you lost your cool? You used to be braver than this, laughing in the face of danger. And now? Now you feel like you should be shrinking from shadow to shadow.

*elseif daring <= 30

Better safe than sorry. You haven't lived this long by taking unnecessary risks.

*else

So far so good.

You'll still feel better once you're inside.

#I find a group of people and shadow them inside.

There's a tingling sensation down your spine, the sun is too hot, the asphalt absorbs the heat, turning the parking lot into a griddle. You need to get out of here fast, but also not be noticed. A group of young \${puppet_gender} walks past, and you tag along behind them. They're younger than you, but not enough that anybody would notice from a distance thanks to your clothes.

*if mallmoney

They're dressed cheaply as well, which makes you smile in relief. None of the Rangers would be caught dead here.

*else

There's no sigh of pursuit, hopefully you've managed to lose them by now.

You'll still feel better once you're inside.

#I walk with confidence, looking like I belong.

Looking nervous would only make people take notice of you. Better to walk with confidence, like you belong here. There's a tingling sensation down your spine as you head towards the entrance, the sun is too hot, the asphalt absorbs the heat, turning the parking lot into a griddle. You pretend not to notice the single bead of sweat running down your spine.

*if mallmoney

There's nothing to fear. None of the Rangers would frequent a place like this.

*else

You must have shaken off your pursuers by now, as long as you don't stick out, nobody will pay attention.

You reach the door without issue, disappearing into the air-conditioned interior. The large windows behind you make you feel exposed, so you chide yourself to breathe as you walk past the first stores. Small specialist shops, not the general ones you need. You feel better once you've headed deeper into the mall, out of sight from anyone not already here. Safe within the crowd. Ambling forward, following the leisurely flow, you take in the various stores lining the central walkway. A faint smell of coffee from one of the cafes, a scent of spicy food from another stall. Gentle music through the speakers, a faint murmur of people talking, a crying baby off in the distance.

Safe. Normal.

*if mallmoney

*goto shoppingtime

*else

*goto shoplifting

*label shoppingtime

Too bad you feel anything but. Under your cap, your hair is a mess. First the accident, then several weeks of untended growth. There must be a hairdresser somewhere in the mall, but you should pick up some proper clothes first. Make an attempt to look normal. That will make people less likely to remember you. You will be a lot more exposed sitting at a hairdressers than walking around in a clothing store.

Subject yourself to being scrutinized. Closely.

*fake_choice

#That's what this body is good for, right?

You don't know why you feel a shiver of unease running down your spine at that thought. The whole purpose of this body was to be able to stand up to scrutiny, right? Be normal. Nobody special. Attractive, sure, but nothing more than that.

You've stayed cooped up for too long if you're starting to let something like that bother you.

#There's no escaping it. Vacation is over, back to work.

There's no escaping what you have to do. Back into the eye of the public. Be noticed. Be seen. You're not at your best like this, you feel and look like someone who spent weeks in the hospital, then weeks cooped up inside. You need to take back control. And to do that, the first step is to look the part.

Get the mask on. Nail down that smile. Get the spring back in your step. You are the one in control now.

#On second thought, maybe I'll fix up my hair on my own.

The thought of sitting there at the hairdresser staring at the mirror gives you a chill down your spine. Maybe that is a bad idea, you can fix your own hair. Get some scissors and even out the worst parts, hide the rest with a suitable hairstyle. Maybe color it yourself. Or shave it. You have options.

It is at least something to think about, you don't have to make that decision right now. Get clothes first, see how you feel later.

You let out a sigh at your reflection in the shop window, then quicken your step down the isle. You need a large store, where nobody will care much who you are or how long you take. The selection will be worse, but if you wanted quality you wouldn't be here. Dressing down. It feels like the wrong thing to do in this body, so you remind yourself that this is just the first step. Like the wobbly ones you took on crutches after the casts came off. Now you can run again, whatever you pick up here will only have to tide you over.

*page_break No Time To Be Picky.

The outlet store turned out to be your safest option. A large floor area filled with a labyrinth of last year's fashion brands, knockoffs, and cheap junk. No effort is made on having the store looking good, this is all for shopping cheap in bulk while hoping for the odd quality find. You should be able to find something that fits you here, and the staff didn't look the type to help you unprompted. The money Dr. Mortum gave you will be more than enough for a few outfits, and since they also stock a small selection of shoes, you can get everything you need in one place.

*if precognition >= 50

This isn't a good day to linger, you can't shake the uneasy feeling. Get this done fast and get out of here.

Clothes first.

You make a slow circuit of the floor to gauge the selection before you make your decision. Better than you thought, though the quality might be lacking. Not that it matters, this is a stopgap measure. Something to tide you over until you dare to return to your apartment. Until things are back to normal. It's a relief not to have to worry about shoplifting anything, you are aware that you look suspicious enough in your state without having to worry about avoiding staff.

Instead, you focus fully on picking out what you want to try on. Normally you have a very distinct style in this body, elegant, expensive and stylish. That hint of sophisticated sex-appeal and danger. Not exactly the kind of style you can pick up at a place like this, at least not without risking it looking cheap. You're going off the rack here, chances are these clothes won't fit you as well as what you normally have in your closet. Considering that, what style of clothes are you picking up?

*goto fuseclothes

*label fuseclothes

*comment ADD STYLE CODE AND MORE VARIATIONS LATER

*fake_choice

#As close to what \${puppet_name} would normally wear.

You see no reason to change what \${puppet_name} usually wears. You just want to get out of this annoying tracksuit and feel human again.

*set hotstyle true

#Extremely normal and bland.

You don't want to be recognized, and the best way to do that is to dress down. Don't flatter your good looks, try to be as normal as you possibly can. Just another face on the street. With the right haircut and accessories you'd be unrecognizable. Maybe you should pick up a pair of glasses too, that can really transform your face.

*set normalstyle true

#Practical to move and fight in.

You have a mission, you can't afford to think what you want to look like. No, what you need is practical clothes. Durable. Lots of pockets. Things you can move in freely. Some sort of roomy coat where you can hide weapons. Maybe layers so you can fit some body armor under the top layer? You don't know what you can find here, but at least you know what you're looking for now.

*set combatstyle true

#Fashionable, but not in \${puppet_name}'s normal style.

You still want to look good, but you know you should probably try to find a way to look less like \${puppet_name} used to. That shouldn't be impossible, you've got a lot of options here, all it takes is some careful browsing to put a suitably eclectic outfit together. Something to make you feel good.

*set coolstyle true

*comment DEPENDING ON OWN STYLE SET selfstyle true. Fix code there.

Strolling through the racks, you run your fingers over the garments, feeling their textures as you try to pick some likely options. It's an old habit, you never really cared much how you looked, but you did care how your clothes felt on your body. Not just the fit but the feel of the fabric. How it felt under your fingertips was the closest prediction you could make to how it would sit on your skin. You couldn't exactly try things on then, and more than once you threw out clothes as fast as you had stolen them because they felt wrong.

*fake_choice

#Pain was easier to handle than a scratchy clothing tag.

You always wondered if your nerves were just wired wrong. Nobody else seemed to complain their clothes felt weird, or be driven to distraction by a forgotten clothing tag. That was always the first thing you did, cut away all tags and labels and try to excise every thread of the remains. Sometimes a corner remained, discovered hours later driving you to distraction. The same went for certain seams.

The fact that your pain-gate worked for a knife in your leg and not a piece of fabric always struck you as profoundly unfair.

#Because they reminded me of the Farm.

Even if you avoided the colors or the looks, there were certain texture that always made you remember the clothes you wore at the Farm. Something about the sound they make, that feeling of being naked despite being covered by fabric. As if it was made from fingers, ready to grab you when you were least expecting it. Not silky. Not plastic. Not rough. Too thin, and at the same time, too stiff.

Wrong, in all the ways you could never articulate.

#It is different in this body, texture is just texture.

It is an old habit, sure, but it doesn't matter in the same way in this body. Sure, there are nice textures, and there are less than pleasing ones, but they don't set you off the same way. They're just different. Some rough. Some silky. There's no value judgment in your fingertips, no disgusted recoil as you hit something that doesn't agree with you. No need to rub your fingers against your leg until the sensation is obliterated from your memory.

It's just cloth, nothing more.

*if mallmoney

*goto shoppingtime2

*else

*goto shoplifting2

*label shoppingtime2

Piece by piece, you pick your wardrobe. No need to be stingy, you'd rather have too much to try on than too little, especially as off-the-rack sizes can vary. You don't want to run back and forth if you can help it, get it all into the changing booth and then pick out your best outfit and a backup. Once that is done you can get some shoes and then worry about your hair. There should be a public restroom outside where you can change.

But first you need to decide into what.

You smile at the changing room assistant, and as you're not carrying any suspiciously large bags or clothes, you're allowed to pass without interference. At least your smile still has that sort of power, even dressed down like this.

A different sort of power than telepathy, but one that can be almost as helpful at getting people off your back. If less likely to be forgotten. You arrange your clothes on the hangers, pulling off your cap to decide what to try first.

*page_break Decisions, decisions.

The changing room is large enough that you can undress without contorting yourself too badly. Without clothes your body looks thinner, less fit. The bruises have faded, but there are reddish scars on your legs where surgical incisions were made. You've lost some muscle tone. The light in here does you no favors, the harshness of it bringing out every imperfection. You do your best to focus on what you have gained rather than what you've lost. Think positive and the dice will surely roll your way. You can move, and right now that will have to be enough.

As you change, you catch a glimpse of your reflection in the changing room mirror, wincing at the sight. Dr. Mortum didn't have many mirrors around other than in the bathroom, but this is the first full-body reflection you can't avoid.

Your body. Not your body.

*if samegender

*if trans

A real \${puppet_gender}. Human.

*else

Human.

*else

*if nb

Human.

*elseif trans

\${!puppet_gender}. Like they designated you.

*else

A \${puppet_gender}. Unlike you.

*if ((samegender) and (genderquestion))

It brings back feelings you've tried to push down. The awkwardness of being seen as a \${gender} that you haven't had to deal with since the crash and injuries. After being stuck in this body. Same gender. A different experience. After spending this much time as your puppet, eating, living, breathing the \${sex} experience you've come to a conclusion...

*fake_choice

#Being a \${gender} wasn't the issue, being a Re-Gene was.

You thought you didn't want to be a \${gender}. But, being immersed like this, in another body with the same gender have shown you that your issues lay elsewhere.

In your lack of humanity.

You've never had a choice not to be the outsider, to be a pale imitation of what you are living now. That's what your issues were. Not in whether people saw you as a \${gender} or not.

*set genderquestion false

#I really don't want to be a \${gender}.

You always wondered if it was a reaction to being a Re-Gene. If maybe what you weren't longing for was the easy acceptance of humanity. But, being trapped in a human body for this long has proven that's not the case at all. This body is handsome, fit, desirable and human. And yet you want to crawl out of your own skin as people keep treating you as something you're not.

\${sex}. The Farm designated you as that, but right now you want to be anything but.

*set genderdoubts true

#I don't know. I'm still confused.

You really don't know. There's too many things mixing together, humanity, gender, attractiveness. You love this body. You hate this body. You want your own body back. How are you supposed to know who you are? What you feel? You've had too much time to think, trapped here, but none of your thoughts makes sense.

You wish you had someone to talk to.

#No time to think about myself right now. Only the mission.

You've got bigger issues right now than whether people see you as a \${gender} or not. Really. You need your proper body back so you can get on with your work. Feelings are irrelevant. Unprofessional.

So you push them away, your comfort is not what's important right now.

*elseif genderquestion

A

puppet_gender. You roll that thought around in your mouth for a moment, almost speaking the words out loud in the changing room like a mad {puppet_gender}. It shouldn't matter, but it does. Somehow. You've never immersed yourself this deeply in your puppet body before. Not just masquerading, but committing to all the ugly drawbacks of it. Living this new life without breaks.

It's made you come to a conclusion.

*fake_choice

*if (not(nb)) #Being a \${gender} wasn't the cause of my discomfort.

You thought you didn't want to be a \${gender}. But, being immersed like this, in the body of a real \${puppet_gender} have shown you that your issues lay elsewhere.

Not in your body. Or your presentation. Maybe in your lack of humanity? Maybe in how you always felt like an impostor, pretending to be something you were not?

You're not sure. Maybe it's simply that you don't like yourself very much.

*set genderquestion false

*if (nb) #Gender really isn't for me.

Being immersed like this, in the body of a \${puppet_gender} have shown you that you were right all along. Gender isn't for you, the binary is a trap you don't want to be a part of. You acted like a \${puppet_gender} in this body because it was simpler to play up the act. Be something people could slot into a box.

Be the \${puppet_gender} of people's imagination. A useful act. But, in the end, just an act. Being trapped in this body proves it.

*set genderquestion false

#Being a \${puppet_gender} feels more natural than ever.

You always wondered if your unease with your body was a reaction to being a Re-Gene. If maybe what you weren't longing for was the easy acceptance of humanity. But, being trapped in a human body for this long has proven that's not the case at all. You're standing here in the harsh lights of a changing room, scarred and ungroomed, lacking all the things you used to make this body desirable. For others, and for yourself. And yet, it feels more natural than your own.

You look like hell, sure, but you look like a \${puppet_gender}. And that matters more than you ever thought it would.

*set genderdoubts true

#I don't know. I'm still confused.

You really don't know. There's too many things mixing together, humanity, gender, attractiveness. You love this body. You hate this body. You want your own body back. How are you supposed to know who you are? What you feel? You've had too much time to think, trapped here, but none of your thoughts makes sense.

You wish you had someone to talk to.

#No time to think about myself right now. Only the mission.

You've got bigger issues right now than whether people see you as a \${gender} or a \${puppet_gender}. Really. You need your proper body back so you can get on with your work. Feelings are irrelevant. Unprofessional.

So you push them away, your comfort is not what's important right now.

*elseif ((samegender) or (nb))

It feels...

*fake_choice

#Strange. Like I will be found out at any moment.

Human.

*if trans

\${puppet_gender}.

This body is that. And now so are you? You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and Dr. Mortum treats you as if you were what you look like.

*if mortumknows

Even though \${mhe} should know better.

So why do you still feel like an impostor? As if you'd accidentally strip another layer and reveal tattoos underneath your skin? Is this what you would feel like if you ever managed to magically remove the tattoos on your own body?

*if trans

Remold yourself to be who you are?

Would you still jump at shadows? Dread your own reflection? How deep did they scar you?

The answer is disconcerting enough to make you avoid it.

#Right. I need this. I need this so badly.

Human.

*if trans

\${puppet_gender}.

This body is that. And now so are you. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and Dr. Mortum treats you as if you were what you look like.

*if mortumknows

Even though \${mhe} should know better.

You hate being locked out of your own body but it is also the most deeply affirming experience you've ever had. A proof of concept. A blueprint for what it would look like to be human.

*if trans

A \${puppet_gender} down to the last details.

You want it. You need it. So badly.

#Wrong. I can't forget that I am a Re-Gene.

Human. This body is that. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and Dr. Mortum treats you as if you were what you look like.

*if mortumknows

Even though \${mhe} should know better.

And yet you can't forget that no matter how you look in the changing room mirror you're not a human. You're a Re-Gene. A tool. Not even cattle. You can't forget that. This body isn't an escape. It's a temptation.

It's a trap.

*elseif trans

It feels...

*fake_choice

#Strange. Like I will be found out at any moment.

Human. Something you never was. \${puppet_gender}. Something you left behind. This body is both, and now so are you. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and Dr. Mortum treats you as if you were what you look like.

*if mortumknows

Even though \${mhe} should know better.

So why do you still feel like an impostor standing here? As if you'd accidentally strip down another layer and reveal tattoos underneath your skin? Is this what you would feel like if you ever managed to magically remove the tattoos on your own body? Remake yourself as the \${gender} you are?

Would you still jump at shadows? Dread your own reflection? How deep did they scar you?

The answer is disconcerting enough to make you avoid it.

#Horrible. I'm not a \${puppet_gender}, this is a nightmare.

You're not a \${puppet_gender}. You've spent too many years remaking yourself to slide back into that pit, and yet here you are. Drowning in people's looks, the way they treat you, talk about you, looks at you. Human, sure, better than a Re-Gene but also so much more gendered. You're an impostor here, not just pretending to be a human, but forced into a role you had left behind.

This is a nightmare. You need to wake up.

#Wrong. I can't forget that I am a Re-Gene.

A \${puppet_gender}. Bad enough, but you can deal. You've lived that nightmare for years, but this is new. This is worse. Human. This body. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and Dr. Mortum treats you as if you were what you look like.

*if mortumknows

Even though \${mhe} should know better..

You look like hell as you stare into the changing room mirror. It's a liar, showing you as something you're not. Human. Laughable. You're a Re-Gene. A tool. Not even cattle. You can't forget that. This body isn't an escape. It's a torture device.

It's a trap.

*else

It feels...

*fake_choice

#Nervous. Like I will be found out at any moment.

Human. This body is that. And now so are you? You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and Dr. Mortum treats you as if you were what you look like.

*if mortumknows

Even though \${mhe} should know better.

So why do you still feel like an impostor standing here? As if you'd accidentally strip down another layer and reveal tattoos underneath your skin? Is this what you would feel like if you ever managed to magically remove the tattoos on your own body? Would you still jump at shadows? Dread your own reflection? How deep did they scar you?

The answer is disconcerting enough to make you avoid it.

#Being a \${puppet_gender} feels strangely comfortable.

Human. A \${puppet_gender}. This body is that. And now so are you. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and Dr. Mortum treats you as if you were what you look like.

*if mortumknows

Even though \${mhe} should know better.

It feels strangely comfortable. You've never stayed a \${puppet_gender} for this long before, it feels more and more natural as time pass.

Is it your humanity or your \${puppet_gender}hood?

You're not sure, but there is something precious here to be found in this otherwise disastrous situation. Something to learn about yourself. You just wish it was under better circumstances.

*set genderquestion true

#Wrong. I can't forget that I am a Re-Gene.

Human. This body is that. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and Dr. Mortum treats you as if you were what you look like.

*if mortumknows

Even though \${mhe} should know better.

And yet you can't forget that no matter how much you stare into the mirror in front of you, all it shows you are lies. You're not a human. You're a Re-Gene. A tool. Not even cattle. You can't forget that. This body isn't an escape. It's a temptation.

It's a trap.

\${!{swear}}. You shake your head and start to pull on clothes instead. There will be time for thinking later, right now you have a job to do. Dress this body for the occasion.

No. The thought strikes you too quick to deflect. Not dress this body. Dress you.

This is you.

This is, for all extents and purposes, you now.

*if selfstyle

The clothes you have picked

*if mirror_image

accentuates your resemblance. As if you were unconsciously trying to evoke who you can't be.

*elseif normalstyle

looks what you might have worn a few years ago, desperate not to stick out. As if you were trying to summon back a past you can no longer touch.

*else

are not the ones you would pick to wear for your own body. Is that why they feel wrong? Had you expected your skin to change and not just your wardrobe?

*elseif mirror_image

You always did look similar, and right now you find yourself scrutinizing your face for new lines. Have you been in this body long enough now that your personality is starting to show on your face?

*else

Can you see it in your eyes as you peer into the mirror? Does it show in the new lines appearing on your face, as if your personality is forcing the clay of your puppet to adapt?

You straighten your clothes and meet your gaze in the mirror.

*if selfdoubt

Dr. Mortum's words come back to you once more. Are you really who you think you are? \${name} \${surname}? Or are you who keeps looking at you from the mirror?

\${puppet_name}.

*if ace

Ace.

Your face twitch, and the reflection echoes the movement. You. Not you.

*fake_choice

#Focus. On. The. Job. I'm in control.

You meet your eyes and whisper between closed lips. Just for the two of you. "Focus. On. The. Job." The reflection doesn't reply, which is a relief.

For a nervous moment you were almost afraid that it would. But no, you are the one in control here.

#I'm hyperventilating, that's not good.

You meet your eyes, filled with nervous agitation. Are you hyperventilating? Yes. Yes you are. Why can't you... no. No. You need to stop. Hold your breath. Then breathe. Slowly. In and out.

You can't lose it here,

*if selfdoubt

can't start doubting yourself in a lousy changing room.

*else

lost in someone else's body in a lousy changing room.

You're better than that. Just breathe.

*set bodypanic true

#The body doesn't matter. My mind is still mine.

You meet your eyes and judge your reflection in the mirror. Does the body really matter? It's just another outfit, flesh and bones instead of cloth. Your mind is still yours, and you can see it reflected in the eyes that stares back at you.

*if selfdoubt

You admit that Dr. Mortum's question had you worried for a moment, but the more you thought about it, the less it rung true.

You know who you are.

*set selfdoubt false

*set selfcertain true

#I could break the mirror right now and nobody could stop me.

You could break the mirror. The thought is there at the same moment you raise your hand, readying yourself for an attack. The reflection almost smirks, or maybe that is your face? With an act of will you open your fist, forcing yourself to adjust your clothes instead.

*if selfdoubt

Your hand. Your. Your. Your.

Don't lose it. Ignore the staring eyes.

*set bodypanic true

Clothes. You look over at the selection on the hangers. That's why you're here. No other reason. You grit your teeth and change back to the clothes you arrived in. Your training gear, masquerading as fashion. You have one new outfit you know works, and grabs the rest without trying it on. Dr. Mortum gave you enough money, you can afford some bad decisions in there.

You need to go.

*if bodypanic

You're not sure how long you can keep yourself together.

*elseif precognition >= 50

It's not wise to linger.

*else

This is just the first stop.

Walking out the dressing room with your haul, you smile at the staff, charm and confidence as natural as you can fake it. No. Not fake. It is still there, even after all this. Even when tired, hurting and frustrated. Guess what people say about fake it 'til you make it really is true.

The bunch of clothes in your arms makes you take a beeline through the neighboring isle of bags and accessories. You need a roomy backpack that won't clash too openly with your outfit. Plastic bags are nice, but they won't leave your hands free.

*if precognition >= 40

And you need that.

None of the shoes in here look better than your current trainers, which is a disappointment. You did see a promising shoe stores right when you entered, so you suppose that is easy enough to pick up once you're out of here. Right now you're starting to feel watched, so you straighten your back and head to the cashier. Your money gets whatever suspicious security staff that kept an eye on you off your back, and you put your newly bought clothes into your backpack before heading off to your next stop.

*fake_choice

#Hairdresser first. I need this mess fixed.

You need to get your hair fixed, and it will be better to do that before changing into your new outfit. There's going to be those annoying little hairs everywhere otherwise, and you'll have to suffer them while shopping for shoes. This way you can drop your workout outfit in the laundry once you return.

*set hd true

*goto hairdresser

#Shoes. The outfits I bought won't work with trainers.

An outfit isn't complete unless you've got the right shoes for it. And let's be frank, your trainers doesn't really match what you have purchased. It's not even a question about fashion, it is one of those telltale signs that can ruin your whole presentation. A sign that something is wrong, a hint of disguise. You can't allow cracks in your facade, presentation was always \${puppet_name}'s first weapon.

*set sh true

*goto shoes

#I'll change into my new clothes first, that's my priority.

You'd better change into your new clothes first. That's the reason you bought them after all. A fresh start.

*if normalstyle

Fitting in a bit better.

*if hotstyle

Looking your best.

*if combatstyle

A practical outfit.

*if coolstyle

A better look.

Once that is done you can start to think about fixing your hair or picking up some better shoes. Everything will feel easier when you're dressed for the part. That was always the strength of this body.

*set br true

*goto bathroomchange

*label hairdresser

You saw a suitable salon when you scouted the mall, a drop in place, not too busy. That's probably a sign it's not the cheapest or best, but right now you will settle for adequate competence.

*comment ADD HAIRSTYLE SPECIFIC COMMENTS IN CODE LATER FOR DEMO.

Heading over there, you pause at a reflective window to pull off your cap. Your hair is clean but messy, not the way you'd usually show up to get it cut. Not that you have a choice right now, so you run your hands through it in an attempt to make yourself look more presentable.

Oh well. You're sure they've had worse customers.

Gliding through the crowd, you step into the salon. It's on the edge of an indoor concourse, the glass ceiling overhead letting in natural light. Most of the shops here are eateries, and the scent makes your mouth water. Later. Right now there is no line, and that's what important.

*page_break You Want This Done.

It is a soothing experience getting a haircut. Your clothes doesn't matter, hidden under the protective cape as they are. That was always one of the perks of this body, you could allow yourself to get pampered. Have others wash your hair without fear. Nothing to hide. Nothing to be judged over. Even the small talk with the hairdresser comes easily, mindless enough chatter that you don't even have to think before replying.

*comment ADD PICK HAIRSTYLE CODE BEFORE DEMO.

Watching yourself in the mirror, you tilt your head forward as some final stray hairs needs to be trimmed. Soon done.

[i]Any moment now, it will snow indoors.[/i]

*if precognition < 30

*set precognition 30

*set precognition %+ 10

You look up, the intensity of the feeling hitting you like a blade to your throat. The crisp sound of chimes as the snowflakes cascade through the air, no, as they hit the ground and... a shake of your head erases the vision.

Danger. Not just for you but for everyone.

*if precognition >= 50

Too familiar. A moment in time showed to you before it happens.

*fake_choice

#I need to leave now, while I still have time.

You don't know what this vision is showing you, but you do know that you want to be nowhere near here when it happens. Trust your gut.

"It's fine now, can I pay?" You wave off the last adjustment, the hairdresser looking slightly disturbed by your sudden change in mood.

"Of course, just let me brush you off..." You feel the soft brush touch your neck but you are already moving.

"Never mind," you snap, grabbing your backpack with the clothes you bought. "I realized I'm late for a meeting," you quickly add, slapping a couple of bills on the counter before you turn to the door. Overpaying. Right now you don't care.

[i]The sound. Crisp, like bells. Then the screams.[/i]

You stare at the door, but nobody else heard it, so you push it open and step out into the concourse. It's noisy but also silent, the chatter and drone of people milling about, eating, shopping, still failing to fill the space.

[i]Snow. Glittering in the sunlight.[i]

Your heart has started to pick up so you turn and walk away, fast, as fast as you can. You need to [b]go[/b].

Keeping your head down you leave the exposed area, retreating towards the exit. It feels better to have a solid roof over your head, you keep wanting to look up but there's nothing there but fluorescent lights.

And then you hear it. A thin, crisp sound cutting through the murmur of voices like a knife through butter.

[i]Like glass through flesh.[i]

You turn to look behind you, just in time to see the glass ceiling of the concourse break inwards in a million shards.

[i]Like snow falling.[i]

In the center of the glittering sunlit storm is a solid shadow,

*if suit_speed

a burst of jump jets letting them land safely in the center, crushing broken glass under their armored boots.

*elseif suit_armor

falling like a missile before impacting the tiled ground. The impact is loud, a perfect three-point landing as the shards cascade down like rain, tink tink tink off their armor.

*else

gliding down on a wire before landing in the center, crushing broken glass under their armored boots.

*page_break \${villain_name} Has Arrived.

*set headstartmall true

*goto snowstorm

#I need to get people out of here right away.

Whatever is coming won't just be a danger to you but to everyone. You know that with nauseating certainty. You could run, sure, but this place is filled with people. You can see that reflected in the mirror, families having dinner out there in the concourse, people chatting, laughing, shopping. They don't [b]know[/b].

You do.

"Do you smell that?" you ask, standing up suddenly enough to almost be nicked by the scissors.

"What?" The hairdresser sounds nervous and suspicious, but you're already looking around.

Somewhere... Somewhere... There!

You slam a handful of bills on the counter to avoid an argument, but the fire alarm you've spotted is your real goal. They need to run. Now. Get out.

[i]The snow falls, but it wont land softly. The shards or glass are heavy and sharp, suspended in your vision like guillotine blades.[i]

"Fire!" you shout, activating the fire alarm. The sound cuts through the pleasant atmosphere, but better than glass through bodies. Some immediately starts to head for the exit, others scatter in the spreading panic.

[i]A crack in the sky. A shadow.[i]

You look up, the dark shadow on the glass ceiling raising a fist.

*if suit_strength

It won't take more than one blow.

*else

The other hand is pressed palm first to the glass, weakening it.

"Run!" you scream, and most obey, but a young man stands frozen in indecision.

[i]You see where the large shards will fall.[/i]

The reaction is instinctual and the tackle is flawless. You push him aside at the last moment as a large pane of glass impacts the floor where he stood, spraying you both in shards. Not large enough to do damage. Good.

"Run," you hiss, and this time he obeys, scrambling away on hands and knees, bloody handprints on the ground. Alive.

[i]Roll![/i]

You don't hesitate but roll aside, the armored boot impacting the place you were a moment ago. The shadow has landed, a solid outline against the sunlit sky above, staring down at you.

*page_break \${villain_name} Has Arrived.

*set savedmall true

*goto snowstorm

#I try to get a clearer image what this vision might be about.

*if precognition >= 50

You've got enough glimpses of the future by now that this can't be a coincidence. No. It might be a source of power. But power is nothing unless you know how to use it.

*else

These flashes of things that might be have haunted you for months. Elusive. Unclear. And yet they return, and with them the tantalizing idea that you might be able to do something with them.

Snow. Why snow? You stare into the mirror, trying to see beyond the hairdresser as she tidies you up. The large window behind you reveals the concourse outside, the glass keeping the noise at bay.

[i]In the mirror, you see snow falling, glittering in the sunlight. The muted sound of chimes.[/i]

No. Not chimes. Familiar. You stare into the mirror, trying to fall into the image, using techniques learned from your telepathy. Focus while relaxing. Don't make assumptions. Just absorb. Your mind will interpret things and force it into a recognizable picture, and that picture might not always tell the whole truth. We never see the world as it truly is, just what our senses present to us.

What [b]aren't[/b] you seeing?

[i]In the mirror you see glittering things falling, things your mind translated to snow, but which you now see is shards of glass. Most small, some large enough to kill. The chimes are not the bells of Christmas but the crisp tinkle of glass smashing against tiles.[/i]

[i]This time you hear the screams.[/i]

[i]This time you see the shadow falling from the sky.[/i]

[i]This time you see the impact of \${villain_name} as they land, helmet turning, turning, turning to...[/i]

*set precognition %+10

*fake_choice

#I scream a warning to everyone to get out of the way.

"Watch out," you scream, heedless of the scene you're causing as you nearly leap out of your chair. "The ceiling is going to collapse, we need to warn people."

"What?" The hairdresser looks equal parts shocked and confused, but your urgency is getting to her. "How do you..."

It is at that moment you hear the sharp crack of breaking glass, even through the soft music permeating the salon.

"No," you protest, but your words do nothing. It is too late, perhaps it was always too late. You heard the scream. You saw the blood.

Now you hear the screams, like a rerun of some awful nightmare. Outside the salon window, shards of glass cascade down, glittering in the sun. Most are small, but some are large enough to maim. To kill. People are fleeing for their lives, a kaleidoscopic background to the shadow falling from the

*if suit_speed

sky, a burst of jump jets letting them land safely in the center, crushing broken glass under their armored boots.

*elseif suit_armor

sky. The impact is loud enough to overpower the screams, a perfect three-point landing as the shards cascade down like rain, tink tink tink off their armor.

*else

sky, descent carefully controlled as they land in the center, crushing broken glass under their armored boots. A dismissive gesture pulls the grappling wire back into their armor.

*page_break \${villain_name} Has Arrived.

*set salonmall true

*goto snowstorm

#I throw myself on the floor to get out of sight.

You don't hesitate to cause a scene, before the vision of \${villain_name} meets your face in the mirror you throw yourself to the floor to get out of the line of sight.

"Wha..?" But the hairdresser is interrupted by the sound of breaking glass and screams. You can't see the scene as you crawl towards the back, but it's still playing in your mind.

The falling glass. People running. Screaming. Bleeding.

*if suit_speed

The hissing sound of the jump jets as \${villain_name} lands among the shards.

*elseif suit_armor

The heavy impact as \${villain_name} lands hard enough to crack the tiles.

*else

The telltale whirl of the grappling hook as \${villain_name} descends to the floor.

You don't pause to listen. Or look. You need an exit, fast. Around you, customers and staff scream in panic, crowding towards the back. Hidden behind a counter you desperately look to the staff for guidance, but none of them head for some hidden back exit and you realize with a sinking feeling that there is none. The only way out is to the front.

*page_break You're Trapped In Here.

*set hidemall true

*set salonmall true

*goto snowstorm

*label snowstorm

This can't be happening, but the way your adrenaline spikes and turns everything to painful clarity assures you that it is.

\${villain_name} is standing amidst broken glass and overturned tables,

*if savedmall

looking down at you like vermin.

*else

blood pooling on the tiled floor, red against pale gray.

*if suit_terrifying

It's a terrifying sight, the armor looks so utterly out of place in the mall, a monster on the loose from some cheap horror flick.

*elseif suit_imposing

War has come to this ordinary suburban mall, and here stands its chief instigator, violence constrained in armored form.

*elseif suit_mysterious

The mirrored helmet makes them look as if the glass ceiling itself has descended to the ground for vengeance, the faint mist pooling around them not thick enough to hide the destruction.

*else

A showy entrance but a practical one, straight for the target no matter what stands in the way.

*if suit_cape

The cape billows as the wind sweeps through the broken ceiling, and the sudden movement breaks your paralysis.

*else

For a moment you're paralyzed like the other onlookers, then the moment breaks.

You need to move.

*if savedmall

*goto closeescape

*elseif hidemall

*goto stalked

*else

*goto runforit

*label shoes

Shouldering your backpack nonchalantly, you stroll down to one of the shoe stores you spotted as you entered the mall. It lies right next to the entrance, the large glass windows giving you a rather uninspiring view of the parking lot outside. Still, daylight makes it easier to judge what you buy. Too bad they didn't have that for your clothes. At least you can pull them out here for comparison if you need to, if you plan to be that picky. Right now you're desperate for anything new.

You don't even want to know what these trainers smell like, you've been wearing them for weeks. And, shoes really should rest every other day if you want them to last. A small detail, but one which is important. With a smile of satisfaction you start browsing the shelves. The selection is better here, you might be able to pick up what you need without issue. The faint music in the background is a soothing presence, and the two girls behind the counter are busy talking to each other. They glance over at you, but when you give them a nod they return to talking about whatever caught their attention outside.

Not the best customer service, no wonder the place is almost deserted. Compared to the busy interior of the mall, this place feels empty.

*fake_choice

#I am nervous, I don't bother trying the shoes on first.

You feel uneasy lingering too long. Maybe it's the fact that you've spent so long cooped up. Maybe it's the fact that you're not even armed. Huh. Why does that suddenly bother you? Why would you need to be armed? This is a mall. Nobody knows you're there. And yet...

You pause with a pair of shoes in your hand, trying to judge their fit. It wouldn't take that long to check. Really. But you grab the shoes instead, picking out some other pairs as well. Some nice. Some practical.

No need to take undue risks. You've got enough money to pay for it. The large windows makes you feel exposed, as if all the cars in the parking lot were watching you.

*if precognition >= 50

[i]A sound like glass breaking.[/i]

You look up, momentarily confused, but nothing is amiss. Still, this makes you even more determined to wrap things up.

You need to get out of here.

It feels like it take forever ringing up your purchases, but once its done you head for the exit. Don't run. Walk fast. You're on the verge of heading for the parking lot when something stops you. A cold shiver.

[i]A mirror breaking into a thousand pieces, a hand reaching...[/i]

No. You turn and walk back into the mall, back towards the crowds. Back towards safety. Don't run. Don't run.

[i]Run![/i]

You turn to look behind you as you ready yourself, just in time to see the glass window near the entrance crash inwards in a million shards.

In the center of the broken window stands a solid shadow,

*if suit_speed

surrounded by a faint smokey haze vented from the jump jets that fueled the kick that smashed it.

*elseif suit_strength

outstretched fist aimed directly at you as if the blow that smashed the glass was a precursor of what the next one will do to your head.

*else

nonchalantly holding the metal pipe that smashed it.

*page_break \${villain_name} Has Arrived.

*set headstartmall true

*set gotshoes true

*goto windowbreak

#I'm getting several pairs while I'm here.

It is wiser to get everything done in one go, if there's something worth doing it's worth doing well. You have at least three outfits that needs shoes, and that's not counting a pair of new trainers, if you can find some of better quality here. You might have to go to a separate sport's store for that. Oh well, that's for later.

You start your slow, methodical search for the right footwear. The sizing depends too much on the manufacturer to leave up to chance, some are too narrow, others are too wide in the wrong places. The time you spend now will mean less chafing later.

One of the girls on the staff eventually asks if you need help, and you send her to the back room to pick up a different size. She's lucky this isn't a tipping situation, and her friend seems distracted, staring at the window.

*if precognition >= 50

[i]The window will break.[/i]

You pause, shoe half untied. You can almost see the floor covered in sharp shards of glass, and quickly lace it up again. What was that?

*else

Teenagers. You nearly scoff to yourself as you unlace your shoes, you know this is stress making you grumpy. That annoying itch at the back of your head which tries to remind you that there's something that you've missed.

*set noshoes true

Maybe you should hurry this up.

The moment you think that, the crash of broken glass outside makes you throw yourself back from the window almost before you realize that you've moved. At least this body still have good reflexes. A moment later the shop window explodes in a similar way, but this time you have a front row seat to the destruction.

Your eyes go wide as you take in the scene from your position on the floor.

In the center of the broken window stands a solid shadow,

*if suit_speed

surrounded by a faint smokey haze vented from the jump jets that fueled the kick that smashed it.

*elseif suit_strength

outstretched fist aimed directly at you as if the blow that smashed the glass was a precursor of what the next one will do to your head.

*else

nonchalantly holding the metal pipe that smashed it.

*page_break \${villain_name} Has Arrived.

*set lingershoes true

*goto windowbreak

#I'm curious, I try to overhear what they are talking about.

You can't help it, you've always been too curious for your own good. Something strikes you as odd about the two girls and the way they seem more interested in the view than you, their lone customer. Sure, it might just be that they are terrible at customer service, but it might just be worth it listening in on what they are talking about.

So, you start your browsing for shoes close to their position, waving away any attention as you wait for them to settle back and focus on what they had been doing before.

"You're imagining things," one of the girls say, her laugh a little too loud, so she quickly hushes herself before continuing. "Here? Nothing happens here, and you know it."

"I swear I saw it," the other insist, her eyes scanning the parking lot. "I just don't know where it went."

"Getting out of a van?" Another laugh. "Get real. Look at everyone out there, it's as boring as always, nobody else has seen a thing."

"I know." The other girl sounds unsure of all a sudden. "It's weird. It should have been impossible to miss."

"What did you see?" you ask, interrupting despite yourself. The sinking feeling in your gut is not imagination, and neither is the crawling feeling down your spine.

[i]Unprompted, the giant window near the exit breaks into a million shards, the shadow at the center slowly coming into focus.[/i]

What? You blink, missing the first part of the girl's answer.

"—over there. It was standing around for a while but nobody seemed to notice. Then it ducked behind a car and now I can't—"

"Down," you hiss, because you can. You can see it. You can see the shadow walking right up towards the entrance, hazy and uneven like a mirage.

Were you fast enough? You don't know, but you're behind the counter now, out of sight together with the two girls, one of them mouthing a whisper.

"What? I didn't see anything."

You hold up a finger to shush her, but the crash as the window breaks outside makes both of them squeal like nervous pigs. \${swear}.

Outside there are screams as people run in panic. Hidden behind the counter you desperately look to the staff for guidance, for some hidden exit. Neither of them move, eyes wide and scared, and you realize with a sinking feeling that there is none. The only way out is to the front.

*page_break You're Trapped In Here.

A second crash tears through the screams, closer this time as it is the window to the shoe store that is smashed. No. No. This isn't some random attack, is this for you? Is someone after you? Driven by the same self-destructive curiosity and need to know you chance a peek around the edge of the counter, slapping a hand over your mouth to keep back a cry.

*set hidemall true

*goto windowbreak

*label windowbreak

This can't be happening, but the way your adrenaline spikes and turns everything to painful clarity assures you that it is.

\${villain_name}

*if lingershoes

is standing amidst broken glass and overturned displays, looking down at you like vermin.

*else

steps closer, armored boots crushing glass to powder underneath.

*if suit_terrifying

It's a terrifying sight, the armor looks so utterly out of place in the mall, a monster on the loose from some cheap horror flick.

*elseif suit_imposing

War has come to this ordinary suburban mall, and here stands its chief instigator, violence constrained in armored form.

*elseif suit_mysterious

The mirrored helmet makes them look as if the broken glass is clinging to their form, the faint mist pooling around them not thick enough to hide the destruction.

*else

A showy entrance but a practical one, straight for the target no matter what stands in the way.

*if suit_cape

The cape billows as the wind sweeps through the broken window, and the sudden movement breaks your paralysis.

*else

For a moment you're paralyzed like the other onlookers, then the moment breaks.

You need to move.

*if lingershoes

*goto closeescape

*elseif hidemall

*goto stalked

*else

*goto runforit

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[Fallen Hero Fanzine](#)

[Aug 18, 2024](#)

Just learned that people have got together and made a Fallen Hero Fanzine, and wanted to take a moment to share the link with everyone here. I am so delighted and chuffed, the amount of creativity and effort that people put into building on things that I made is just mind blowing. Seriously. I am so grateful for everyone's enthusiasm!

And now I am back to writing puppet shenanigans, it's time for the shopping episode nobody knew they wanted....

[My first ttrpg module is up for sale!](#)

[Aug 14, 2024](#)

Well, in an effort to diversify my writing/income, I have been working on this RuneQuest trpg module in the background. Much was already written as background information since I have been running this area on my rpg campaign for years, but it is nice to have everything put together for sale and not having to be the sole writer for once!

Life and Traditions under the Sun Dome is 300 pages of overly detailed cultural knowledge and Yelmalian shenanigans!

Come foreigner, visit Sun County, the only nation in Glorantha that passed The Solitude of Testing. See the living light of Sun Dome, travel the easily accessible road network, enjoy our surplus of food, our stoic unity, and our fully adequate culture. Come for the holy days, witness our drill parades, leave when we tell you to! Sun County - the safest, hardest working and most envied nation in Glorantha. You wish you were us!

-The Sun County Travel Bureau.

Life and Traditions under the Sun Dome was written as an attempt to answer any questions a player or gamemaster might have about Sun County, from the mundane to the theological. Whether the question is what happened in your initiation rites, to how rude the songs are the soldiers sing while marching, to what festival is coming up next, it's in here. Need descriptions of the popular theater plays complete with different interpretations? What about the banned ones? Just look in the Popular Culture chapter. Need five different kinds of bread and what you can put on them? We've got you covered. What happens if my character decides to get married? What is a "Pavis Wedding?" Who gets the custody of the kids in a divorce? How do you relate to other citizens compared to foreigners? How do you insult someone and when are you insulted? Don't worry. You'll know by the end of this book. This is a sourcebook for everybody, gamemasters, players and the culturally curious alike.

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Can be purchased on DriveThruRPG! Only 19.95\$ for 300 pages.

<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/491594/life-and-traditions-under-the-sun-dome?src=fbp>

[Fair warning about using Apple](#)

[Aug 12, 2024](#)

I haven't looked into this in detail yet since the changes doesn't happen until November, but I wanted to give a heads up that Apple are up to new shenanigans. So, make sure that come November you pledge through either Android, or on a computer to avoid the extra 30% Apple tax.

Apple is requiring that Patreon use their in-app purchasing system and remove all other billing systems from the Patreon iOS app by November 2024. This means that starting in November, **new memberships purchased in the iOS app will be subject to Apple's 30% App Store fee.**

First, we want to be clear about one thing: **this will not impact your existing memberships at all.** Apple's App Store fee only applies to **new** memberships purchased in the iOS app beginning in November 2024.

[Questions answered for July!](#)

[Aug 10, 2024](#)

Alright, my brother and his family has gone back to Göteborg again, and summer is officially over and work can hopefully resume as normal. Hope everyone has had a somewhat restful time!

.....

Does Jake have insecurities about sleeping his way to the top?

Of course he does, but he tells himself that isn't what he has done at all. But yeah, he's sensitive about that.

If someone had the power to completely separate parts from people, for example from targeted teleportation, would Anathema be effected? If she is would she survive, like if she was cut in half would both halves be fine? If she did survive would it be possible to put her back together?

Ooooh interesting. I would say it would depend on power level. The most likely result would be that the whole of Anathema gets teleported, no matter how small parts were targeted. If we were talking about a super powerful targeted teleporter I would say that parts might be teleported off. They would still be alive and functional and I honestly have NO idea how to put them back together again. That's nightmare fuel.

Does familiarity with Sidestep effect how susceptible someone is to their notice me not invisibility?

Yes, it is a lot easier if they have no idea who Sidestep even is.

Is one of the threads Nocturne requested something along the lines of "You are okay with people being hurt or killed to accomplish your goals"?

I don't think so directly, but she has absolutely used it as therapy for acts/events she really wants to forget. She is pretty ruthless at base level.

Does Nocturne keep a list of all her requested threads and a schedule for when they need to be renewed?

Not a physical one, but yes, a mental one. But, it also varies with time, some threads might be fading forever as she has moved beyond their need, while new ones might be needed as a result to life as a crime lord.

How well would Sidestep be able to navigate using only telepathy?

Depends on how many minds were around. Both too few and too many would be an issue.

How well is Sidestep able to parse esoteric powered senses when reading minds? If someone had shrimp vision or could taste emotions what would that be like for Sidestep?

It would be weird, but Sidestep would be able to tap into the person's experience and knowledge to help them deal. But yeah, boosted individuals can be a trip to mind dive into, and sometimes you have no choice but to withdraw before you lose yourself in senses you can't even understand. Sidestep is better than most telepaths at this, which is also why they can do animals pretty well.

For trans Sidestep will there be an option to choose whether HG refers to them as brother/sister based on their agab or brother/sister/sibling based on their current gender?

It will be a choice eventually, HG is eager to please.

Is there anyone HG has a relationship with where they aren't influencing them?

Huh. Hmmm. Does Ortega count? But, joking aside, yes they do if you count active threads. However, even casual acquaintances often gets a little touch and a word of encouragement. Little minor things, a lot of the time for what HG sees their own good.

In hypothetical books where other characters are the main protagonist in which ones is Sidestep the deuteragonist, in which ones are they an antagonist, and in which ones are they just a supporting character?

Dunno for all, but I do know for some: Ortega - deuteragonist. Herald - antagonist. Argent - antagonist. Chen - supporting character. Dr. Mortum - deuterantagonist.

Is Catfiend the type of invincible villain who is desperate for a good challenge?

Hmmm. Slightly tendencies to that, yeah.

Is Catfiend aware of the mysterious threat Sidestep is preparing for?

I don't think so. Not yet.

Would a heavily modded individual have better chances of surviving a boosting that works normally kill someone?

No, probably less due to the implants not being affected in the same way.

Is Argent tempering her expectations for the regenerator?

Yes, she's trying to.

If thief step gets the regenerator quietly, does that mean that argent lost her chance at it?

Well, we will see about that. She might still be hunting for it...

Do you think the word count for books 3-4 will be greater than books 1-2?

My goal is that they shouldn't be. But... I don't know. They will be as long as they need to be. But I also want to finish the story and not have it balloon further.

What is project stripes?

Spoilers! You will find out in book three.

Is argent usually dismissive when meeting new people or did step's introduction come at a bad time?

Both. She's usually quite curt, and this came right after she had run amok and hurt her teammates.

So the puppet demo will cover paths 2 & 3 together? What made you decide to combine them? Or was that always the plan.

It wasn't always the plan. But, as I pathed them, I realized that enough scenes and events were shared that it would be easier to deal with them as a whole from the start. More work initially, but less work in the long run.

Is HG capable of self-threading?

Oh yes! They try to be subtle about it though.

I remember you saying that if not romanced, Danny ends up with someone else. Is that still the plan? If so, does his crush on sidestep fade?

Like most crushes, they fade if people realize they have no shot. There are two people Daniel might possibly end up with at the end, but it is by no means a given, and I won't say who.

Will rat king always be with sidestep whatever happened ?

Yes.

Can we make body for rats king

Probably. It is planned, hopefully it is workable in the story too.

How did Daniel react to learning of Sidestep's apparent death? Was he inconsolable, fall into a deep depression, motivated more than ever to become a hero, or some other reaction?

He was very sad, it is a traumatic thing to see your hero die in the line of duty. But it did give him more motivation than ever to become a hero.

What are Five Pennies powers? What exactly happened during the incident where he killed a protestor?

Five Pennies powers are weird and spoilers, so I won't describe them in detail. The incident in where he killed someone was during an argument with the press, in which he was accused of various wrongdoings. He lost his temper, one of the coins attached to one of the people that had annoyed him the most, and the poor man died. Most say that his blood boiled, but that's most likely an exaggeration, it did look and sound exceedingly painful on camera.

Was Anathema immune to the nanosurge, or were the nanovores able to overcome even their Invulnerability?

Anathema was immune, no nanovores could eat them.

Who was responsible for the Nanosurge, and what had they been expecting to happen before it got out of control?

Who was responsible will be revealed in the story, not sure if it is book three or four yet. As for the purpose, that is spoilers!

And most important of all: has Daniel ever rescued a cat from a tree?

Of course!

For injured Sidesteps that are stuck in their base after the escape from Rangers HQ, would the RatKing (theoretically) be capable of piloting the suit to help care for Sidestep (at least for things that don't require a high degree of fine motor control)?

Yes, the girls could absolutely come to the rescue there!

How did Deadeye come to be a sniper?

Her boost really assists her there, but she was already a very good shot beforehand. She likes it.

Does Argent consider what she 'does' with the vores to be cannibalism?

No. But she knows it is murder.

Does Jake sincerely believe in myths such as aswangs and mananaggals? Is he creeped out by supposedly haunted places? What about the Heartbreak site? How does he feel about banyan trees?

It's always hard to parse what is sincere belief or not. I would say that he is slightly superstitious and can be creeped out easier than for example Nocturne who likes to tease him about it. He is absolutely wary about places that gives him a bad feeling, and he absolutely would NOT go anywhere near the Heartbreak site. It feels off. But would he swear that all the mythic beings he grew up hearing about exists for certain? No. But it costs nothing to be careful, you know?

What do Nocturne and HG think of his superstitious nature?

Nocturne likes to tease him a bit, HG is more... hmm... I trust his instincts.

Considering their affinity for eating, would the nanovores enjoy it if we doodled little drawings onto Argent's skin? Hypothetically: what about when she's asleep? I know it's strictly not allowed by her, but: Would doing so risk a breakdown of cohesion between her and them?

I don't think the nanovores would enjoy it, unless you doodled with meat sauce or something...

Would carbonisation via intense, concentrated fire from a flame thrower overpower the Catfiend's regeneration? Or would whatever's been burned eventually grow back?

Everybody's got their limit, nobody's found the Catastrofiend's yet. It is feasible.

You mentioned before that Jake finds power sexy. How does that appeal translate to the bedroom? Does he like having that power over him be translated in similar position in bed? 🙊 Or the other way around- does he like having power over it?

Oh I am leaving bedroom imaginations to the reader here.

If Sidestep has a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate), would the Rangers respect it? Or would some people (Ortega, Herald) try to revive them?

Depends on whether they had talked about it beforehand I think. If they had, I think they might come to terms with it. Though especially for Ortega, they would need to be convinced that Sidestep was really serious and it wasn't just depression.

From the previous QnA, HG doesn't seem to take kindly to Lord Ember even having a crush on Sidestep... surely it's fairly harmless? Or does Lord Ember have a track record for being dangerous to crushes/lovers?

Lord Ember does have a bad reputation, fire power is volatile...

You mentioned before that Bo isn't exactly thrilled to be roped into an ambitious Mob Boss's plans. Do the henchmen have any preference for what kind of career path they'd be more happy to work for?

Hmmm there already is some variation between Rosie and Bo when it comes to what they will accept and become permanent retainers, so yes. But I am still developing this due to... reasons, so I'd rather not go into depth beyond what is in Retribution at this point.

Does Blaze ever use his powers to light a cigarette? Or is it not precise enough to do that? Does he smoke? Or is it just the sweet vice for him?

I don't think Blaze smokes but he could use his powers to light a cigarette on a good day. Might sting a little bit in the fingers that holds it too, like holding your hand too close to a fire.

How good is Skybright at in arm wrestling challenges? Given how strong her boost is, is she physically strong as well? Or is she reliant on her telekinesis?

She is physically in very good shape, she feels that she needs to be in order to use her powers to their best. But, she relies on her telekinesis, that's her boost after all. In a normal arm wrestling competition she's as good as a professional athlete that is not specialized on that.

How durable and strong was Cavalier? Would bullets hurt him? Bombs? Does he have any drug resistances if someone wanted to knock him out? Could he be shoved by an average person?

Cavalier was strong, but not massively so. Probably on the level of Sidestep's strength upgrade armor. He was very durable, otherwise he would never have survived his boost. It was a combination of hard skin, solid flesh, and limited regeneration. Not at all Catastrofiend levels, but enough that he would survive a bullet to the chest or head. You needed what amounted to light anti tank weapons to start hurting him, but he tended to explode rockets and the like before they ever reached him. He was sensitive to gas and the like, he could hold his breath for quite a while, but not forever. He couldn't be shoved by an ordinary person, unless he wanted it and faked the reaction. The thing with Cavalier was that he was very hard to take down because his immediate reaction to things that seriously hurt him was to explode his surroundings and annihilate everything around him. Not great for collateral damage, but great if you were the spearhead of an attack.

Considering Seattle holds itself to the highest moral standards compared to other states, would they take in runaway Re-Genes seeking sanctuary/safety from the Farm? Or would their backgrounds bar them from ever entering + get them arrested/killed?

That is an interesting thought. Seattle's views on ReGenes are so far classified.

How are valuable Re-Genes treated? Do they get extra perks for consistently doing good jobs? Experimented on (or tortured) more often to possibly induce greater power? What about Re-Genes who don't contribute much to the Farm? What are their odds of getting scrubbed/killed?

Good Re-Genes gets extra treats. Once they have useful powers, there's generally no experimentation to induce more, that's reserved for failures and weak ones. Re-Genes who are dangerous gets scrubbed, but weak or useless ones might be used for parts as well. Note that non-combat powers can still be useful for operations around the Farm.

Based on the previous QnA about Blaze having no leg to stand on when people like Ortega more than him, after he claimed he didn't get into the hero business to be liked... how would he react? Would he ignore those words, or think them over?

It's the kind of words that are denied and shrugged off at first, but remains and festers in silence. Impossible to stop thinking about. Maybe even words that might lead to change eventually, but not immediately.

Considering the food fed to Re-Genes, does the Farm breed/keep animals on-site to make into food? Or do they get the meat from cities and transport it back?

Yes, they breed animals on site, and grow crops. The cover of the Farm is an actual farm after all. One which experiments with genetically modified crops to help with the ash-damaged fields. It's self-sufficient when it comes to basic foodstuffs like vegetables and meat, but a lot of more specialized things are transported in by truck. Flour and sugar are two big basics they import, while they do grow corn, the processing of grain to flour was deemed too complex.

Can Zephyr be genuinely selfless? Or is their only concern being money and recognition/attention?

I mean people are complicated, so sure!

If the Farm wants to look for runaway Re-Genes, why not station some of their staff at hospitals for deep covers? Even if a Re-Gene managed to unfaithfully evade being sent to one, there are still valuable medical records and 'samples' their spies would be privy to, making for good resources to send back.

The amount of staff needed for that is not deemed worth the investment. There are a lot of hospitals and little clinics everywhere.

Would HG and Nocturne eventually tell Jake the truth on their own? Or would they need outside influence to do it? (Say... Sidestep)

I think they might need outside influence, or at least an inciting incident. It has gone too far by now.

Can Blaze cook? If he does, what sort of cuisines does he do? Or is he more of a takeout guy?

I see him as a bbq guy, who can cook when it's under certain circumstances, but is happy eating takeout normally.

I've seen some people claiming it, but is it true that part of the reason Blaze hates Julia is because she turned him down? Or is he used to having flirtations turned down (Argent) to not really hold it against her?

I mean at this point a lot of people have turned Blaze down. And I wouldn't say he hates Julia, but there is a certain amount of hurt manhood feelings there, both when it comes to reputation, powers, and that they won't become Los Diablos hottest (literally) power couple.

If released, is there anything stopping the Catastrofiend from barging into HG's turf to devour everyone, including their own people? There *is* a lot of tasty people who tend to gather on their territory...

Normally, the Catastrofiend is very aware of which side the bread is buttered on. It used to work with a lot of these people, might even have liked some of them in its own way. It's not a complete monster. But, technically it's nothing to stop them from doing it, especially now when it's so hurt.

How did Tina and Teddy get married? They're both criminals. What's the process there to getting hitched?? Who proposed?

Oh Psychopathor proposed! Of course. He's an old-fashioned romantic. Probably blew up a refinery and something as an engagement gift. And, when you are a criminal it is an easy matter to take over a church, priest included, to get married. If any pesky heroes would try to interfere, well, there you have the wedding party taken care of too.

How did the HG trio react to reading the Catfiend's Mitchell profile?

HG: Let's never antagonize this thing. Nocturne: It could be useful though, all you need is touch it. HG: No way, have you seen how gross it is? Jake: I wonder if I could take it...

Is Tina tech savvy?

A bit, yeah. More than most realize.

Compared to being the LBH leader and being the captain of the Guardians, what would you say Blaze's favourite things about either position is? What about his least favourite?

Long Beach Heroes was the dream. Low key heroes and friends, keeping punks and villains off their part of the town, helping with rebuilding and making their home a better place. If he could choose, he'd go back in a heartbeat. But between broken friendships and city politics, that path is closed. He's proud to be the Captain of the Guardians, but the responsibility is heavy. As is the fact that he has to take orders, and then defend them to everyone else. The money and fame feels good though.

Speaking of Blaze: is it still safe for him to surf when he has a bad leg? Is Zephyr at all happy about being the better surfer if so? Or are they miffed they didn't beat him by their own merits?

Blaze sadly doesn't have time to surf much these days, and his bad leg would have hampered him. Zephyr was always the better surfer, at least in their own eyes. Blaze would not agree.

If Argent gets sleepy, does the cohesion/connection between her and the vores weaken, and risk 'accidents'? How does she deal with tired days?

On tired and bad days, she goes home. She has it in her contract that she can take sick days when she needs to, though she has not detailed exactly why, other than at times her powers weigh heavy on her.

Does Chen know he has the WORST taste in people? Esp when it comes to a romance Sidestep? Like really? The Rat of Los Diablos? Why???

Chen is sadly aware of this fact. It is nothing new to him. Some might accuse him of "but I can fix him" syndrome.

Who initiated the relationship between Blaze and Steel? And am I reading it wrong that Blaze still has lingering feelings?

I think Steel took the first step there, after he had been picking up some signals. As for lingering feelings... who can say? If you don't end up hating each other after a relationship it is easy to sometimes have soft memories of the good times together. That doesn't mean either party thinks it would ever work, or are willing to try again.

Also on Chen's romantic life, I think you said he never had anything serious after Soo Park. Does he feel that Sidestep is more like those last relationships? Or something finally serious?

Hmmm. I do feel like he thinks Sidestep is more serious, because there is a lot of baggage there. Not something he can easily step away from and pretend it never happened. He gave it a lot of thought before taking that first step, it is the biggest risk in a relationship he has taken in a long time.

Will Dr Mortum know that Step is a ReGene after kidnapping them if they help bust the puppet out? Or can that still be a kept secret?

I'm not entirely sure yet, I need to finish writing all the variables.

If Sidestep used sign language more than actual speaking, would any of them have learnt it for them? Would Chen have difficulty due to his hands not having that kind of dexterity?

I think all of them would have. And I don't think Chen would have issues, the fingers are movable, it is more the sense of touch that's the issue. Gestures should work fine.

More for my own amusement, how would they (ROs) take it if a tall step put things on the top shelf after fights? Just to be a dick.

The only one who would be annoyed (and who would have issues getting the stuff) is Argent, who would be livid and climb the shelves like a hissing squirrel. No, Dr. Mortum wouldn't have issues either, but I won't tell you why.

Why did Jake call a short step, yknow, short at the meeting? Like throwing rocks while inside a glass house after getting your ass handed to you after the auction.

Sometimes you go for the easiest insult, even when it might hit yourself too. And I think it was genuine surprise, Sidestep looks taller in the armor.

Ortega picks up on step's secret crush at some point, but when did they start to notice? Was it anything particular that Step did like getting annoyed and jealous when they flirt with the waiter at Hoots?

I think it varies. But Hoots would be a major clue for most variants.

If we're soft with Argent and staying at Ortega's after the crash, has she noticed Step's secret crush yet?

Oh she will, and have such fun time with it!

If you choose rival Ortega in rebirth, you get a hefty relationship drop but not in retribution, what's the logic there?

In Rebirth, everything is still new and fresh. A lot of the stat settings there are BIG, because they are used to set sort of a baseline for the character if that makes sense? Since everyone starts from the same base. So, when you set Ortega as a rival pretty early there, it sums up your whole previous feelings about Ortega, and how angry you are that they might be in your way now. Hence big drop. While in Retribution, this is an adjustment of rivalries. A change. The thought there is that you will already have had time to pick up relationship drops as you go, the selection there is just a new "title" to finalize your feelings. And, if you haven't got any relationship drops and have a massively high Ortega friendship and still picks rival... well, that's the kind of complicated feelings that makes good stories. Your best friend/love interest is also your rival.

If you date Argent in part 4 and have a secret crush on Ortega they'll ask if you want to hang out instead. Was this Ortega trying to get close to Step before anything serious could happen with Argent while they still had the chance or something else? Because they don't do it if you try to hang out with Herald or Steel.

I would say it is a sign that Ortega might be more sensitive to the Argent relationship, and in a way might also be more easily hurt by it? Ortega and Argent didn't have a thing (because of Argent), but there was also a sympathetic vibe there, two people who could work together. And this makes Ortega have feelings. It is different with Herald and Steel. It's hard to explain how really, sometimes Ortega does things in my head that feels right but which are more based on vibes than any plans of mine. They are terrible that way.

Did Argent make up a fake birthdate as part of her cover story?

Oh yes. But she still doesn't like celebrating her fake one.

Is Step that first person who can potentially visit Argent's apartment?

Ortega has been there too, but not for as long a time. SO I would count Sidestep as the first true visitor.

How much older was HG than their younger sib?

Oh boy I calculated that at one time but I'm not sure. I think between 10-15 years? Closer to the latter.

Did HG and all their sibs share the same father?

Yes.

You mentioned in an earlier QA that Nocturne is the main reason Ortega hasn't had much success in pursuing HG. What's her method of choice?

Bureaucratic chaff and misdirection. Also a judicious use of hired/manipulated minor villains for distraction.

What's Herald biggest regret regarding his career, if he has any? How about Steel? Argent?

I don't think Herald has any regrets about his career. It's gone as planned. Steel does wonder what would have happened if he never would have taken the offer to become Marshal, there is a small amount of regret there. He wonders if his presence was what made Ortega come back from retirement. Argent does regret joining the Rangers on occasion, she feels like it's only a matter of time before her secret will be revealed.

Danny's true power seems to be gravity, and it's being kept from him. Wouldn't it only benefit him and the Rangers to know that?

But who would know to tell him? The Rangers team doesn't know for sure either. And, if it is kept a secret... one can speculate why that would be. As you say, it would be very useful.

Has HG ever been as close to someone as Nocturne or was she the first to be let all the way in?

She was the first. HG is affable, but doesn't let people close easily.

You've mentioned Ortega would be the RO most interested in step's tats. I see that being a sore spot for a lot of Steps, can we tell Ortega to back off if they try and push that envelope?

Of course.

Is HG's aware of Re-Genes or just think they're an urban legend?

Urban legend, but some legends have a kernel of truth.

How long have Lord Ember and HG been rivals? Is the rivalry between them personal or just business?

Business. Since Lord Ember set himself up as the main villain in San Francisco.

Does Nocturne have bigger plans than LD?

Yes.

Did Argent go thru TBR at nanosurge?

Yes.

Does Jake think of himself as a self made man or someone who got lucky thru his powers/close connections to HG?

He likes to think of himself as a self made man, but a small part of him feels like maybe he slept his way to the top.

Has HG ever gone thru TBR?

Yes.

Has HG ever thought about taking boost drug again since their powers can help them survive?

No. Too much of a risk. HG is a coward at heart.

I'm not asking for it as an option, but would HG be willing to thread sibling(ish) step who wanted to get double boosted?

No. Too big a risk.

Was Anathema the "heart" of the Rangers when they were alive?

I would say so. At least the good cheer.

Was Rat King ever part of a rat colony? If so do they remember it?

No, they were implanted right after they were born, that's why they can work together this well. They have no memory of a body or other existence.

Is it possible that a Step who uses the regenerator could end up regretting it, and/or still try and confess to being a re-gene?

Maybe, we'll see. Not sure yet.

If Ortega knew about the regenerator plan before hand, would they be for or against Step using it? Would they keep their opinion to themselves and let Step decide?

Ortega would shut the hell up for once in their life.

Does Ortega still plan to come out as Bi in a straight-passing relationship?

I want that to come out, yeah. Just needs to find the right moment.

Would Ortega immediately come out to a gender-questioning Step who confesses to wanting to be the same gender as Ortega?

That sounds like a good moment to do so.

Similarly, for gender-questioning Steps who still think Ortega is straight, could they be afraid that coming out would be the end of their relationship?

Absolutely! I feel that is a common fear.

Can Argent blinding one of Step's eyes ruin her relationship with any of the other Rangers?

Hurt, yes. Ruin for good? We'll see. But it is an act that won't be forgotten.

What's your opinion on the hypothesized feathered dinosaurs? And what's your favorite dinosaur?

I don't see that as a hypothesis any more. There's been so much proof (not for all dinosaurs of course, mostly the smaller ones who need the insulation) of it! Feathered dinosaurs is the truth now. As for my favorite... hmmm. Since Pterosaurs are not dinosaurs, I would go with Stegosaurus, it always fascinated me so much as a kid.

If Step told Ortega about being friends with the Rat King would they be interested or curious about the relationship between the two telepathic entities, given Ortega seems to have an interest in telepathy in general and because it's Sidestep related? Or would their response be more along the lines of "I don't get it but good for you"?

Oh Ortega would be madly curious!!! And once again, frustrated at being immune.

We've been told a few time the autopsy tapes were pretty traumatic for Steel; was it just because it was seemingly an autopsy on someone he knew or was there something else that made is especially brutal, like the body being treated in a way different to normal autopsies?

It was someone he knew. And well, the body was treated pretty uncaring too. Very callous.

Is the toxicity of Step's mind, to other telepaths, a result of their trauma/bad mental state? If so would a Step who heals become less toxic to other telepaths?

I would say the trauma is a big part of it, and a Step that heals would be a lot less toxic.

If it's not related to their poor mental health did left over effects of their experience with the Void, Nanosurge or Heartbreak contribute to the toxicity?

It's a big mixture of all the events they went through in life.

There's the fan club variable, the Rangers, Blaze, Mia, ect that we can use to gauge how some people feel about Sidestep's actions; but how do the general public of LD feel/view about anarchist, prepare hero hunter Steps and thief Step's who give to charity? The way LD works gives me the vibe that people would be very cynical or apathetic but there are smaller communities like Vera's that are able to see the effect of direct action to help each other.

We're going to go into that more in book three, as certain villain paths are fleshed out. Your LD vibe is right on target.

The HB site has been weird and off putting for a while, would there be any way of cleansing/exorcising/fixing (I'm not sure what the most applicable word would be) it?

Hmmm. I am honestly not sure there. Probably not, but who knows?

Could you share a random fact about Ben, Vera and Arde?

Ben likes icecream a bit too much, and is self-conscious about getting a bit of a tummy as he ages. Vera fantasies about leaving Los Diablos and see how far away the horizon really is, but is kept her by all the ties to the people and the community that she loves. Arde has plans they don't tell anybody about, not even Vera.

Would Argent like it if we dropped the 'you like jazz?' line from the Bee Movie as a really, really bad way of flirting with her? (Platonic or romantic)

I don't think she's seen the Bee Movie.

I am a free-time writer, and I have a very strong dislike for my writing. So I just want to ask you; as someone who has written for a long time, does that feeling ever go away?

It does! The thing is, when you start writing you know what you like to read. Chances are you have read a LOT, and you know exactly what you like and what you hate. But that also means that you can see all the flaws in your own writing, and hates it. That's why writing at the start is about writing A LOT. Don't worry about it being good, just keep putting down words. Fanfic is good for that, often it is easier to forgive your own writing if it is about characters you didn't invent. Like, at least only half the things there are created by your brain. Also, it is easier to take it lightly, as you can't sell it, or make a profit, or whatever the current capitalistic monetization paradigm will tell you is necessary. Also, write finished stories or books! Don't keep editing things forever to make it good, write an ending and be done with it, and then move on to the next one. Move forward, and eventually your skill will catch up to your eye.

Of course it never goes away entirely. I often HATE a lot of the scenes I write, especially scenes that NEEDS to be there, and which I had to force into existence. I hate them because I had to spend a lot of time on them, and thus I am aware of how it felt when I wrote them. People tend to like these scenes as well as any others, so I have resigned myself to the fact that it is just me. By the time I come around to fill out and edit such scenes I have forgotten the pain of creation, and I am often surprised and delighted by what I find. Or, it is crap, and I write a new scenes. Such is life. But now I genuinely enjoy reading my own writing, especially old things that I have forgotten are mine. Sure, there is what you might call "cringe" there in places, but also turns of phrase I didn't even remember and can discover anew. Forgiving yourself for not being perfect is part of becoming a better writer, and part of that is trying to focus on what delights you rather than what annoys you.

The truth is that when you read a book, a lot of it will be forgettable. It needs to be there for form and structure. But it is that one scene, or sentence, or chapter that will make it sing. That you will remember. Maybe write down as a quote. That maybe rocked your world. That might be just a single sentence. And a book that has one of those is still a great book! Few will remember the more boring parts. Try to stop focusing on making those good as you write, focus on the things that really burns inside you. Maybe the boring, bland bits don't even need to be there in the end. Who knows? You will find what you love about your writing eventually, and once you do, it will make it easier to make it sing. It will probably not even be what you expected or even wanted in the first place. I sure as hell never planned to write romance...

Referencing a past QnA where the HG trio had stats as if they were Sidestep (Career path, motivation, etc), is Nocturne actually *interested* in justice?? Actual justice, 'make a fair place for everyone and tyrants/cruel people/etc don't go unpunished' justice?

Hmmm. I would say so, in a weird way. I won't say that her view of justice might line up with everyone else's, but yeah. She is however prepared to go to great lengths and spill blood for what she wants.

Th Farm can manipulate memories... so how would Ortega react if the Farm had cut out Sidestep's better memories of them so they wouldn't come to Ortega for help/help see them as a threat, instead of a friend/ally/past love?

Ortega would tear the Farm to the ground if they were able.

Do anyone have vampires like power in the world

I mean Shroud is kind of adjacent, so there's probably one or two.

Would Chen's heart override his logic for a romanced step, like forgive him for killing Blaze or some other outrageous thing?

There are lines that can't be crossed, and just because you love someone doesn't mean they doesn't need to be stopped.

Just curious. Why is Chen the only one who can only be romanced by male/trans step? I know he is gay but why, since the other ROs are all open to all gender.

Originally, neither Argent, Daniel or Chen were meant to be romancable at all. I added that when people liked Rebirth and I decided to be more ambitious than I had planned to be. Chen was always gay, and part of his backstory was a struggle with that, and how it had impacted his relationship with his family. I originally planned to go with my principles of all RO's for everyone, and even had a talk with Chen and a female Sidestep written out, but it didn't feel right. My playtesters at the time agreed, it felt awkward and out of character, and a little too close to the old trope of "you're only gay because you haven't found the right woman yet." So I decided to break my own design principles and keep him gay, rather than break the character. So I guess, in short the answer is that it just didn't work for me. Same with my brief pondering about making Herald, Argent and Chen gender selectable. It would detract from the story.

I was wondering a few things about Anathema and how their invulnerability affected them.

- can they get sick (common cold or otherwise?)

- does their hair still grow and can they cut/style it still? What about facial hair?

- for trans/Nb Themmy, would hormones work for them? What about gender confirming surgeries?

No, Anathema does not get sick! Their hair does grow, but a lot slower than normal. Facial hair is an issue, but Anathema's hair is not as vulnerable as their body, so that can be dealt with with their own acid. But, it's not likely that Anathema will be able to have any cool haircuts sadly. Neither hormones nor gender

confirming surgeries would work either, sadly. So yeah, bad with the good.

Which of the RO's have lost the most teeth while fighting?

I have never written Ortega as fast before.

Why *did* Blaze join the Guardians? Easy money?

No. I would call it more a search for respectability and position. It would be easier money to be a corporate hero.

In a previous QnA, Blaze thought that Chen was comparing him to Ricardo during their thing (which was wrong). Chen in return thought he might be more interested in Julia: was he similarly wrong?

Chen was slightly less wrong, but I wouldn't call him right.

Does he celebrate pride month?

Oh yes. Probably a part of the "veteran" segment of the parade, dressed down, so nobody ever realizes who he is.

How much percent would you say the book is finished?

No idea. I don't focus on that.

Was Sidestep influenced/manipulated by Heartbreak the same way that a random, non-telepathic Joe Shmoe would have been during the HB incident? Or did Sidestep's telepathy allow Heartbreak to connect with Step in a unique way?

Sidestep's telepathy made for unique interactions and synergy.

How does the Handyman feel about Owl's willingness to kill? Steel's and Herald's stance on her makes me wonder.

He... has issues with it. But he likes to think of himself as a mellowing influence, and he is right about that.

Probably been asked a billion times, but is there a tentative release date for Book 3/Revelations?

Nope, no idea! It depends on real life, inspiration, how ambitious I go, how complicated it turns out to be, my other projects go, and a million other things.

Will we learn more about danny's past? Also why was he looking for some kind of recognition when he told us his last name?

Oh yes!

First off, I'm back finally! I have to ask would Jake wear a zoot suit & what are or would be his thoughts on them? For some reason he strikes me as an old-school So-Cal gangster & I can only imagine him wearing really nice zoot suits now. Sort of like the Joker's but way better quality & better kept.

I mean he absolutely could pull it off, I think Nocturne has probably talked him into one for a costume party or something. He thinks it's a bit too flashy.

On a completely unrelated note can we please tease Argent and mess with her & everyone for that matter more moving forward? I find that people with serious trauma like pretty much any Sidestep tend to vent & deal with things by fucking with people and generally being a troll. Especially when they have severe trust issues & either can't or won't get help from others.

I mean there is a reason why Argent can be such a troll as well. I will do my best to find times for things like this, it depends on what fits into the scenes.

No spoilers necessary (but desperately wanted) for poly steps just how of much of a cluster fuck can we make our characters' lives? like could we try to convince say Julia, Argent, and Mortum to all go on a date with us at same time? Cause the mere thought of doing so makes laugh like a madman. I'd love to know the chances of actually accomplishing this feat. For instance would we have a better chance of fighting Godzilla? If you've answered this before or if I asked this before then sorry for effectively wasting some of your time

I mean... look. I'd love to be able to say nope, that's never gonna happen, but part of me is also sitting here cackling in a corner thinking of how fun it would be and wondering if I can pull it off. The very thought delights me, that's all I can tell you for now.

Does the Rat-King have a natural lifespan or are the brains effectively immortal?

The Rat King is already older than any normal rat, so there seems to be something going on with the lifespan there.

How would the power players of the FEZ react individually to a no-win scenario? Natural disaster or enemy assault.

Oh that is SPOILERS of the big kind.

Are the re-gene brands a custom built parasite tailored to each subject?

Yep! Though I wouldn't call the tattoos a parasite...

In terms of Step's vices of sugar, tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine. On a scale which would the Rangers take the most seriously or would it vary?

I mean we all know it is alcohol...

You've said Ortega punched multiple ppl over sidestep, did Ricardo ever punch a woman? How about Julia?

Julia definitely did. I don't think Ricardo... no wait, Ricardo did punch Owl.

How would HG react if they slipped up and called Sidestep by their little siblings nickname? How'd they feel if Sidestep actually responded to it without realizing it?

Like when you actually manages to pet a reclusive cat, but you can't show your excitement or do it again because then it will run away.

Can we get a movie marathon with Argent and Ortega? I'm a lifelong moviebuff & would love to see their opinions on a wide variety of movies if possible.

I am sure that Argent and Ortega can find common ground in the spaghetti western genre...

I remember you said that fighter Steps would be the best of the main group in hand to hand at least in technique, how would a prime Sidestep vs Steel exhibition go?

Sidestep would win.

Who among our named cast celebrate Christmas & Thanksgiving? I mean actually participate not go to parties because they'd get shit for not going although that info would be great to. For instance I love Halloween so all October I'm just happier then any other time of year including my birthday.

I think I might have answered something similar ages ago but I can't find it now, so if my answers have changed, sorry about that. Dr. Mortum is a huge Halloween fan, and organizes the yearly villain Halloween party. Argent is also a huge Halloween fan. On the other hand, Ortega is more for thanksgiving, that's the time they get to see most of their more distant relatives on Elena's side, and catch up on things. They usually takes a week off for that every year. Chen is invited every year, and reluctantly agrees because he doesn't want to be a bother. Probably the only holiday he kind of feels relaxed at. Daniel likes Christmas for the aesthetics, it was never really celebrated in his household, and he likes to make up for lost time. Since he has no family, he tends to spend it at one of the Los Angeles orphanages he used to volunteer at when he had just moved to Los Diablos and had no job and no friends. It's a yearly tradition, and an open secret that he is Herald. I think the HG trio is mostly for Thanksgiving, though the organization would have holiday celebrations too. They have gone to HG's Halloween party more than once. Sky-Raider likes Christmas, there's probably a villain party for that as well somewhere. A lot of villains doesn't even have families. Vera has no real favorite festivities, they always makes her feel a bit out of space, and if she has a chance she grabs Arde and they head off somewhere alone to chill. There's so many obligations with celebrations, and she always feels like she does the wrong thing.

Will crashstep use a cane in recovery or is this headcanon territory?

Canes are useful and cool. Would be a shame not to use one.

With the Olympics going on, I wondered what Olympic sport/event you might associate with each RO (and HG trio, if you're so inclined)? Doesn't necessarily have to be the sport they'd be "best" at, more just a fun question based on ~vibes~

Instant vibes: Ortega: Speed climbing. Herald: Diving. Argent: Gymnastics. Chen: Pistol shooting. Sky-Raider: Mountain Bike. Vera: Table tennis. Dr. Mortum: Dressage. Jake: Boxing. Nocturne: Sabre. Hollow Ground: Audience.

If Ortega had one last chance to say everything they ever wanted to say to Sidestep they had a past thing with, and they'd *believe* it (compliments and all), what would they say?

That depends too much on the path to ever give an answer to.

What would current!Chen caution past!Chen to do or think, knowing what he does now about Sidestep?

Don't underestimate them, and trust your instincts.

Would any of the ROs (with or without romanced steps blessing) get a tattoo or something to match/show support of steps regene tattoos? Like a little replica of steps barcode or something?

I'm not sure, that might be in really bad form.

Could Sidestep have possessed any comatose patient or was there something special about the puppet's body/mind?

There is a sliding scale from comatose to brain dead, and the puppet was right in the sweet spot. Still physically functioning, but with no conscious or unconscious mind that Sidestep could pick up on. Normally someone becomes comatose for reasons that includes damage to the brain. Blood clots. Stroke. Inflammation. Trauma. This would have made things very hard for Sidestep to deal with. Also, some people might be comatose but still have a very vivid

unconscious life, there is something in the connection to the conscious mind that just won't click. That would also pose trouble for Sidestep. So, the puppet was a one in a million chance, Sidestep could have made do with others, but it's doubtful it would have worked as well.

Do the metallic parts/Mods of the Catfiend's body regenerate like its fleshy parts do? Does it need to consume metal to "regrow" those components?

The metallic parts needs to be repaired/regrown. The fiend can do some things on its own, the blades is the most easily regrown, in a way they are like metallic covered teeth. Some of the other components it needs to get help for. Yes, somewhere out there some poor mechanics have done work on the Catastrofiend.

How does Nocturne's Boost blind people? Does it cause an overload like a flashbang? Or does it directly shut off the occipital lobe? Is the second option technically a form of telepathy?

That is spoilers, you will need to find out that in game.

How did Dove and Arde meet? What kept Arde from just running away?

You will probably find that out in game!

Are the cuckoos kept isolated from one another to the point they wouldn't recognize each other if they met in the field?

Yes. Most of them wouldn't know each other.

In regards to last month's question about whether or not Ortega could've gotten to Sidestep if they hadn't stopped for Chen, would Ortega still have been around by the events of Book 1, had they left Chen and still failed to save Sidestep?

I honestly don't know. I think not, but Ortega can be unpredictable.

Have there been any attempts to create perpetual engines in universe, considering that many powers seems to violate the conservation of energy?

Of course! That's the current pipe dream of physics, now that fusion is workable.

Why would it be worse if a Catfiend half ate another?

Kuru.

So when you answer these, do you stop answering questions posted after the end of the calendar month, or do you just answer all the ones posted since your last answering post?

The ones posted since my last answering post most of the time. If there are too many, I might break at the month.

Where was Regina the day of Heartbreak?

I'm not sure I should tell you!

How was regina told about sidestep being taken in again? In person? Did the evil emts understand how big a deal this was, enough to go through to the director immediately?

They had no idea of how big a deal it was at the time, they just saw an opportunity. But due to the nature of the Heartbreak incident, the current director was informed immediately.

Does Mortum have any interest in making watches?

Not currently, but I can see that as a thing they'd be into. Maybe when they retire.

What's your favorite video game?

Nier Automata without a doubt, closely followed by Dragon Age 2. The one I have played the most though? Civ V.

Since he's apparently interested, how would Argent react to Lord Ember asking her out?

Laugh. Absolutely lose it with the hyena cackle.

What is Lord' Ember's reaction to hearing that Argent is dating a civilian (Sidestep)?

Oh, so she's slumming it.

Would Argent recognize Heartbreak if she saw a photo of them?

Probably.

Also can I have Mortum and HG as dinosaurs too?

HG is not a dinosaur technically, but absolutely a Dimetrodon. Dr. Mortum is a Troodon.

Argent is Lord Ember's type, but would she still be his type if he knew the true nature of her powers?

HELL NO! She should be nuked from orbit, which would be hard since the FH world don't have nukes or that many satellites.

So in timelines where Argent kisses Sidestep during the bridge fight, how jealous was Lord Ember of the new villain?

Just low level normal seething envy, since Argent moved to LD he's not exactly kept up too much. He might be bad, but he's not a stalker.

Who is the oldest person currently alive in the Fallen Hero universe and how old are they?

I literally have no idea!

Does Snowball have any favorite treats?

Bananas, peel and all.

Is the number of these ever overwhelming? Should we try to limit our questions to one or two per month? I don't want to stress you out!! But this is a cool and fun idea, so thanks for the opportunity!

If I don't have time or feel overwhelmed I will tell you, I promise! Just be a bit mindful about asking elaborate AU things (which I won't have an opinion of), big spoilers or what characters think which will come up in game (which I won't answer), or large lists like "favorite car of all the ros and the hg trio, and henchmen and the crew." Be specific and interesting and I have no issues with the number of questions.

What would the Catfiend taste like to the Catfiend?

Very tasty! Deeply marinated in the good juice.

Will we have a chance to confront Argent on the repercussions of her using the regenerator before she goes through with it?

It depends on the path, but there can be a discussion there.

Where does Sidestep get their solution to feed the rat king from?

Probably steals the mixture from hospitals and then adjusts it themselves.

What's everyone's favorite potato chip flavor?

I have no idea! Chip flavors are so extremely local and ever changing. Even here in Sweden the flavors just keep shifting in and out, and my favorite corn chips flavors from the first time I was in the US doesn't even exist anymore.

Not asking who, but have we met any characters who would have unusually good odds against the Farm? If so, how many?

Hehehe... yes you have. Hmmm. One that everyone has met. Another one too... technically depending on how you define things.

Did Tia Elena name Snowball or did Snowball tell Sidestep her name when she was rescued from the lab?

Tia Elena named her. She just had a number code at the lab.

How long would the Farm have kept Heartbreak specimen alive, if they weren't a Regene? As in, if Sidestep wasn't a Regene, for how long would the Farm keep them for experiments before disposing of the materials?

As long as they remained scientifically useful.

Did the Farm know which of the Rangers were deployed to HB?

As soon as the LDPD did.

Will it be possible to gain Blaze as an ally in future books if you don't ally him in the hotel?

Possibly yeah.

Would the Catastrofiend make use of the regenerator if it got an opportunity to use it?

No.

Are there any performers on Broadway with boosts?

Possibly. Minor boosts can be a boon in performances, and if they are deemed harmless they can get a license even on the east coast.

Because the rangers are US government employees, I assume any work they do saving/protecting civilians is covered by their paycheck.

Oh yes. And they are insured when they mess up...

What about non-federal official heroes, like the Guardians? Does the Los Diablos mayor office issue bills to people who have been saved by Blaze to cover the cost?

No, the Mayor sees this as part of a PR scheme, and managed to sell that to the Council. So the Guardians also has their paycheck and insurance sponsored by the city, or rather by the cabal of major companies that runs it.

Is the Chicago Bean still around? How does Argent feel about the fact that she kinda shares an aesthetic with it?

I cannot capture the face I made on Argent's behalf in words. For fun, I will say that the Chicago Bean absolutely exists, and some hapless reporter asked that was question and was promptly banned from ever appearing at a Rangers press conference ever again.

What is the lifespan of a single nanovore before it dies of "old age"?

It depends on the activity level, I don't have exact numbers. The higher the activity level, the shorter the lifespan. Luckily high activity level also often coincides with a feeding frenzy, so nanovores will be quickly replaced.

What is the procedure for if a Re-Gene becomes ill on a mission, to the point where it impacts their performance but not enough to require hospitalization?

Pull them back for treatment. Even Re-Genes gets medical evacs, they are valuable tools.

Just how naughty can a cuckoo be before they are pulled from a mission? If a cuckoo does everything they are asked but has attitude, are they in trouble?

It depends a lot on the team, but Re-Genes with an attitude, cuckoo or not, are a liability. That is as bad as refusing orders, because it is a sign of independent thinking and a concept of self-worth. If not correctable, that might be a cause for recycling, or at the very least wipe and replace the chipped memories if they are not entrenched enough. That particular AI chip loudout might be scrapped as well, if it gives rise to independent thinkers, it's dangerously defective.

Has Ortega ever got sick of a short Sidestep's shit and hung them on a coat hanger?

No? I doubt most coat hangers or clothes could stand up to that kind of abuse.

How did Argent know the specifications of a living space that would seal in the nanovores? Or did she just over engineer it and hope the nanovores wouldn't break out?

Oh she over-engineered it like hell. But again, she can't be sure. It's not like something like that can be found open-source on the internet or something.

In scenarios where Sidestep shot (?) HB, what came first Chen almost snapping or the sound of the caster going off?

Chen almost snapping.

Let's pretend for a second all the movies IRL exist in FH, does Argent have any "Literally Me" characters? IE an outcast character that someone connects with so much either from actually sharing a lot traits or just wishful thinking they go "Wow, this is literally me"

Oh boy. I don't think so? A lot of the movie characters Argent bonds with and idolizes are more like what she -wants- to be. Aspirational. She rebuilt herself from the ground up, body and attitude both, so a lot of her is cribbed in part from various sources. Not a single individual, but little scenes and fractions of identity that she has latched onto and made hers. One of the things she loves about movies is that she can get pulled into them and -not- have to be herself.

How insistent are the farm on cuckoos having tattoos? If they got asked to infiltrate or monitor a group like a nudist colony then would they have a cuckoo without tattoos take on the mission or would they turn down the government's orders?

I honestly doubt that has ever come up. But if that was necessary, a cuckoo would not be chosen. Tattoos are essential, otherwise they might be mistaken for a human.

If Jake got caught and prosecuted for all of his crimes, would they put him into a medically induced coma for the duration of his sentence, or would they have some other ways of stopping him from just strolling out of prison?

Jake is a tricky one there. Unless there is some way to disrupt his powers (not that Sidestep knows), he would be one of the ones who would have to be kept in a coma. However, there are two likelier choices considering who he is. He might get deported to the Philippines, since that is his country of origin. The classic, just get him out of our hair. He would also be subject to a massive recruitment drive. His powers would be super valuable for many government agencies, and his psychological profile would show that he's essentially a rather loyal man. With HG's powers taking into account, it wouldn't be hard to sell it that he has been mind controlled, and a full pardon could be arranged. Money, security for his family, whatever he wanted, it could be arranged. Probably

even leniency for Nocturne (she wouldn't be considered too dangerous with her powers). Not HG though... that one is deeply dangerous, though easy to keep in a comfortable prison should that help Jake stay loyal.

How would the various rangers and the hollow ground trio react to finding child re-genes of themselves?

That's not how it works.

Will we be able to date Vera/Ben/Mortum without them knowing we're a villain? Or does it through them knowing we're a villain? And if so, would they accept if we don't reveal ourselves even with feelings involved? Who'd push?

All three of those will be fully aware that you are a villain, there's no civilian path there.

Will there be an option to introduce mortum to Argent?

Yes, just not sure how I will do it yet.

As per the June QnA question about what Re-Genes talk about through the wall of their cells: do they warn each other about certain guards, handlers, or scientists?

Oh yes, there's a whisper network on who the dangerous ones are. And, though nothing is ever proven, I think that on occasion especially nasty Farm staff might end up rather unlucky... Re-Genes can be quite subtle when needed.

Would Marcia recognize Ortega? How would she handle Ortega coming in and asking after the resident basement-dweller?

Marcia would be like "Oh, you have a pretty lady/handsome gentleman out there asking for you by name, and I might be needing my glasses adjusted, but they really look the spitting image of Charge. A little older and taller I think, but oh my, they're a cutie. Should I turn down my hearing aid and go dust some shelves so you can have some private time?"

Has HG ever got someone hurt by mistake using their power? Like telling someone that they can't feel pain or not to worry about something that maybe should have been worried about?

Oh yes. It's an easy thing to do. HG likes to remember those points when they get overconfident.

How high do you think the survival rate of a boost drug (including substitutes like void blood) could theoretically be in your setting?

Not high at all. But any number I would pull would be pulled out from thin air.

How big is a single nanovore? Also, what do they look like under a microscope?

I honestly don't know. If I specified the size, that might mean I paint myself into a corner story wise. Visually I've always imagined them as a cross between tardigrades and woodlouses, but techy.

Does Ortega trust Herald with anything they don't trust with Steel or Argent?

No, but they should. It would be good for them.

What does Herald think of kites?

The bird: Cool! The kite on a string: A damn nuisance near what remains of the beaches.

How long does it take Steel to change armor configurations? Does he need a dedicated hangar and pit crew to change or can he run around with an Optimus Prime style trailer filled with his other loadouts?

It needs a hangar. Some variants are an entirely new armor, while others are just modular weapon systems. But all needs time and work to prepare, it's not something he can do on a mission. Once Steel takes the field, he's stuck in whatever configuration he had until they return to base.

Is there a substance abuse problem in hero/villain communities similar to what was going on with 80s - 2000s wrestlers?

Oh yeah. It's not uncommon at all, especially with the laxer laws when it comes to controlled substances.

Is it more common for heroes & villains to take breaks even if there's no serious injuries like many modern combat sports athletes or go non-stop until they have to recover from something major like pro wrestlers?

It varies depending on the person. And, it might not only be physical injuries that needs rest. PTSD and stress is a big issue, and while some prefer to repress and work through it, others takes time off before they snap. Some would say the biggest risks of injuries, capture and death are when people keep pushing themselves beyond their limits. Sponsored heroes, or ones in teams, might have people that care about them enough to make them take a break before something worse happens, but the same is rarely true for villains. The most well-adjusted ones (like Psychopathor) usually disappear for a month or two after a big score, presumably for rest and recreation, and to spend their ill-gotten gains.

How likely is it there's a documentary series about heroes that's similar to Dark Side of The Ring? & if it's likely have any past/present LD Rangers ever been a subject or interviewed for it?

I would say that there definitely is one for vigilantes. They don't have any media teams or corporations looking over their shoulders, and many are quite outspoken about the challenges they face. The team who made it probably planned one for the more official heroes as well, but got leaned on pretty hard to turn it into an upbeat documentary instead and stopped the project. No dark sides allowed for corporate spokespersons. There might be tapes out there of interviews filmed but never used, revealing some nasty sides to things. They should have been destroyed, but you know how things are... I don't think the Rangers got interview, that was too high profile.

What was in the warehouse (or what did he think was in there) that Psychopathor wanted?

I'm not sure what you're talking about? If you mean the warehouse in Rebirth, I think that was just the current base for Psychopathor? A good assembly spot to prepare for their next job, a temporary base so to speak.

Does Ortega attribute any of their survival going up against HG as due to being Sidestep's friend? As in HG should have had them killed by now but is willing to overlook some things because their little sibling wouldn't have wanted them dead.

Oh yes. Ortega is quite convinced that is the reason why they have just been indirectly warned off (blown up flat, etc) instead of assassinated like Hood. That is one reason they haven't pushed too hard against HG with overt attacks, because there must be limits. Ortega doesn't want to cross that line until they have all the proof and information they need, and is ready to take HG down for good.

Would this opinion have shifted upon discovering Step was alive? From being just too skilled to be killed to being kept alive as leverage over Step? Or being alive due to sentimentality to having dodged genuine assassination attempts so they can't get Step to be a hero again?

Oh yes, the moment they learned Sidestep was alive, all facts clicked into place. It's the wrong facts, sure, but oh boy do they paint a very convincing picture. Ortega is not sure if it is Sidestep that actively protected them (they hope so) or if it is HG who wants to refrain from widening the rift. Ortega is also so absolutely furious at himself for not coming to the conclusion that the fact that HG hadn't tried to kill them yet meant that Sidestep must be alive. If only they had stopped being so depressed maybe they would have added up all the facts beforehand.

Was there any public backlash or conspiracy theories about why Sidestep, a vigilante with unknown and non-very-flashy powers, got pulled into a disaster on the scale of Heartbreak?

Oh yes! Especially considering that there were rumors about the Nanosurge, though most bought the official explanation. A lot of people had theories about Sidestep's true powers, some were probably even correct! Others saw it as a misjudgement by Charge, you don't take your Sidekick on a mission like that. Just like Charge to let their ego decide.

What is the situation surrounding boosts, mods, the hero scene, and the legality of such things in Canada?

Canada is not as repressive as the US east coast, nor as permissive as the free western territories. There is a thriving hero scene in Canada, people can get licensed to use their powers, and many choose to go into law enforcement. They don't have a Rangers project per se, but the Royal Canadian Mounted Police do have an Enhanced Crimes Division that boosts and mods can apply to. If you pass the background checks and the six months of basic training, you will have a good paying job waiting for you. These heroes are known as the Royal Canadian Enhanced Police, the RCEP for short, though many of them prefer the parent term and see themselves as much a part of the RCMP as their non-enhanced comrades.

Of course not everyone wants to go through with this, or believe they will be able to pass the background check for various reasons. They can become independent heroes, and if they pass a psychological evaluation, and a voluntary mapping of their powers, they can get what is essentially similar to a private investigator license. This is quickly revoked in case of too much property damage, but careful and heroic individuals are much respected. And, they can also retain their secret identity.

Vigilantes have no licenses or official sanction. If they are heroic and not too destructive, they are left alone. Otherwise they might be treated as almost as much of a problem as the villains are.

The hero drug is illegal in Canada, but with the busy border traffic between Vancouver and Seattle, it's not a hard thing to get hold of. Penalties for smuggling are very harsh, the Canadian authorities prefers that people get boosted on US soil so they don't have to deal with the potentially explosive fallout and side-effects. There are well-known "clinics" in isolated spots near the border that offers an opportunity for boosting under somewhat medical control, and these are popular.

How would the Rangers have taken it if Sidestep did die during the Psychopathor fight?

They'd be sad and distraught, but on occasion allied heroes die.

What was Themmy's last thought before dying? Did they see the Void when dying due to Heartbreak?

Oh that is spooilers!

If someone took the boost drug with something like DMT which gives extremely intense hallucinations (often to do with higher planes of existence, to the point where some people think it is responsible for out of body experiences during near death experiences), what kind of power what would they be likely to get?

About as random as during other times, there's no predicting it. There might be a greater chance of extrasensory or "weirder" powers connecting to the experience, but it's hard to be sure due to limited tests being done. I am sure the Farm has experimented with various drug cocktails to see if there is a difference, but so far there's no statistical significance. Too small sample size.

Placing some tinfoil scraps on the table. Was 5p always prone to be aggressive/"rancid"/villainous/ other adjective to describe his whole thing, or was there a certain circumstance that caused him to change in such a way? If so, was it caused by being boosted similar to The Void or was it a certain event that caused/catalyzed his descent from hero to killer?

Chicken or egg? Hard to tell at this point, even when he was on the right side of the law, Five Pennies were always one of the more brutal heroes. Maybe we'll get into it in game, not sure yet. If not, I might reveal more background later.

And has 5p ever encountered Mortum's gun?

I don't think so.

Would storing 5P's five pennies in Mortum's gun deteriorate their abilities when 5P uses them?

Nope.

How do I open all of the gates?

You can't yet, that is for book four. Or book three. Not sure yet.

You mentioned in another Q&A that there isn't much of a market for superhero TTRPGs in FHR, but what about their world's equivalent of Madden or fantasy football? Do they have games where they play as teams of superheroes or set up teams of superheroes for missions or whatnot?

OH yeah! Fantasy Heroes must be a big thing, build your own four man hero team and see how it does. Was probably called Fantasy Rangers first before the cease and desist letter came. With the ranking sites for heroes and villains, I think this would be a feasible thing to do. Probably a lot of board or console games too.

What are the housing units for regens like? Communal dorms? Single unit closest-like bedrooms? How are they adjusted for Regene's with unique physiologies?

It varies. New Re-Genes have communal dorms to be able to interact. When they are later selected into teams, each team have their own dorm to increase bonding. Some Re-Genes do have single unit rooms, either because their powers are dangerous or volatile enough, or because they are deemed difficult or unreliable. Sidestep was one of those. The rooms are spartan but not uncomfortable, just devoid of personality. Think hospital more than prison cell, sturdy and utilitarian. They can be adjusted depending on the occupant, let's say a solid metal bead for heavy Re-Genes, or a water bath for ones needing immersion often.

How would Hood and Sentinel have fared under Heartbreak's mental influence?

Bad. Would probably have led to a city-wide disaster, maybe even worse for Hood.

Did Deadeye have any prominent employers before HG or did she freelance?

She was a freelancer.

Can you rate the public figures of the cast on a scale of how likely they are to lose in a look-a-like contest of themselves?

I don't know for everyone, but I DO know Ortega would absolutely lose, and it would infuriate them.

When it comes to the distinction between a standard killer & a massacre villain do people have a heavily desensitized threshold like most mid/high power superhero comics or is it roughly like reality? IE if the gala attack happened IRL & 5 people died that would be enough to be called a massacre but if Emma Frost or Namor did it while they were villains it'd be bad but it'd have to be around 50 people to elicit that kind of response

I would say it operates more on comic book logic here, but I am avoiding numbers for a reason.

When you fight the re-gene in Rebirth, Step notices their optic mods. Given the longer time you spend with him (like saving him) the higher your SD clue gets, were his optic mods recording?

Ehehehehehe. Not gonna tell you that.

Would Daniel, given the speed of his flight, consider a flight to Japan and back a hiking trip?

Kinda like the Appalachian trail I suppose. A LONG one. Since Danny can easily sleep floating, it is feasible, he would have to pack food and water though, and some means of navigation.

Does the core implant memories similarly how to Step can do with Argent?

Hmmm. I would say similar enough.

Following up on a question from last month: Nowadays, when Hollow Ground crushes some rando's pathetic attempt to bring them to justice beneath their heel, do they ever think wistfully that Hood would have done it much better?

Oh yes. A man (gn) is measured by the qualities of their enemies.

How often does Ortega let slip something to Daniel that Daniel doesn't have security clearance for? Has Steel ever let anything slip to anyone?

Ortega lets slip surprisingly little. Honestly, I think Steel has let slip more. Don't underestimate Ortega's caginess.

What does Herald think of Argent flirting with a villainstep? Is it different from how he views Ortega's previous times on the fridge (if he thinks about that)?

He thinks Argent is being self-destructive. That can't be healthy. And he does think the same about Ortega...

If the rat king wasn't in place, would argent be able to use step's armor against them? How much could she fuck with the armor if it was possible for her?

It would be harder due to the telepathic interface, but it would be easier to read it at least. A powered armor (not just Sidesteps) is made to respond to the wearer, either through muscle interaction, neural, or telepathic interface. This is an active loop, which is harder for Argent to influence. She would be able to puppet an armor like that. However, she might be able to cause faulty sensory readings and the like, use it a bit like Sidestep started out using their telepathy. To mess with people.

When Argent feeds them, how do the nanovore know not to eat her as well? By taste or by technopathy?

At this point, a bit of both. She's designated HOST not DINNER.

How do the nanovores perceive Argent? Is she their leader? A foreign body they'll listen to? A very large and misshapen nanovore?

She's HOST, a bit like a coral reef for them I suppose. Fish living in anemones and so on. They live there, she protects them, and they protect her.

Would Argent have been disappointed if the villain she'd been flirting with turned out to be a flat out sentient machine like presumably Dread Reactor?

No, that would be fascinating. She always wanted to meet Dread Reactor.

Does ortega consider their mods to be a part of themself, or like chen and his hands, does ortega not consider them their own?

For Ortega, they are as much a part of them as their eyes or hands. It's all them, that's one of the reasons why they are able to get that modded. They are fully integrated on a level that's true for few other modded heroes.

Does Argent cheat at video games when playing single player or multi player?

No, that would be cheating.

What would happen if I Boosted an independent cancerous cell culture like the HeLa cells?

I don't think it would work on just a cell culture. But now you've got me thinking...

How stable is the hero drug on its own? Is it basic, acidic or otherwise difficult to store? Radioactive? Are its fumes hazardous? How long does it take to degrade beyond effectiveness?

The hero drug is not very dangerous on its own. It's somewhat acidic if dissolved in water, but not more than lemon juice. No fumes, but if burnt the smoke can harm lungs and mucous membranes. Not healthy. It can't boost anybody if smoked like that, people have tried. It's generally not radioactive, though there has been experiments with irradiated variants to see if that is more effective. The results are inconclusive, but it seems that radiation in combination with the hero drug can result in more dangerous but volatile boosts, thus less serviceability. As for stability, it varies depending on the form. Currently the premium variant is liquid, for injection, and degrades within a few weeks if kept at room temperature, longer if kept cold. It's not overly sensitive to heat, but it does reduce the shelf life. The old variant, which was a yellowish, milky, crystalline powder for ingestion was more stable, and could last for many months if stored dry. This is still the most common type to smuggle, though it is less effective than the newer, purified variants. Most dissolve it in water before injecting, in the mistaken belief that will make it as effective as the premium variant.

How are the nanovores feelings and behaving during Book 2's Argent date?

Spoilers. Maybe I'll write that out one day.

What would a romanced Ortega's reaction to Sidestep wearing deliberately awful outfits on dates just to make them cringe be?

Oh that is a challenge, two can play that game...

Is HGs organization as large as Ortega thinks it is? Or does Ortega think HG has more reach than they truly have?

I would say that Ortega is prone to exaggeration.

Does Herald rank higher than Ricardo on "Top 10 most handsome hero" lists? Or is there a betting pool in the Ranger's HQ staff for when that will happen?

Yeah, he is now. To Ortega's chagrin.

Aside from Sky Raider are there any names we know that Dr Mortum has done armor/weapon work for? Have they done work for vigilantes or is it villains exclusively?

I haven't decided all, but I do know they have worked with Psychopathor. Dr. Mortum works with vigilantes too, if they can cough up the cash, which is rare.

Was going in with a small team to handle the Heartbreak threat personally only Ortega's call or was it suggested or preferred by higher ups? Was it an attempt to minimize civilian casualties or were there other motivations since just bombing the building was always on the table?

The team size was to avoid giving Heartbreak tools to use. Hence Sentinel's absence. It was Ortega's call, and as you can see, they were a bit hesitant whether Sidestep should come too. Ortega wanted to go in and take Heartbreak out in person rather than bomb the building and surroundings to minimize casualties. They didn't know if any people were still alive in there, or in fact if Heartbreak still was. Steel was the one which arranged for the bombing backup, though this was probably strongly suggested to him by the military. As a last resort, don't tell Charge.

Since Dr Mortum is so fond of capes did they ever have one in an iteration of their own villain armor? Have they ever incorporated one into their civilian wardrobe?

No, but they did have a sweeping coat which fulfilled a similar role.

Is there a higher resignation/requested transfer rate amongst handlers assigned to work with cuckoos? If so is it because they're more difficult to dehumanize, or for different/multiple reasons?

I don't think so, but I do think the handlers are screened a lot more resolutely to weed out too emphatic people.

Can 5Ps be telepathied by Sidestep? Or do his pennies give him a kind of resistance?

Spoilers.

Is danny perceptive enough that he might notice any tension or hesitance between one of his teammates and the villain, particularly in a case where sidestep/ro would be hesitant to hurt each other? What about if the villain (who he doesn't know is a sidestep he's dating... doubly so in cases where step mangled his leg at the gala) is suddenly subtly hesitant to hurt him?

Ehehehe oh you will see. Not gonna tell you.

What is it about a Villainstep that's Ortegass nemesis compared to every other potential status that makes them so certain they're working for HG even before the meeting? Or is it just "I hate these 2, they must be connected"?

Once you have a conspiracy board with lots of lines connecting things, it becomes very easy to fit every new threat into the picture that is emerging. In short, it's just a hunch.

Does Sidestep remember their re-gene designation number?

Yes.

Are Ace's premonitions 100% accurate or are they more like extremely probable outcomes?

Depends on your power level. Also, they tend to be probable unless affected by Ace, so they can be changed once you figure out how.

Which of the ROs are quickest to notice when Step struggles to be fully present during physical or emotional intimacy? Would any of them only realize that was happening afterwards?

Who would be first to try and talk to Step about it?

I would say Danny... he's pretty perceptive that way, and have no filter for when Sidestep might like to repress things in peace. But it is a thing all the RO's will figure out sooner or later.

Did the farm make cuckoos have telepathic fights to have them hone their telepathy?

I think telepathic adjacent cuckoos were deliberately kept very isolated from each other. Too dangerous.

Does Chen still play chess? Does/did anyone in the Rangers play with him?

Daniel does! He's improved a lot.

The ultimate balance of tactician and fighter, which one of the cast would be best at chess boxing? Rank them please

I have no idea what chess boxing is, and ranking the cast is a huge effort!

Does Ortega have a thing for nerds?

Ortega has a thing for characters, people that stick out somehow. And sometimes, those are nerds.

Can Ortega fix/maintain cars or are they just good at driving them?

They're decent, they had to do that a lot when growing up. Not an expert though.

Are there crimes targeting the Enhanced that are considered hate crimes?

No.

Does Ortega think a revealed Step possessed Argent? Or has that yet to cross their mind?

I'm unsure. It would depend on the circumstances. Most likely not.

Mayor Alvarez is credited with opening the heroic heritage museum, was she present during the gala? Does she have any idea that the original blueprints of the museum were altered either before or after the villains attack?

Oh yes, she was present during the gala. She has no idea any blueprints were changed, she was not that involved in the details.

Would any of the ROs purposefully tighten the lids of things so Sidestep comes to them to open it?

Nah, they know Sidestep one, knows the knife trick, and two, would be as likely to gently smash it open. Asking for help? Sidestep? All signs point to never.

If the ROs fell asleep at a desk or couch, or some place not their bed, how would they feel to find Sidestep carried them to bed or threw a blanket over them to keep them warm?

I mean who wouldn't feel warm and loved by that?

What did Ortega see when present for Step delving into Argents mind a second time at HQ? How did Argent and Steps physical bodies react? About how long did the mind delve take?

The mind dive was quick, but took long enough for Ortega to start to worry. One to five minutes perhaps? It depends on what was done. Both of them showed rapid eye movement behind closed eyelids, and depending on what happened, quick facial distortions, fleeting, gone as soon as they arrived.

Did Ace intentionally take the Boost drug?

Oh yes. They were the betting sort even back then.

Would Argent actively try to suppress her thoughts about her birthday around a known telepath Sidestep to stop them finding out that it's her birthday?

I honestly don't think she needs to suppress much, these days she rarely thinks about it.

Since her clue is raised when the Puppet passes out completely unharmed at the gala, is Argent aware Ortega's been investigating the Puppet.

Argent might be having an inkling, yes.

Who would be better at noticing minor similarities (hand gestures, speech patterns, etc.) between Step & Puppet, Ortega or Herald?

Herald. Ortega would notice, but would be more likely to write it off as Seeing Sidestep everywhere.

Is Doves 1-sided rivalry with Herald coming more from a place of malice or annoyance?

Amusement.

Did Mortum have any rivals at any point in their life?

Probably, but I haven't come up with them yet!

Does Bo's daughter know what he does for a living?

Not exactly, but she suspects.

What would Ortega have done if at the end of book 2, they explained their HB sibling theory to Sidestep and then Sidestep revealed they were just a paranoid average citizen with no connection to any major players?

Insert doubt emoji here.

What would've been the max range of HB before they expired if they hadn't been stopped?

I would say city wide.

What scares Ortega more; the thought that Sidestep is a villain or Sidestep is truly 100% retired?

Oh that is an interesting question. Ortega would not want to admit this, but it is actually the latter.

Very roughly (like by standard form), how many nanovores does Argent have around her?

Absolutely no idea!

Could the rat king feel Argent trying to take control of villainstep's suit?

They might feel the suit glitching yes, but not pinpoint the source. If they connect the two, they might get better at spotting it.

(What) does Argent know about the Ratking? If she does, does she suspect it being part of the armour?

Spoilers.

Do Ortega and Chen miss the old HQ, did they fight at all to keep it as it was? Or after Heartbreak were they glad to have a bit of a "fresh start" away from the potentially painful memories?

Both were happy for a fresh start, away from the ghosts.

How vivid and faithful can implanted memories be? Has there been attempts to make full clones with full duplicate lives from the original?

Implanted memories can be just as real as organically sourced ones. However, there is a question of quantity. Think of it like seeding a wildflower meadow, you blanket the entire area with seeds, but which ones which will take root and grow, let alone flower, depends on the dirt, the weather, so many things. Of course there has been attempt to transplant whole memories and personalities, some say that as a way to eternal life, but so far none of the attempts have been very successful.

Could Hollow Ground use/work with other telepaths to command others without touching? For example. Hollow Ground touches Sidestep. Sidestep telepathically connects Hollow Ground and the target and then they give the command.

No. I don't think that would work.

Does Ortega have a range of scented candles that just smell like burning electronics?

Ahaha no.

Does Argent have a mental list of how accurate film's portrayals of heroes are to the hero's she's met?

No, the film portrayals are just stories, she wants them larger than life.

Does Argent know if Villainstep took a sample of her hair in the sewers?

No.

Has Argent ever been tempted to traumatise a villain by letting them get a quick look at her face under the nanovores?

Gross, but no.

Did the SD kidnap Hollow Grounds sibling because they wanted to recreate the geokinesis they claim to have? If so how would HG feel if they learned the lie that helped give & maintain their status is also the reason they lost their last family member?

Spoilers.

Was Marshal Hood somehow involved with the younger sibling's death?

Nope.

Do you have a term of endearment in mind for Mortum to use with genderqueer steps?

Not yet. That's the problem with both french and spanish, they are so gendered. I'll have to consult with my french speaking readers. I will most likely also let people choose at this point.

Step can fess up (or not) about being a regene or a villain. Is there a secret Ortega never plans to disclose to Step because they're afraid of Step's reaction? Would Step be able to find out anyway? I don't want to know specifics, just if there is one. Oh and what you think a justified range of emotions from Step would be if they did find out.

Hmmmm. That's a good question. Maybe. I need to think about that, I can't answer it yet. As for Sidestep's reaction, that is up to the reader.

Will the Regenerator need any extra parts for it to work? Namely, one might say, Nano-sized ones both Mortum and Argent already know how to work with?

I mean... that sure would be dangerous and convenient.

Does Argent know more about how the Regenerator works than we do when she finds it up for auction?

Yes.

Can Argent 'talk' to devices that are powered down? Or does her technopathy require devices to be running to work?

They need to be active.

Has Lou Carter ever been involved with a cult?

Not unless you count capitalism.

If Shroud got her hands on a body another telepath was controlling at that moment, what would happen?

I don't even want to consider that, it would be BAD.

When did Sky Raider turn villain?

A year or two after leaving the military.

Apologies if asked before. Do social media exist and in what form?

It does, but in a less evolved form. It's more late nineties message boards and things like that. Lots of little private islands kept alive by enthusiasts, some of them not quite legal. There is no Facebook here yet, they might be working up to the Myspace stage.

Could the Catfiend survived prolonged exposure to a vacuum?(Like the void of space and not a dyson handheld cleaning instrument)

Not prolonged, but probably an hour or so, though the damage would be severe.

If someone took the hero drug and Hollow Ground told them what power they'd gain, would that work?

No.

If Hollow Ground told someone they've mastered a skill, would they only think they did so? What if they watch a tutorial and Hollow Ground tells them they'll do it perfectly the first time they try it?

That would help a lot, removing nervousness, adding confidence and so on. Still wouldn't be perfect, they wouldn't have the muscle memory, but a damn sight better than otherwise.

Is an object affected by the progression of time inside Mortum's gun? The Catfiend degrades over time sure, but is that because of the natural processes of starvation, suffocation, and dying of thirst or because of more esoteric wibbly wobbly space decay?

Wibbly wobbly space decay!

Mia's got guts but have there been any villains she'd been too afraid to interview (Catfiend notwithstanding since it can barely talk). Have any refused to be interviewed when she's asked?

There has been villains she has not interviewed because of concern for her safety, specifically paranoid ones who likes to hurt people. She is less worried about the megalomaniacs, they tend to want an audience to brag to. Lots of people refuse interviews, but the ones she picks usually are suckers for fame and a chance to say their piece.

How does Mia usually go about getting villain interviews? Does she have criminal contacts that help set it up or does she just catch them after they're done doing whatever & ask for a time & place?

She does have criminal contacts! It's good to get tips as a reporter.

What are Boss!Step's crew's thoughts on No-Kill/Agent-Kill/Massacre Steps? Is it something any might express later?

Not gonna discuss it here, because this will come up in game, especially due to body-hopping shenanigans...

Did HG's little sibling ever encounter heartbreak?

I don't think so.

Who would be most to least likely to snuggle the farm animals on mama Ortega's farm?

I would say the least likely is Argent. For understandable reasons. Ortega doesn't do the snuggle, unless it's the horses. Chen would love the dogs, and watch the rest of the animals respectfully. Daniel would absolutely snuggle everything he got away with, but probably be a bit freaked out by some of them. I can see him holding a hen in both hands arms outstretched and just going "help?". Dr. Mortum is actually surprisingly good with farm animals, and knows a whole lot more about them than anybody would expect. They would not explain why.

How would our goat friend react to them?

Snowball is spoilers.

Hypothetically, could HG access Sidestep's chip memories? the false ones because it's technically not brain damage but just replaced memories?

Hypothetically HG might help Sidestep to access them, but at this point it's unlikely. At this point memories pretty much have fused into a giant personal soup where it's hard to pick out exactly what was seeded from the chip. Not saying it couldn't be done, but that it would probably be a long process, not unlike therapy.

Is Regina susceptible to HG's threads?

I don't see any reason why she shouldn't be?

[Time for your questions for this month!](#)

[Jul 28, 2024](#)

Alrighty, sorry for being a lot less online and on the discord than I usually am, but between summer family travels and massive amounts of rain leading to a small flood and water damage in our house (have had to move so much stuff, and deal with the insurance company, ugh) I've been all out of social interactions.

Thank you so much for your support, and hopefully things will calm down soon. Got another project coming out in a few weeks too, and once that is done that will free up more time to finally finish the Rebirth update. And the puppet demo is coming, but more and more paths are getting dragged in there so it keeps growing wide rather than long!

Alright, please ask away, whatever strikes your fancy! (just remember I am unlikely to spoil what will happen in Revelations)

[Lab Animals](#)

[Jul 22, 2024](#)

Alrighty, the combined puppet demo is still a patchwork since there are so many paths to connect. So it is not finished yet, but here is an excerpts from the 3.1 path side of the demo. This is where Mortum had Sky-Raider break the puppet with broken legs out from the hospital. It's not from the start, but from somewhere in the middle. As always, the code lacks a lot of choices, what the puppet and Dr. Mortum are to each other, and paths, but it's a little peek. Thank you for your patience! I truly appreciate your support! I couldn't do this without you. Now I just need to turn all these bits into a finished mosaic and get the proper demo done. But it's complex!

The base of this is romanced or friendly puppet that has not told Dr. Mortum that they really are Sidestep.

....

*comment 3_1 path, add in variants for 2_3 and others later.

Only when the doors are safely shut behind you and the elevator has deposited you back into the bowels of Los Diablos do you dare to breathe once more. No blaring alarms. No sign of immediate intrusion. You don't doubt the security systems would pick up Retribution, Dr. Mortum made that armor, of course \${mhe} would be able to spot its approach. Did you do it? Did you lose whatever was in that armor?

You certainly lost your breath, struggling to regain it enough to speak. Dr. Mortum gives you time to recover, running \${mhis} hands over the panels, no doubt scanning for whatever threat that has left you in this state. Finding nothing.

Hopefully.

"Calm down, \${title}," \${mhe} says, as if \${mhe} could read your mind. "There's nothing out there, you're safe." Dr. Mortum's hand on your back is light enough not to trigger bad feelings as \${mhe} ushers you deeper in to the lab, away from the entrance. It's heavy enough to feel supportive. Warm. Safe. Are you? Could you ever be?

No, your brain supplies, unprompted. Not while whatever was in that armor is out there, looking for you. The lab is shielded, you know that much, but you can't stay here forever. Like it or not, you need help. More help than Dr. Mortum has already given to you.

*if mortumknows

*comment Write later, mortum knows the truth. Probably a goto to a new scene. REMEMBER TO ADD VARIABLES FOR THIS LATER.

*else

*goto littlelies

*label littlelies

And for that, you need a lie more palatable than the truth.

*fake_choice

#For now. I will tell Dr. Mortum once it is safe to do so.

You won't keep lying forever. Just for now. How could you even start explaining what is going on? With Retribution out there, there's no way Dr. Mortum would believe that's really your body and that \${puppet_name} never existed. Right now proof exists to the contrary.

#At this point I don't even know what the truth is.

At this point, you're not even sure what the truth even is. Retribution is out there, your armor and body no longer yours to control. How are you supposed to tell Dr. Mortum that its really your body and that \${puppet_name} never existed? Right now proof exists to the contrary.

#I can't risk Dr. Mortum throwing me out.

It's not like you can stop lying now, no matter how much you care about the good doctor, not when you need \${mhim} the most. Besides, any story you could tell would fly in the face of all evidence. Retribution is out there, your armor and body no longer yours to control. No proof that it was ever yours to begin with.

!\${mhe}'s a scientist. The most logical conclusion would be that you've been brainwashed. Or manipulated somehow. Perhaps you'll get a chance to reveal the truth and have it sound believable eventually. Until then, you need to keep up the act.

"!\${puppet_name}?" Dr. Mortum calls for your attention, and you realize that \${mhe}'s probably been trying to get your attention for a while. "What happened?" !\${mhe} doesn't elaborate. !\${mhe} doesn't need to. You know what's unsaid. What is the danger here? Does \${mhe} need to do something about it?

You sit down at the table, \${mhe}'s ushered you into the little kitchenette by now. Coffee is a panacea, and you can smell it brewing. Not ready yet, you suppose you should be grateful that he didn't just microwave a cup of the cold leftovers. !\${mhe} hasn't done that more than once. More of an atrocity than many of \${mhis} experiments.

"You were right," you start, looking down at your hands as you try to pick the right words. You know \${mhim} well enough to sweeten the pot with some flattery. "My boss." You pause as if it takes some effort to say their name. "Retribution. They're after me. I managed to get away this time, but I wouldn't want to chance a repeat experience."

"Merde." The curse is short and swift, a quick look at \${mhis} watch to see if there is anything amiss. You don't need to read \${mhis} mind to know what \${mhe}'s thinking. You came here. To \${mhis} lab.

"I wasn't followed."

*if known_telepath

"Retribution is a telepath." !\${mhe} shakes \${mhis} head as if \${mhe} can't quite believe your recklessness.

*else

"Retribution is a telepath I believe?" \${mhe} meets your eyes, and you nod. An easy enough conclusion to make for a \${mortum_gender} who created their armor.

"If they had any power over my mind, do you think I would even have had thoughts of rebelling?" Your laugh is hoarse, you have no idea how this is working, but at this point you're certain that it is. Look to the evidence, not to your own terrors and paranoia.

You must be, if not immune, at least impossible to find or influence for Retribution. If that hadn't been the case, you would never have been able to escape the mall. Whether it is because whoever the impostor is can't access your powers, or whether it is because they need all their strength to control your body, you're not sure. You can't use your telepathy when possessing other people's bodies, you would assume the same would be true for them.

"That makes sense," Dr. Mortum grudgingly admits. To even have the treacherous thoughts you admitted to earlier would have been cause for dismissal otherwise. "And I trust you were careful enough not to be spotted physically as you came here?"

*fake_choice

#"I'm not an amateur," I say, annoyed.

"I'm not an amateur," you say, the annoyance your first hint of emotion that's not tied to fear. Good. Anger is the fuel you need right now.

#"Of course. I would never risk anything happening to you."

"Of course," you assure, voice going soft. "I would never risk anything happening to you." \${mhe} has been too good to you. You won't drag back trouble to \${mhis} doorstep if you can help it.

#"You would already know if I had messed up, wouldn't you?"

"You would already know if I had messed up, wouldn't you?" You can't help sounding nervous. The certainty that you lost Retribution is mixed with the fear that you don't know enough to predict them. "I don't want to compromise this place."

"I know that. And the systems back you up, all seems quiet out there." \${mhe} adjusts \${mhis} glasses, and finally focuses fully on you once more.

*if character 3_1

"It's best you keep your head down for now, though."

"I won't stay locked up forever." You speak through gritted teeth. "We need to figure out some way to strike back."

*else

"As I said, you'll be safe here for as long as you wish to stay."

"I didn't come here to hide." You speak through gritted teeth. "I came here to get help to strike back."

"Oh." You can see the slight shift on \${mhis} face, the nervousness of a \${mortum_gender} not used to outright battle. "I'm a scientist, \${title}, not a fighter."

"I know," you assure. "And you made that armor too well for Retribution to be taken down easily. I don't..." you pause before continuing. You don't what? Want to kill them?

Regardless of your anger, you can't. That's [b]your[/b] body. But that's a reason you can't admit to, at least not yet. Not without risking your one lifeline. Maybe later, once you have your body in front of you. If you can't take it back then, maybe you need to confess. Ask for more help. But right now, what you need can be obtained with few deft lies. What is another one on the pile you've built together?

"I don't want them dead. I need to talk to them," you finally settle for as you continue. "I think this can be solved by words, but I can't risk them taking me out before I have a chance to say my piece."

"Are you serious?" Dr. Mortum gives you a look of equal parts horror and disbelief. "Haven't you given up on them yet? What kind of hold do they have over you?"

*fake_choice

#"I owe them my life. I can't just forget that."

"I owe them my life. I can't just forget that." A truth, finally. "I think I can fix this. They don't know the whole truth, if I get the chance to say my piece they might understand."

#"It's complicated," I admit with a helpless shrug.

"It's complicated. And maybe I'm wrong. But I can't just cut all cords and pretend that would work. There are things I need to know first."

#"Please trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"Please trust me," you say, doing your best to sound confident. "I know what I'm doing."

"More secrets," Dr. Mortum sighs as you don't elaborate further.

"There's always more secrets, you know that." You wish you didn't sound this tired. That you didn't [b]feel[/b] this tired.

"I know we agreed to this, to keep what we have between us away from the rest of our complicated lives, but you are making it very hard not to ask." $\$!$ {mhe} looks back over $\$$ {mhis} shoulder as $\$$ {mhe} pours you some coffee. "I'm worried. I feel like I can't help you if I don't know what's really going on here."

"I know I'm not fair," you admit. Which is the least of it. "And you deserve to know everything. I just don't know if I..." You break off, meeting $\$$ {mhis} gaze behind the tinted glasses as the cup is placed in front of you. "Telling the truth is not something I'm used to. I don't think I ever have. I can't. It's too risky."

"No risk no reward," Dr. Mortum says with a faint smile. "Fine, I won't push. You can do this on your own time. Just know that I am willing to listen."

"I don't doubt that." You look down. "I'm just not sure I'm willing to take the risk. Not yet."

"Not with your life on the line," $\$$ {mhe} says, $\$$ {mhis} guess too close to the truth as always.

"Can..." You break off, rephrasing the question. "Will you help me?"

"What do you need to do." The sentence is simple, scalpel-sharp. "What do you need [b]me[/b] to do."

"I need to talk to Retribution. Outside of their armor. And they won't come willingly. So that needs to be dealt with. I don't suppose you have a backdoor?" You keep your voice even, it was one of the things that worried you.

*if streetwise

How would you ever know?

*else

You never found anything, but you have to admit Dr. Mortum is sharper than you when it comes to those things.

"I don't." $\$!$ {mhe} looks almost offended by the suggestion. "I pride myself on my integrity as a weapons and armor designer, once it leaves my hands it doesn't belong to me anymore. I do, however, know whatever hint of a weakness still in there despite my best efforts."

"Do you know a way to stop it without destroying it?"

"Well, there will likely be some damage," $\$$ {mhe} admits. "But nothing that's not repairable. Why such concern?"

"Like I said, I hope this can be resolved with talking." You sip your coffee, doing your best to look nonchalant. "No need to make that harder than necessary."

*comment ALTERNATIVE PATH IF CATASTROFIEND IS LOOSE, REROUTE TO LATER.

*comment if mortumgotgun is false, then write different section.

*if gunsecret

*goto plantime

*else

*comment goto explaingun, write later if you don't know what it does.

*label plantime

"Well, we do have a few options." All business now, scientist's mind already at work. "I do have my 'disintegration' gun back in my hands." The smile twitch at the word disintegration. "That could be used to transport Retribution to a secure location of our choosing. All we need to do is shoot them, then reverse the process in a suitable holding cell. Such a short stint within the gun won't harm them. It won't feel nice, but I assume that nausea and migraine is acceptable?"

"They'll still be in the armor." You feel uneasy at the thought, you've never seen this gun work, but you suppose it can be tested before using it on your body. Just to be sure.

"I can set up a holding cell with an ambient power draining loop. I should be able to drain the armor if given enough time."

"You're forgetting about the nanovores." You made your armor with things like this in mind. "Drain the power to the void cage and they'll get loose and eat the containment walls even if Retribution doesn't unleash them immediately."

"Merde. You're right. I had forgotten about that." Dr. Mortum sits down with \${mhis} own coffee, forehead wrinkled in thought. "A true dead man's switch."

"They don't want to be captured." Your voice feels empty of all emotion. "Better to destroy everything in their surroundings than that happening." Nothing organic, but no cell or prison to stand in the way of you escaping in the confusion.

"We would have a short window once Retribution is released from the gun when they would be confused," Dr. Mortum switches plans seamlessly, dumping some more sugar in the coffee before stirring. "It might be enough time for us to trigger the emergency eject system."

"Maybe." You know what \${mhe}'s getting at. In case you ever needed to get out of the armor fast, there is a way to do it nearly instantly. Using the emergency reject will shed the majority of the armored structure, leaving you with minimal life support, your helmet and the Rat King. It was meant as a last resort in case your armor was immobilized somehow, if your generator was malfunctioning, or if someone like Sticky Sticky Bang Bang had planted explosives on you. As annoying a name as annoying a power. You just never knew. "It won't be easy to trigger for us." You know the how to work it from inside the armor, a separate, mechanical sub-system, double redundancy in case Ortega broke through the insulation and fried your systems for good.

"Not easily," \${mhe} admits. "But luckily Retribution did ask for an emergency medical assistance port, so it's not impossible."

"They did." Your smile feels almost alien on your face, the first ray of hope in a long time. You needed to be able to open the armor from the outside if your body was ever incapacitated. "That will take a while, though." You need to open the hatch which will need tools, then access the port manually. Not something that can be done during a fight. "And I doubt they will stand still long enough to let that happen."

"In a place with dampeners I can enlist someone to help us with that. Strong enough hold them down long enough to get to pop their armor, so to speak."

*if suit_strength

"Even with the exo-skeleton?"

"I think so. Though I suppose it wouldn't be a bad idea with redundancy."

"Are you talking about hiring help?" You suppose you have no choice here, even though you loathe to involve others. This is a private problem.

"I can call in a few favors." Dr. Mortum sips \${mhis} coffee. "You already know Sky-Raider."

*comment ALTERNATIVE DIALOGUE IF YOU DO NOT KNOW SKY-RAIDER

"I do," you admit, the details of your rescue still painfully clear. "I doubt those tentacles will last long enough against nanovores."

"Would Retribution really dare release them in a dampening field?" There is a momentary pause before \${mhe} continues. "They would risk harming their own armor I think."

"If they are desperate enough." You're not about to tell \${mhim} that the Rat King has an easier time operating under dampeners, and they are the ones in charge of the nanovores. Is your impostor working with the Rat King? The thought is a painful stab in your gut, you hadn't expected it to hurt that bad. Would they know the difference? You would have hoped so. But could they sense it's you in this body? Is that the reason why your armor moved so sluggishly? Was the Rat King trying to help you?

"You're right. We can't afford to take that chance." We. You look away, blinking hard as you try to focus on business once more.

"We need an organic bruiser," you say.

"Well, Dove is working with one," \${mhe} says after a moment's thought. "Armadillo I think their name is. Only met them once. Odd fellow, but definitely organic. Four arms would be helpful too."

*if thief

"Dove." You sigh. Of course it would have to be that annoying thief, you've run into each other once or twice, competing for the same targets. You've never met her partner, but from what you have heard, Mortum is right. "She's not too fond of Retribution, maybe we can get a cheaper rate. I don't have access to much money right now."

*if streetwise

"Dove." The name is familiar. A mercenary and thief, working for the highest bidder. From what you have heard about her partner, Mortum is right. "I hear she's expensive. I don't have access to much money right now."

*comment ADD DOVE FACTS, DOUBLE CHECK

"We have an agreement," Mortum assures you. "I build and service her equipment, and in return, she steals things I need and does me the odd favor."

"You know a lot of people." Your smile is fond, right now that's playing in your favor.

"I have built equipment for villains for years, not to mention that I throw the best Halloween parties," {mhe} says humbly.

"I'm not one for parties," you admit. "Nor networking."

"Oh I don't believe that, {title}." Dr. Mortum smiles in encouragement. "You've just had the misfortune of being a henchman. Many villains do have preconceptions against the people that work for them, treats them like brainless, easily replaceable goons. Only room for one ego on stage, I suppose. It's only my status as an ex-villain that makes me palatable to them. If I had only been a humble scientist I doubt most of them would give me the time of the day."

"Their loss." Your smile is predatory.

"Indeed." Dr. Mortum's smile is an echo of yours.

"So the plan is to capture Retribution in your gun, transport them to..." You look at Dr. Mortum for suggestions. Not here I hope?" Right now this feels like your only safe space, you'd rather not have it compromised.

"No, I have a testing bay elsewhere, sometimes I need a secure and durable location for weapon's research. I can fit it with a mobile dampener, and the walls should be thick enough to contain Retribution long enough to remove their greatest weapon."

"Sounds logical." Most likely reinforced concrete and metal, both materials that takes some time for nanovores to digest as long as they are thick enough.

"Underground?"

"Of course."

"That should do. And if they agree to help us, the others can wait there." You don't see any major flaws to this plan other than the fact that you have no idea what will happen when you finally meet your body face to face. But there is no way to predict that, you try to call up any trace of precognitive vision, but there's nothing. You're not sure if that is a good sign or bad. So far it has mostly triggered during disasters and stress, so you suppose it's mostly a good one. "Are you sure the gun still works?" It's the linchpin, you can't afford to leave that to chance.

"I haven't had time to service it yet," Dr. Mortum admits. "I've had a deadline on another project, so I've been keeping it in the vault. I need to give it a thorough examination before we set this plan in motion."

"The vault?" You rise to follow, and {mhe} makes no move to dismiss you. "Got any other useful weapons in there?"

"Not many right now," {mhe} says with a chuckle. "Like I told you, I had a deadline. Quite a large arms delivery to an old..." there is a tell-tale pause "...acquaintance. She's gearing up for war from the look."

"Anything that concerns us?" You don't ask for the name, you know {mhe} won't give it to you."

"No, I gathered it was out of town business. A family affair. I didn't ask for details, she can be twitchy with people that know too much."

"Even you?" That's a surprise, you thought Dr. Mortum was above the petty bickering of villains.

"Especially me. She already suspects I know too much, but she can't be sure, and above all, she can't be sure I haven't stored what I know somewhere safe in the event of my death." There's a look of discomfort on {mhis} face, and you resist the urge to ask what that is about.

"Sounds like a dangerous woman." You ponder who it might be, there are less high-profile women in the villain business, at least ones who might be interested in a load of weapons.

"All villains are," {mhe} shrugs, but shoots you a glance that tells you to please stop digging. "And right now she's busy, so she's no concern of ours."

"Understood." You don't pry, though you really want to. Knowing what is going on is power, and right now you feel powerless enough already.

"Trust me, you're safer not knowing." Dr. Mortum punches in a code, letting the camera scan {mhis} eyes, and the vault opens up before you.

Like {mhe} said, it is mostly empty shelves. There are still some guns here, mostly energy based, small and handheld. For personal protection not assault. Standard ones too, though you suppose anybody interested in a weapon that fires bullets could find one cheaper elsewhere. So there must be other modifications that's not immediately apparent. Armored breastplates, what looks like a prototype force field generator with a strange protrusion attached, and, in a special case, the gun Dr. Mortum had been so desperate to regain.

"It doesn't look that imposing," you say as {mhe} unlocks the case, removing the weapon.

"It's not supposed to." Dr. Mortum looks at the indicators at the side, a quietly pulsing light that's easy to overlook if you don't pay attention. "Use a spectacular weapon, and everybody will focus on that. Just look at Psychopathor, he'd have much better luck with some small and integrated blasters rather than those massive cannons he keeps lugging around."

"True," you admit as you exit the vault, the door sealing itself shut behind you. "Getting the gun away from him was always the first step to victory. Where are we going?"

"It's still full." \${mhe} gestures to the slowly blinking light on the side of the gun, nearly imperceptible if you don't know what you're looking for. "I figured I'd let whatever is there degrade a bit more before reconstituting it. Just to make sure no organics would pop up unexpectedly." \${mhe} chuckles. "I have no way of knowing when it was last used, but if anything was alive in there it should be dead by now."

*if villainy <= 30

"Do you really think there was a risk that anything really was alive in there?" You hadn't even considered that, the thought makes you sick to your stomach. You hadn't known.

"Unlikely. It probably was in storage for a while before the auction, if someone was in there, they would already have been scrambled."

"Scrambled?" You put a hand over your mouth. You can't afford to show yourself to be too squeamish, but...

"Yes. People last for a few days at most, but after a day or two they tend to be damaged beyond repair. Cellular degeneration."

*elseif villainy >= 70

"It better be." You don't want anything to interfere with your plans, right now this is your best bet. You can't afford for it to fail.

"It must have been in storage for a whole before the auction, and people last for a few days at most. After a day or two they tend to be... scrambled. Damaged. Non-viable."

*else

"Oh." You feel a twinge of what might be guilt. "So if you had emptied right after the auction if someone was in there they might have lived?"

"Hardly. People last for a few days at most, but after a day or two they tend to be... scrambled. Damaged. Putting them out of their misery would be a blessing."

"And you plan to use that on Retribution?" On your body? Suddenly you're less certain of this plan.

"Degradation doesn't set in until after at least twelve hours." Dr. Mortum sounds too certain for you to like it. "When we were testing the technology, Vitruvian made extensive research. No organic thing suffered damage if reconstituted within four hours. And up to twelve, the effects were nausea and migraine, no lasting damage."

"Animal research?" Your face is set in stone. You don't know if you want the answer to be yes or no.

"Mostly. Rats. Rabbits. Pigs. The species or weight didn't matter, nor did clothing." There is a pause, and a slightly disgusted look on \${mhis} face. "He did insist on testing it on humans as well."

"You sound like you didn't approve of that."

"Vitruvian was..." Dr. Mortum puts the gun down on the lab bench, looking at it with distaste. "He didn't think that humans were more than animals. He was a boost-supremacist, I trust you've heard of those?"

"Yes. The Green Sky. Cult of the New Flesh." Your mouth twitches. "Was he a member?"

"I never asked. Maybe I didn't want to know. There was a lot of things we never spoke of."

"Are you okay?" You can see Dr. Mortum's hands have clenched into fists, the unnatural tension finding no release. Nothing to punch.

"I am now. Just bad memories. He didn't react well when he learned I was 'only human,' he must have assumed my intellect was caused by boosting. But..." \${mhe} shrugs. "He's dead, I'm still here. It's all in the past."

"People still don't know exactly what happened to him." You did your research before deciding to hire the good doctor. This had nearly made you walk back the deal. You're no fan of uncertainty, nor betrayal.

"I happened to him." A cold, controlled smile. "I can be forgiving up to a point, but... he crossed that line."

"Going back to the gun," you say, uneasily watching that smile. If you ever told Mortum the truth, would he decide you had crossed that line as well? That you needed to be removed? "So it is tested on humans then."

"Sadly, yes. Like Vitruvian said, we needed to know the limitations of it in case we might have to use it on people that mattered. And while a pig or an ape might be close enough in size or biological profile, we can't ask them, nor evaluate possible damage to their intellect."

"And?"

"Like I said, there were no problems if contained for a few hours, even upon repeated exposure. Somewhere around the ten to twelve hour mark the subjects reported suffering from nausea and headache, as well as diarrhea. I always suspected the latter was due to intestinal bacterial die-off, but we never studied it

too extensively."

"It sounds almost like some form of systemic poison."

"We did suspect radiation poisoning at first." $\text{\$!{mhe}}$ rubs $\text{\$ {mhis}}$ hand thoughtfully. "I was a part of a project dealing with radiation back during my..." $\text{\$ {mhe}}$ paused. "During my time in the private sector. It is similar. But we could pick up no trace either before or after exposure."

"Cellular degradation?"

"Most likely. After a day or so in there, the damage was more severe. Blurred vision, progressing to eye damage. Detached corneas. Coughs, progressing to what looked like full chemical pneumonia. Internal bleeding. Organ failure. Brain hemorrhage. One subject was still alive after a week, but needed to be euthanized shortly after. I always suspected Vitruvian did the same with the other survivors."

"Suspected?"

"I never asked. It seemed... simpler at the time. I didn't have to decide what I felt about it if I ignored it."

*if villainy <= 30

"Do you wish you had?" Your voice is soft, encouraging $\text{\$ {mhim}}$ to be honest. With $\text{\$ {mhim}}$ self, if not you.

"Maybe. I... have done a lot of bad things in my life. Some might even call them cruel. Or evil."

*elseif villainy >= 70

"It needed to be done. No use feeling bad about things you can't change." You know that to be the truth. People in your line of business can't afford to go soft.

"Maybe you're right. It won't change anything, I suppose. I... have done a lot of bad things in my life. Some might even call them cruel. Or evil."

*else

"I know what you mean." You've made your own painful decisions, and walking away from the consequences seemed the easier path. Nobody would be helped by you worrying about things that needed doing.

"Thank you. I... have done a lot of bad things in my life. Some might even call them cruel. Or evil."

"You could use those terms for the LDPD. Cruelty is what this place is built on, no matter what side of the fence."

"That's one reason I stopped being an active villain" Dr. Mortum's gaze grew distant. "Too many temptations to take shortcuts no matter how many stands in the way. I like to see myself as ruthless and willing to do what needs to be done, not like Vitruvian. Not a monster. Though I suppose a monster's helper is not much better. I'm hardly reformed, you know."

"I'm working for Retribution," you admit with a shrug. "I'm hardly one to talk."

"True. And I suppose it doesn't matter much, what is done is done." $\text{\$!{mhe}}$ pauses long enough for the silence to become uncomfortable until you break it.

"So what do you think is in there?" You nod at the gun.

"Most likely whatever the person who used it last was trying to steal." There is a sigh of relief as the subject is changed at last. "Since the catch and release is the same trigger mechanism, I doubt that they can have been under the illusion that it really is a disintegration gun for long. If we are lucky, it might be something valuable. Inorganic matter doesn't degrade at nearly the same pace. Electronics might start to malfunction eventually, but even that takes weeks. We didn't test it beyond two weeks, but at that point things like base metals and money were as good as new. And everything else just needed minor repairs."

"And if we are unlucky?" you ask, pushing your hands into your pockets.

"A pile of decomposing organic goo, which is why I will be firing it into this test chamber." $\text{\$!{mhe}}$ motions with $\text{\$ {mhis}}$, and the polymer glasteel doors open. See-through. Strong. "I can quickly seal the chamber in case something gross pops out. The smell is quite atrocious, always reminded me of cat pee. I'd prefer to vent it before disposal."

"Ammonia." You wish your brain wouldn't fill in the scent. "I suppose broken down proteins might be blamed for that."

"Possibly. I never looked into it, our research was to establish parameters of safety, not pushing things too far."

"Fair enough. Did any of the people ever remember their time in there?" You can't help being curious. What would it be like?

"No. Just darkness. As if they had fainted. Which I suppose is for the best. A moment of lost time, followed by nausea."

"Once you've cleared the chamber, can we test it on something living before we do it on Retribution? I'd hate to have something go wrong." The more you hear, the more uneasy uneasy you get. But this is your best shot, so you need to know as much you can before setting the plan in motion.

"Of course. I'll just have to replace the power cell, it is almost depleted. I can't do that with the chamber filled, we don't want an explosion on our hands."
Mhe looked thoughtful. "Or implosion, I suppose. I'm not sure exactly what would happen. Just that I don't want to be anywhere near it."

"Best to avoid that then. I suppose we're in no hurry, we still have to contact the others." You can feel the sand in the hourglass running. Time is running out, you know that. The only question is how fast.

"Don't worry, title. I'll do that as soon as we clear this thing out. Please step back, this might get gruesome." Dr. Mortum aims the gun into the glasteel cube.

And then Mhe pulls the trigger.

[Bad day. Good day.](#)

[Jul 18, 2024](#)

Well, vacation has turned hectic as we have discovered mold in our house (which is half underground, so...) and has needed to deal with that. And the rain just keeps pouring down, in addition to both me and my partner catching a cold. Fun. Still, here comes this month's lore post from Lady Argent's perspective! Hope you enjoy a rare look inside her head. Apologies for being little on discord right now, just need to deal with real life first!

.....

A gray and blue meeting room inside the Rangers' Headquarters, tinted windows overlooking the Los Diablos skyline. Marshal Steel, in uniform, is gesturing at a frozen television still of the latest villain to surface. Retribution. Charge is out of uniform, lounged in a chair like a shipwreck held together by wire and will, cables connecting him to the wall. Herald is out of uniform as well, hovering comfortably instead of being seated in a chair, one leg awkwardly outstretched. Lady Argent is sitting straight and attentive, untouched, in uniform, staring unseeing past the Marshal. A nearly imperceptible twitch goes through her hand, tick, tick, tick. But her nails remain still and don't echo the tune on the surface of the table.

The meeting drags on, the ticking of the clock running raw over my nerves. Analogue. Untouchable. For now. Wei keeps talking, his words not interesting enough to drown out the ticking. Can't speed it up. Did they find out? No. Must be because of Ortega. Loss of control. Sloppy. Blew it for both of us. Analogue. Immutable. No longer shaving minutes from long meetings, oh sorry, I don't know why this clock keeps speeding up. Crap. Maybe that's it. Maybe I was the one that blew it.

"What do you think, Argent?" Wei turns to look at me, and I turn, teeth turning blunt and domesticated before I open my mouth to answer.

"I think this is a waste of time," I admit, softening my voice to make my words less biting. "This is all speculation. You didn't even fight Retribution; all this is second-hand information."

"That's why I'm asking you," he says, the faraway look of patience on his face too familiar. "You did."

"There's footage," I say, shrugging as I fight to keep my nails polite. "You've shown enough of it at this meeting alone."

"Not from the sewers." Oh, there it is, a twitch in his facade, a question he doesn't ask.

"They're fast." I meet his eyes, safe in the knowledge that mine won't reveal anything but his own annoyed expression. "Had too much of a headstart once I got down there. Tracked them to a manhole, but there was probably a car parked there. No idea where they went."

"I'd think you'd be more upset about that." Wei glances over at Ortega, still bruised and stewing in defeat.

"She's plenty pissed, alright." Ortega laughs, still the one that gets you. That your smile is nothing but a placeholder. "But right now, I think she might be more pissed at you than Retribution."

"That's not helpful." Wei sighs.

"Neither is this." I stand up, shaking back my hair. Heavy. I can feel the weight on my scalp, a thousand ants crawling and I force myself statue-still as I stare the Marshal down.

"Maybe we should call it a day," Daniel suggests, always too quick to pick up on my moods. Make excuses for me. "We're all losing our tempers here. Let's sleep on it." He keeps hold of Wei's gaze until the Marshal relents with a curt nod.

"Fine. Meeting adjourned." Wei looks over at Ortega. They'll likely continue just the two of them. Theorizing. Like the old days.

"I'm off for the rest of the day," I say, heading for the door.

"Can I walk you out?" Daniel floats after me, injuries not a hindrance to a flier.

"Sure," I say, not slowing down to wait. Not that he needs it. Like an angel on one shoulder, an unneeded guardian dog.

"Please don't fight Retribution on your own," he says once we are clear of the others' ears. "You're planning to, aren't you?"

"So?" I feel the systems in the walls hum with our passing, gentle attention, nothing more.

"We're supposed to be a team. That's how they beat us the last time. One by one. We can't let that happen again."

"Daniel." I force myself to stop, looking up at where he is hovering an inch above the ground. For a moment I wait for the hunger to hit, and when it doesn't I reach out to touch his chest. "I know what I'm doing."

"We were both vigilantes before we joined, I get the need to act independently. But Retribution wiped the floor with us. Please be careful," he pleads, placing his bare hand, bare skin on top of my hand despite all the times I told him not to. And yet, there is no surge of heat, no temptation. Huh. I let him hold it there, investigating my own response.

"You were a corporate hero," I say, only half focusing on him. What is this? What is this sense of... caution? I can feel my skin clenching tighter, latching together, unwilling to reach out, denying even hunger in the face of... what? Caution?

"Not always." Daniel sighs and removes his hand as if he suddenly remembered he's not supposed to do that when you're ungloved. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," I say, turning to walk away. "And I'll take your advice under consideration." I flex my hand, open, close; no sense of lingering skin cells, no thwarted hunger, just a deep dread and a need to hide. "I'm going home. I need a bath."

He let me walk away without trying to stop me, in that, he was always the wisest of the team.

...

Lady Argent's apartment, an interior room, no windows. No outside ventilation, the door hermetically sealed, the air refreshed by air scrubbers, the negative pressure a guarantee against leaks. The pool. A final refuge.

"Increase nitrous oxide content," I mumble, half-submerged in warm amniotic fluids. The machinery obeys, saturating the air. I breathe deeply, letting my boundaries melt away. Around me, the water swirls silver and red as my little friends feed, leaving my body like a shoal of piranhas, devouring the meat I brought into the pool with me. Not all at once, they know me well enough not to leave me without their support but had anybody been alive to witness, they would have seen my body thin, hands and feet melt away, the bumpy lump of flesh that is my core covered by the thinnest sheen of silver. I don't look. I'm past that point by now.

I know I'm a monster.

Expanding my self, I feel the hunger as the pool boils with activity, like a vat of acid melting meat, leaving me the lone dumpling still floating. My hair remains intact and heavy, inert remains woven from stacked corpses and molecular bonds. My greatest creation.

I can feel myself sinking, so I instruct the system to increase the salt content of the fluid that supports me until I bob comfortably near the surface once more. No need to move. Better not to. The thin layer of nanovores is not enough to dampen anything, even the movement of water grates against exposed nerves. Breathe. Let the nitrous oxide do its job. Ignore the remaining pain. It won't last forever. Focus on something else.

They feel safe here. The swarm is comfortable, soon to be sated, their depleted brethren replaced. Red meat. Been on that diet since the fight. I close their eyes and replay it once more.

Every step. Every blow. So quick, the cape swirling, expertly masking movements. Pain radiating like explosions, there, then not, drowned by adrenaline and joy. Joy? Yes. I remember that clearly, despite the grossness of the sewers and the frustration of an impending loss.

It was a long time since I had felt that alive.

The amniotic fluid closes over my head, and I open my eyes to a reformed body, solid and heavy. The water still has traces of red, my little friends haven't finished their meal. That is strange. That is new. I flex my newformed hands, standing up in the pool. The water ripples around my shoulders, and I try to coax them out into their feeding cloud, but they hesitate.

Afraid?

The feeling hits me strangely, filtered through my own experiences, falling into the water, reflexively holding my breath as my skin burned. Saved my life. Didn't save my soul. I look down at the dirty water, -ordering- them to clean it up. They obey, to my relief, once more satisfied that they are safe. Protected. Hidden.

What are they afraid of?

I remember fighting Retribution, my reflections in their helmet, their reflections in my skin, brutal, no-holds-barred destruction as nobody was there to see. Is that it? I've lost before, but... once I did, there was nobody around to tell the tale. I half expected an empty suit of armor once I woke up. Did I feel relief that it wasn't there? At the time, I assumed it had been hermetically sealed, safe against my little friends, but now I wonder. Did they stay fused? No swarm?

Yes. I feel the answer is yes. Stay safe. Stay hidden. Stay protected.

I hug myself hard; of course, I will protect them, just like they protect me, a devil's bargain of monsters and hunger for the greater good. To be used against other monsters.

Control.

When I look around, the amniotic fluid is clean once more and all organics are absorbed. I step out of the pool, Aphrodite reborn, wrapping myself in my robe. I feel nothing. A breath, a fine-tuning instruction, and I can feel the approximation of weight against not-my-skin, a slippery sensation of what might be silk. I need to eat too, and rest. Then I can call Owl.

There's someone I need to find.

...

Bright Los Diablos sun sends glittering reflections from Lady Argent's skin as she leaps down from the rooftop, the shadowy cloak of Retribution swirling as they turn to face her. Silver and Shadow.

Joy.

I smile, teeth turning sharp as my legs absorb the impact, the ground feeling rubbery and then hard once more. Suddenly everything is clear as crystal, my friends and me in perfect fusion. I feel them, focused, sharp, terror and hunger wrapped in one, clinging close to my frame, cradling my ruined flesh in their protective embrace. They feel me, confident and strong, holding them tight to purpose and duty. At times like this, we are one, no conflict, something more than the broken parts, remnants of what we were forged into something new.

"You. Again." Retribution's voice, as fake as mine, runs through metallic filters, the helmet somehow as expressive as my face. Not annoyance. Not all annoyance anyway. "We need to stop meeting like this." They move with restless energy, brief bursts of servo-engines reacting with inhuman speed as they avoid and retaliate.

"You need to stop robbing banks," I say, careless of what they really are doing. It's not important. This is. We are.

"It's not a bank," they say, cloak hiding the punch but at this point I'm wise to that trick and cartwheels back unharmed.

"You're still breaking the law." I close the gap once more, claws extending as my sweep misses, as does their jab. I jump back, marveling at the smoothness of their armor. It's a delightful barrage against my senses, shining brightly with intent, a cryptic puzzle box protected against my seductive whispers as if it has a will of its own. As if it is as bound to its wearer as my friends are to me. I sense no direct neural interface I can use. This is different. This is NEW.

"Maybe the law needs to be broken," they retort, more careful now, our fight becoming a dance of attacks, seeking patterns and opportunities rather than damage. "Ever thought of that?"

"Maybe I have," I admit, feet extending, toes thickening to hooves. Lengthening to use that third joint for extra speed. "Ever thought of that?"

"Oh, I've thought of everything," they laugh, gesturing as part of the wall suddenly collapses in my direction.

I don't move; that would give them an opening. Instead, I stand firm and let the concrete and glass break against my head like waves against a pier. Unmoving. In the cloud of dust I smile, their reflection finally erased from my skin. "Good try," I say, closing my mouth before the dust makes me cough and ruin the impression.

"Shit," they swear, backing up with hands raised in mock surrender. "Guess I am all out of tricks now."

"Cute." I tilt my head, which suddenly feels heavy and filled with ants. There it is again, the feeling from the museum, but this time my friends are prepared. My eyes shift into their perspective, my human brain seeing things that are not there while they see the truth. Retribution isn't standing still but moving. Running. "There," I hiss, mostly to remind myself to breathe. I keep forgetting around them.

"Shit," they repeat as I catch up, and this time the word is spat with frustration. They still manage to dodge, my claws tearing nothing but cloth.

"Slippery little rabbit." I smile as I plead to the light of their armor to slow down and dance to my tune instead of theirs. I can feel the beating power core heart of it, but my fingers keep slipping, another will there blocking me. Keeping me out. Not artificial intelligence, something strange, something— "Ooof!" Two fights prove to be one too much, and Retribution hits me with a blow hard enough to make me skid back; pain diffused into nothing as my friends do their job.

Blood in my mouth immediately digested. I brace for the surge of hunger, but it's not there. I don't have to extend control over them; they leash themselves. No swarming. Instead, they cling ever closer and I laugh. This is. This is GREAT.

"That wasn't meant to be funny," Retribution says, fists up, cautiously on guard. "It was meant to hurt. Just in case you didn't know, feel free to collapse in pain at any moment."

"Thank you for the heads up." I flex my hands in perfect sync. Have we ever been this close? No struggle for dominance. They NEED me. They need my protection. "I'll take it under consideration." In the distance, sirens are blaring. The LDPD. Spoilsports.

"I hear them too." They don't turn to look, focused on me, every inch the predator. Neither of us prey. I like that. "Raincheck?"

"Are you running away again? I'm disappointed." And to my surprise, I am. I want to continue this, whatever this is, this fight, this feeling.

"No use sticking around." They gesture to the scene of destruction around you. "I already have what I came for." The pleased chuckle comes through the vocal distorted garbled, but the message is clear.

While we were fighting, some of Retribution's accomplices escaped with the loot. I wasn't paying attention. I was enjoying myself too much. Wei Chen will have a field day with this.

"Guess I have to settle with you then." I don't let disappointment stop me. Instead, I leap at them, knowing I will only catch smoke and shadows. This fight is for any witnesses; we both know my heart isn't in it now that company is coming.

Retribution will escape.

I will let Retribution escape.

We both know the truth as the smoke explodes around me, and the last image I see is a salute, half mocking, half respectful, as Retribution disappears into an alley.

We both know I will follow.

We both know I will find nothing there but ghosts.

And I am fine with that.

"Until next time," I whisper to the shadows.

[June Questions Answered!](#)

[Jul 7, 2024](#)

Alright, taking a break from my vacation to answer this! Hope y'all have better weather than we have here...

....

What is the first dinosaur that comes to mind when you think of each of the rangers?

I was dinosaur obsessed as a kid, I approve of this question. Ortega: Allosaur. Argent: Microraptor. Herald: Hadrosaur (foulkii). Steel: Triceratops. Also, bonus Sidestep for a laugh (not exactly human, not exactly a dinosaur): Anurognathus

Is Boosting a specific consequence of the drug, or is gaining powers something that humans and other animals are naturally capable of and the drug just so happened to be very good at activating it?

Ooooooh good question. I will say that with things like natural psychic sensitives going around (no boosting) and certain legends and tales from history, this might be something in humans and other animals that the drug finds and activates.

Is HG bored? Are they just going through the motions now that they've won? You've said Nocturne has much higher aspirations than HG these days, would HG like to retire now if not for that?

Yeah. HG is bored. They are absolutely going through the motions. Honestly, Ortega might still be alive just because they at least liven things up a bit (also they are very hard to kill).

How active are Chen and Ortega in generic hero work? How often are they seen dealing with mundane criminals and low-level villains?

Chen? Not at all these days. That's not to say he wouldn't punch a robber, but he's rarely in that position. Ortega absolutely is the one who wouldn't mind dealing with some mundane crime while restless. So they are a lot more active.

How custom are Chen's mods and armor? Would any sufficiently wealthy/tech-savvy person be able to match Marshall Steel?

Yeah, with enough money you could. There's nothing there that's super unique, it's just expensive and specialized equipment.

Are Chen's prosthetics combat capable? If he had to fight without his armor would he perform better, the same, or worse than he did when it was just his hands?

It varies depending on which prosthetics he currently has. Some of the more human looking ones are rather fragile, and would be worse. Most would be better.

How aware are ReGenes of where their downloaded knowledge comes from? For example would a techie Sidestep not know why they know mechanical engineering, or would they recognize that that knowledge is from the downloaded memory of a university student?

They would know, especially at the start. Then it would be more like looking over someone's shoulder, watching them do it as you take an engine apart. But, the longer you have the memories, the more they become internalized and yours. These days it would take effort to try to figure out where you learned things. Sidestep might intellectually know that they learned Spanish from a downloaded memory, but it would feel like they have always known. No memory of the learning process remains.

Would Sidestep's nanovores be more effective against Catastrofiend than Argent's?

Hmmm they would be differently effective. More effective at kneecapping it by eating the blades.

any guess as to when we'll get to save our game in retribution? I really want to start on my second character but I don't want to lose all the things I did on my main.

Look. The way CoG do things these days, it will be when I submit Revelations for testing. And, at that point there might have been updates or bugfixes (I have a list of stuff). There is no use refraining from playing to preserve your character for now, chances are that build won't be viable anyway. An update might mess it up. Explore and have fun for now, at that point you might have an even more fun run to prepare for with your main. I am sorry, but I have no control over this.

Dr. Mortum mentioned that they were skewered by Owl. Did Owl kill opponents? How do the Rangers feel about vigilantes that kill?

Owl killed on occasion. She could be vicious. Some of the Rangers did NOT like that at all, but others saw the necessity. I think Herald is the one most opposed to it (he does not like Owl), as is Chen, because he knows how bad it can be.

How badly did Mecha lose her fight with Jake? Is she still alive?

She's still alive. Just bruised.

Do Ward and Pelayo have any idea that their boss is the reason a bunch of their colleagues got killed by Re-Genes? If not, will it be possible for them to find out?

They have no idea yet. Not sure if I will bring it up in game, Sidestep wouldn't. Though... hmmm... someone else might.

Was Argent intending to kill the MC in the sewer fight, or just hurt them badly?

You know, accidents happen...

If Anathema's first power hadn't been invulnerability, would their acid generation have immediately maimed or killed them? Have there been boosts that survived the drug only to die quickly from extremely dangerous and unstable powers?

If they hadn't already been invulnerable, they would absolutely be dead from the acid. And sadly, that is a common cause of death for boosts with things like fire generation, or the ability cause explosions and the like.

If Chen ever had to go somewhere for an extended period of time, who would he trust to dog sit Spoon? Or would he disqualify everyone as an appropriate dog sitter for some reason or another and put him in a kennel?

There probably is a very nice assistant working for him in his role as Marshal that absolutely is trusted with watching and taking care of Spoon. Sorry Rangers, none of you are stable enough to pass Chen's judgment there.

In paths where Chen regrets how he treated Step with suspicion in the past and wonders if he actions had some impact on how things played out post HB; does he have any doubts about his distrust in Argent? Does he ever wonder if he's making the same mistake?

Oh yes. But she's also so damn suspicious...

Additionally does he ever have concerns that the trust issues in the team makes him a bad leader? Because not trusting his team members wouldn't exactly encourage them to confide in him about any of the secrets going on.

He does. If it was up to Chen, he wouldn't be the Marshal. However, at this point he doesn't know who he would trust to be that. Certainly not some stranger brought in, no matter how highly recommended.

Probably not going to get a straight answer due to spoilers but; the way you've explained HG's telepathy there's not really any kind of awareness, like they can't read or see into other people's minds, and the only way they can really gauge their threading working is by observing the persons

behavior. Because of this how does HG perceive the experience if Sidestep goes into their mind and there's that kind of feedback loop; do they actually get an insight into Steps mind?

When Sidestep goes into someone's mind, they sometimes bring a hint of awareness with them that they need to take extra steps to remove at the end. Especially if the memories connect strongly. When things get interrupted in the middle, like with HG, things can stick around, like being awoken suddenly from a dream makes you less likely to remember it. It wouldn't be as clear as Sidestep perceives it, more of a blurry dream-like experience. Most people wouldn't get any additional insight into Sidestep's mind... whether HG did, I'm not gonna tell.

If so is this the first time they experience telepathy this way?

Yes.

Is Mortum still an RO? Whenever questions are asked and it's more geared towards the ROs, Mortum always is usually always left out. Or is it just to spoilery for them?

Oh Mortum is still a RO! It might just be me that forgot, or sometimes the questions are all geared towards the Rangers and I get into that habit as I answer. Blame me. I do these in one go, sometimes I miss stuff, or misunderstands things. If so, sorry! I did a search on the last QnA and didn't find any where I had missed Mortum when ROs were asked for, but if there is a particular question I missed please re-post it! (did a search for ros)

I vaguely remember Sidestep being double boosted. If the nanovores were their first tbr, was Heartbreak their second? Or is that yet to come?

We have two things here. Being double boosted is taking the boost drug twice. One could argue that Sidestep is that, the first one their creation as a Re-Gene, the second one by drinking Void blood. A traumatic boost response (tbr) is when your boosted power does a big leap in response to trauma. Sidestep had that happen at least twice. The Nanovores and Heartbreak.

Will Ortega's generator be a problem in the next book? It's said their electricity isn't working in the end, so I'm wondering if near the beginning of book 3 it'll still be a problem.

We will go into Ortega's generator in book three.

When did Chen start having feelings for Sidestep? I've seen conflicting statements in game about it. In some runs he says not until after they came back and in Sidestep's mind it says it could pinpoint some looks Chen used to give them (other than suspicion)

It might vary in game, depending on the run and the Sidestep. For some, it might have been before Heartbreak even, but not for all.

What is the likelihood of the villains' nanovores unintentionally becoming un-neutered? Is even Mortum's handiwork something that step could accidentally "break," so to speak? With sufficiently strong or uncontrolled telepathy? I know it didn't work in book 1 if a ruthless step intentionally tried to... but i'm concerned with the addition of open gates (and the uncontrolled nature of the telepathy that occurs during the events that trigger them) would affect it at all

None. It would take tech, not telepathy.

How well known is the trauma boost response in universe? Do the rangers know about it? If so, do any think sidestep may have undergone it (or that it broke their powers if they lied about that)?

I would say that it is at least a commonly acknowledged theory among boosts. Most have stories of people who it happened to, and while there is little science backing up exactly how, the proof is there for all to see. And who among the Rangers who believes it is spoilers.

Is the anathema sidestep sees near death at all similar to the ghost of sidestep that Ortega saw during the time sidestep was gone? If not, could her consciousness have been 'absorbed' or 'preserved' by the HB site?

Hmmm I would say that it could be seen as similar in a way, yeah.

Would argent be able to tell the difference between a rat-king controlled suit and ordinary occupied villain suit?

Only through the lack of banter.

Is there a possibility for Mob boss/Anarchist sidestep to do all this power buildup/influencing politics for their fellow regenes? As you said motivations can change and we don't know everything yet, so I'm curious if this could be a one possibility?

I mean, yeah. I can see some Sidesteps wanting this power to be able to change things for their kind. That's the only thing people listen to in the end. Power.

And first two books have been s big focus on rangers and sidestep's past with them. Will we in book 3 & 4 see more of Mortum and other villains?

Yes, book two suffered that way by being cut off before it was planned to have come to a conclusion. It just grew too big. So there will be a lot more villain content in Revelations, especially during certain paths.

Does Mortum have any memories of their mother?

Oh yes.

Also I would like to thank you for just writing a story that is so friendly for aromantic person! ❤️

Thank my playtesters! They have really gone above and beyond with suggestions and explanations there. I am so grateful for them.

Would we have the opportunity for Step to have sex with Chen with his arm and legs detached in-game ? or just sleep (chastely) with. That seems to be a great symbol of complete trust.

That's a good thought, I hadn't thought about it yet, but you are right in that.

What is each RO's daily clothing style ?

If we take a day off work, when they don't have to dress up for anyone, it's something like this. Ortega: Loose, comfortable clothes. Brand names, colorful shirts, likes linen and white. Looks dressed down but flashy. Chen: Military surplus, or some generic sport merchandise. Loose and roomy. Might wear shorts if he doesn't want to talk to people. Always a cap. Angie: Soft pastel dresses or jumpsuits, light and airy. Very feminine. Hats, shawls and sunglasses. A bit sixties celebrity. Daniel: Skinny jeans and an art-print t-shirt. Might wear minor designers he has befriended, especially when it comes to printed t-shirts. Sneakers. Mortum: Flashier than in the lab. Smart fitted suits in light fabrics. Looks expensive. Always the glasses, and a very expensive-looking watch of their own making. A touch of orange or other bright colors. Vera: Athleisure. Not above a bare midriff. Dresses down so nobody will recognize her when she dresses up. Expensive running shoes. Ben: Expensive jeans that have been around the block. Probably a tear or two or some oil stains. The tightest of t-shirts. Loose, open, short-sleeved overshirts to show off his arms. Luxurious hair.

I saw you answer in previous Q&A that we had a chance to see Chen truly be absolutely furious !(at Step i guess?)Can a Steel Romanced Step see such a view?

Absolutely. And it might not be at Sidestep...

What was Sky-Radier's hair color before he dyed it? Why dye his hair blonde? Does he change his hair color often? Is it possible to make him change his hair color in-game like changing Ortega's facial hair? And I'm curious if he would dye Step's hair.

Ben's original color is more of a mousy brown/dark blonde. That kind of color that is not rich enough to be proper brown, nor light enough to be really blonde. He has bleached/colored it for a long time, he had longish hair even in the military. Though he had to wear it in a ponytail, that was his one vanity in uniform. He's not adverse to color it other colors than blonde, but he likes how it looks. He could absolutely dye steps hair, probably fix it up too. He had to do it himself a lot on the field, couldn't just go to a hairdresser.

Does Chen have a attractive ass? I mean, when Step has dirty thoughts about Chen in inappropriate occasions, the center of the thoughts is always his ass. (eg.When the two of them were in the locker room,a conversation with Rosie in Revelation1.2.6)

It is in the eye of the beholder (and the artist) but Sidestep sure thinks so. So I would say yes!

Has Sidestep ever lost a tooth? Which ones?

Oh probably many. You lose teeth when you fight, especially the front ones. Luckily enough going to the dentist is something you can keep your clothes on for.

You said before that Skybright and Cavalier were always enemies/rivals, even before the Pentagon incident. Why?

Some people just don't get along, and they were both powerful, famous heroes who worked for rival parts of the government. And, I think it was one of those things too were they both wondered if they could take the other, but neither of them wanted to find out. Also, the collateral damage would be bad. Cavalier thought Skybright was naive, and she thought that he wasn't a patriot.

If someone had one eye closed when Nocturne uses her powers, would the other eye be blinded and the closed one be fine?

Oh I love this clever, clever question. The other eye would be blinded, but the closed one would be fine. As long as you kept it closed, so... good luck.

From a previous QnA: Blaze didn't get into the hero business to be liked. So what leg does he have left to stand on when people like Ortega more than him?

Oh that is a sore point, please leave the poor man some legs. No need to kneecap him entirely. His life would be so much better if he stopped comparing himself to Ortega.

Does the HG trio have any skill in patching up wounds? What kind of expertise would they be at, if they do?

Jake is pretty good at it. He has taken some classes even, that's just something that's good to know in his job. HG doesn't, but their powers could help. Nocturne would not touch a wound if she could help it. Gross.

If HG threaded someone with amnesia and say 'You are [Insert Name]', would the personality that comes back be from the actual person they were before their amnesia? Or the person HG perceives them to be? Or something else?

Hmmmm. I would say it depended on the cause of the amnesia. If it is from brain damage, the person would believe they were [name], but they wouldn't have recovered any memories. If the memories are suppressed due to trauma or similar, they would be flooding back.

If Sidestep won 'Hottest Bachelor(ette) of Los Diablos' would HG be proud? Or block out the fact that a lot of people want to sleep with a Sidestep they consider to be their little sibling?

Proud!

On a similar note, if Lord Ember developed a crush on Sidestep, would HG see it as an opportunity to gain the upper hand on him by leveraging that somehow? (E.g. Promising a hot date with Step if he just did x) Or would that be too awkward to play around with?

Look. Then Lord Ember needs to be put down for good.

What is Lord Ember's type?

Argent.

Was it thanks to Arde that Dove learned that Re-Genes are also people, or did she know before?

No, Arde was her first experience with Re-Genes.

Did Dove ask to learn Re-Gene signs, or did Arde ask to teach her?

I think she asked what the signs were, and it took a while before Arde warmed up enough to actually reveal they were words and not just ticks. It's not something you share easily, that is a secret language.

Does Dove know any Re-Genes other than Arde?

Not other than Sidestep.

What is Shroud's relation to her gender? Does she have any hangups, or think it's odd like Arde? Or has being a cuckoo given a different perspective?

Shrouds relation to her gender would be the same as her humanity. She sees herself as a monster, but likes playing with the feminine and terrifying.

Could it be possible that Sidestep chose that name based on their Re-Gene name?

Of course! I'm probably not going to go into what Sidestep's Re-Gene name was.

Will any of the ROs ask Step to teach them Re-Gene signs, or will Step be the one who offers?

I'm not sure, we'll see.

If we can shift rivals again in the next game, will Hollow Ground be an option?

Hell yes!

Do Re-genes still get periods or did sterilization take care of that?

Periods still happen sadly, I don't think ovaries are removed for most (unless that somehow interferes with powers or mods).

Were cuckoos ever allowed to grow out their hair to blend on missions better or just given wigs?

I think some had hair, though very short or shaved was common. Wigs were used.

Probably spoilers, but will it be possible for Ortega and HG to begrudgingly tolerate each other for Sidestep's sake or is there too much bad blood?

I think they might come around. But I am an optimist.

Is there a specific reason why HG hasn't had Charge killed yet? Is it cause it hasn't worked before? HG attacked their apartment in the past, was that really just a warning shot?

Yeah, there are reasons. Some of them are as simple as the fact that Charge livens things up. Others are that you know what you have, but not what you get instead. Also, keeping this a tense, cold war works. If HG REALLY tried to kill Ortega but failed, then Ortega might try to return the favor, and HG doesn't like those odds.

Has Anathema ever met Tia Elena?

Yes.

I remember the possibility of a more detailed post about Los Diablos in the future but wanted to ask about the architecture; how similar is it to Los Angeles? Has it changed and possibly taken a different direction after the Big One? Was it build with a specific style in mind?

The big one happened before many of the defining buildings of the eighties. So imagine the base this is built on are what was there in the late seventies, but with a functioning subway/light rail (it was never torn down). (a bit of a view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Alc5FQI76dM&t=8s>). It is also important to note that this was before earthquake proofing, so many of the buildings were either damaged or ruined entirely, either by quake or the tsunami (much smaller here than in cascadia). The rebuilt city looks very different from the LA today, it has a much more modern vibe since basically nothing was bult there during the eighties and nineties. Only past the 2000's did the building boom really take off for larger buildings like highrises or statement pieces. And, since many of those buildings were built by companies or rich individuals out to make a statement about who and what they were, they are a lot more showy and ornate. Definitely some Art Deco vibes there, back when the bankers wanted to show off their wealth. In a weird way I think the architecture is more like some stuff you can see in Dubai and other cities who built themselves up from nearly nothing with vast amounts of money.

What would've ignoring HG's invitation/path been like if it was added? Also to be a bug in the room when they realized Sidestep ignored them

I don't know! But it would have meant HG going after and attacking the puppet as retaliation, which would have led to a similar crash scene.

HG's gender mirrors sidesteps, but what about the dead sibling step supposedly looks like? Are they also a match (say Nb step Nb sib), same agab, different, or entirely up to headcanon?

I think the sibling matches Sidesteps current gender/presentation, but I might change my mind.

What happened to the other Cuckoo model Re-genes? I think somewhere it said they are all dead/gone or whatever, so what happened to em, ya know, if it's not spoilers.

Oh they are not all dead and gone!

If they felt so inclined for whatever reason, would the SD fake someone's death and hard how would it be for them to do so?

The SD could quite easily fake someone's death. That's not hard at all.

In a friendly or more relationship with argent, would she be able to direct her nanovores to cover up Sidestep to hide them? Without harming Sidestep?

Oh boy. Could you theoretically throw a grenade in a garbage can to use it as a rocket? You can certainly try.

Which real world movie do you think would be Argent's favorite?

Argento's Phenomena.

Is Sidestep aware of how many open and closed gates there are in their head?

Not consciously, no.

Did Ortega ever investigate whether Hollow Ground had any connection to the heartbreak incident? If so, was it because of something he noticed or because of his general paranoia.

Yeah, Ortega did that rather sloppily in the aftermath. Just because it would be nice to hate someone you could see. They had to admit they found no proof. Sadly.

What does Ljungstrand(probably didn't spell that right) think about the gates? Or what would he think, if he knew about them?

Compartmentalization.

Did the cult of the green sky make any attempts to recruit Ortega during the years they thought Sidestep was dead?

No. That drive died with the Void. The current remains of the cult (The New Flesh) doesn't care.

Are most cases where people get Boosted and immediately die caused by their body immediately going into TBR and feedback looping until it's fatal?

I wouldn't say most. Most are due to the changes brought being incompatible with human life, or purse systemic shock. But it can certainly be a factor in some cases.

Would HG want to learn the Regene sign language from a sibling-coded Sidestep?

Hmmm I am torn. On one hand it sounds like work, on the other hand it might be useful. And bonding.

Has Snowball ever been injured or sick? Or is she invincible like Anathema?

Snowball is not invincible like Anathema, but so far she has not had any major injuries or sickness.

Has Sentinel ever done the feat from Avatar: Legend of Korra where an airbender kills someone by airbending all the air out of their lungs?

No, it's far easier to just fling them into a wall, or barrage them with rubble.

Is the Boost drug permeable through skin? Like one could get Boosted by dipping a finger into a pot of it, without ingesting, injecting or having an open cut for blood contact?

Not really. Though to be fair, it might work if you fell into a vat, Joker-style. It's generally injected or ingested.

Does the regenerator use nanovores in its healing?

I guess you'll find out soon.

Do the nanovores prefer to snack on boosted individuals over unboosted individuals? (Ie: if given a choice, would they always pick a boosted or an unboosted individual)

No preference. Some boosts might be less palatable though.

What powers would a Boosted Emu get?

Hard to say, it's as random and weird as with everyone else. Though flight would be funny.

Is there anything in the higher spaces that would've eaten the Void and thought they were tasty?

Hmm. Hmmmmmmmm. I... don't think so.

Will the other Rangers learn about the regenerator prior to its use or is that strictly an Argent, Step, Mortum plot line?

At this point in time, it's strictly Argent/Step/Mortum. I might change my mind later though, it is not written in stone. Just on my flowchart, and as we all know, those are subject to change.

Do Spiders direct combat Re-Genes as a part of their role, or are they mainly working with organizing and directing other humans in the military? Do combat Re-Genes have different opinions on cuckoos if they've had to work with them before? Better or worse opinions?

Alright, let's have a talk about the possible cuckoo variants I plan to let you choose between eventually. For people not in the know, that's where the term "spider" comes from. I had a list of four variants, focusing on different things like information gathering, communication, impersonation, and even outright covert killing and other things. None of these roles (whatever they turn out to be eventually) are official Farm names, or indeed certain roles that all cuckoos have. They were just a way for me to give some depth and variation to what jobs Sidestep used to do for the farm. So there is no "Spider" class, there are just Sidesteps who were used in more of a coordination and communication role. And for a Sidestep in that role, they would have worked mostly with humans. There is no need for a cuckoo in that role with other Re-Genes.

Hypothetical situation: what if Sidestep plays house and allies with HG, but ends up spending more time with Nocturne or Jake cause they like their brother/sister-in-law better? (Somehow I imagine Nocturne trying to avoid Sidestep cause she dislikes them lol) Would HG be jealous their baby sibling likes their lovers more than them? Could this potentially cause a rift between the HG trio?

Oh here we go with the hypotheticals again! It is an interesting question, but would you really want me to tell you that in a QnA? Wouldn't you rather have to experience something similar in game, and wonder how people would react? I'm not going to tell you how you will best be able to manipulate the HG trio, you're going to have to find that out for yourself.

Did the Void ever specify which pronouns to use for them, or did people just go with "they" because their gender was unknown/ambiguous?

The Void went with "they" for the ambiance, and because they truly felt they had transcended such piddling terms as human gender.

On the contrary, would Nocturne get jealous if Sidestep and HG spend too much time together or get along too well?

Guess you'll have to see! You don't get to find out before you fuck around...

How good an employer is the Farm, in terms of pay/benefits/working conditions? Security clearances aside, do they have any trouble attracting/retaining good employees?

They've got good pay/benefits. The working conditions are intense, so they do have issues with recruiting suitable employees. They often have to be gradually inducted in the layers of secrecy, and many end up leaving before they learn anything too incriminating. Once you have, leaving is... difficult.

In a previous QnA you said that HG's threading depends on what the threaded individual heard, not HG's intent. That suggests HG's threads are entirely open to the interpretation and perception of the individual being threaded. Has that ever caused them trouble?

Ahaha. Oh yes. Language barriers, bad hearing, badly worded commands, silly misunderstandings... they have all messed up HG's plans on occasion. As an example, just take the little "Forget about me." Such an easy command, and very practical for HG to use. However, if the person is in a certain mindset it is very easy to hear it as "Forgot about me?" and have the person to absolutely mad hostess and make sure that HG is included in everything, and will be the center of the party they are at. Very awkward.

For example, Let's say HG is at a party and shakes hands with a party goer, saying 'You want to punch Todd Smith' with the intent of threading that individual into hopefully punching Todd Smith - an annoying upstart reporter. However, the person HG is threading thinks of Tod Smyth, their neighbor. Who is probably going to get punched in this scenario? The reporter Todd Smith or the neighbor Tod Smyth?

The neighbor, especially if he's got it coming already. The way to get around this, something that HG learned by practice, is to first talk to them about Todd Smith, to make sure that is the immediate association that will come to mind when the command is given. Probably talk about how Todd Smith has sexually harassed someone or something, and then go "Yeah, I can see it in your eyes (touch) you really want to punch Todd Smith. (remove touch) Same here. Someone should have the balls to do that."

Spoons been to Elenas ranch but its a bit of a drive from the city. How does Spoon do on long car rides?

If he falls asleep, fine. If not everyone better be ready for a fifteen minute break, because he will WHINE.

You said that you feel like you can't read fanfiction, but do you think that will change when the final book is out? Do you see yourself bingeing a whole load of fanfiction once you've finished your story?

Probably not. That might affect stuff if I do other things in the future. Here is the thing, fanfiction is for you! It's not for me. And that also means you're safe, I will never see what you get up to!

Does there come a point during the car rides to the ranch when Spoon realises where they're going? Does he start getting excited to see his farm friends?

Hmmm probably. It's not that often they take long car rides anywhere else. Though he's usually asleep until they pull up on the gravel road. At that point he starts perking up.

How exactly does the power scaling in the subtle/forceful manipulation work? Is it linear? Is it exponential? Does it work somehow else?

It works on vibes! But I will say it is more like steps on a stairwell. There are certain platform steps I often use for stuff, and the big one is around 80. That's when things starts getting into overdrive.

Also, do you have an idea (not asking for specifics, just wondering if you know behind the scenes) of how having, say, 75 in subtle makes Sidestep in the top 1 in X telepaths, while having 85 in subtle puts them in the top 1 in Y telepaths? Or do you not compare Sidestep's power level to that of the general telepath population to that extent?

I don't compare. I have no general system for this, only what is needed in the book. But I will say that even a 75 Sidestep is bloody powerful, more powerful than most telepaths.

Does the federal government have a failsafe to disavow the Farm as a rogue element?

Of course.

Was the person who would become Heartbreak affected by Project Stripes?

Yes they were!

Has there even been a boosted US president? What about the heads of the governments of other countries?

No boosted US president, as for others... no comment (eyes the UK).

Did the Void ever drink their own blood to see what would happen?

You know what? Probably. But nothing happened.

Did Ortega notice any of the differences between the plans the Rangers approved and the finished home that Argent lives in?

Ortega? Noticing small details? That sounds unlikely, right? But what's even more unlikely is that they would ever bring it up. Just another fact on the pile.

Unlikely, but I'm curious; Could having all the gates open potentially be good for sidestep's mental health long term?

I mean... huh. Hmm. I mean. I suppose? Just gotta live long enough to get to long term.

What typically happens if a cuckoo starts misbehaving during a mission?

If it's bad enough, abort the mission and it will be a long time before the cuckoo was trusted on one again. Might lead to retraining or even scrubbing.

What was Spoon's initial impression of Sidestep? What about when he saw Chen sitting next to them and talking to them?

Spoon just saw another human and possible friend.

Malin, did you know that I appreciate you and your work greatly? Not really a question, but I wanted to say it.

Thank you!

Does Jake make any noise when he phases through stuff?

No, it is soundless. But now I kinda wish it made a silly little "pop".

Sidestep had Ortega, Locus had Poryphory, did Thundercloud have any close confidants?

I don't think so. Not immune to her telepathy. I think that was one reason she went the way she did.

Does Jake ever phase through stuff while asleep?

No, it is a thing that requires concentration. If he had been a sleepwalker I think it might happen, but he's not. He has accidentally phased through stuff while drunk though.

What do Farm Re-Genes gossip about through the walls of their cells?

People. Their day. Guards. Stories of what they've seen on the outside. Just what normal people chitchat about, but less weather.

Is Armadillo as comfortable in their shifted form as their human form or does it cost them something to maintain it?

I would say almost more comfortable in their shifted form. It is comfortable. It's more of an effort to be small and soft.

What was the relationship between Dr. Ljungstrand and Dr. Jansen? Does Anna signing the first email responses with a "love" mean anything?

They did have a brief fling, yes. Didn't really last, they both work too much.

Did Dr. Mortum know Dr. Jansen?

Hm. No. But they've heard of her. Might have seen her at a conference.

Has there ever been a fiery showdown between captain Blaze and lord Ember?

Nope.

Where is each RO's favorite place to be kissed?

Oh boy. I don't know! Can you even have a favorite?

What purpose does the earring HG gives sidestep (in some outcomes of the meeting) have?

Three things. First, a powerplay. Look what I can do. Second, a sign that Sidestep is now one of us that others can see (you might get the offer voluntarily in book three). Third, it is a helpful reminder and focus for HG. All their piercings and jewelry are.

is lord ember's ability to resist HG's threads something that Blaze hypothetically could cultivate, or is it unique to Ember/his powers?

Hmm. Technically Blaze could.

if HG had prosthetic/modded hands would their powers still work?

You'd have to do the covid elbow touch greeting or kiss someone. It needs skin to skin.

You mentioned before that the hero drug gives abilities based on the mental state of the person taking it, but at what point? Is it their state of mind when the drug first kicks in? The average mental state through the initial effects of the drug? The point when it wears off?

A combination of the two first. But, this is not a sure process, in most cases it can only nudge the selection process slightly in some directions.

Does Steel let Ortega find out that he chatted to puppet or Pelayo before they break Step out of the hospital and they talked him out of hanging around? Or does he keep quiet on that front to avoid angrytega?

Oh keeping quiet for now.

Which of the rangers would be most likely to not notice a civilian caught in the crossfire during a fight with a villain like Blaze can?

Argent.

If you boosted a cassowary could you end up with a dinosaur?

If you boosted a human, you could end up with a dinosaur too.

How advanced is synthskin for mods? Is it mostly cosmetic, or are there upgrades out there that mimic human skin's elasticity and feel, or ones that can emit body temp warmth?

It is a good approximation of human skin. But, there are two variants of this. The first one is a synthetic skin substitute. This is used to transplant new skin, like for major burns and other things. Once in place, it will stick and grow like normal skin (if the process works fine). It will still be of a slightly different coloration (most likely), and have a certain unearthly smoothness and lack of pores to it. No hair follicles either. They have the same temperature and elasticity. The second one is the thin membrane used to camouflage mods and make them look like human flesh. Most are of a uniform color and lacks hair just as above. They feel different and don't have to be as flexible, as the mods underneath have less give than flesh does. However, advanced synthskin might have color variations, freckles, pores, even fake hair. These are often combined with mods which have a gel-covering mimicking the softness of human flesh, and includes mild electric heating to simulate body heat. These are very expensive, and most who are worried about looks go the way of clonegrown-limb transplantation instead.

You mentioned in the previous Q&A that there are boosts who are locked up in a coma and the authorities hope for the best. What kinds of powers do those people have? Do you have any specific ideas in mind?

No specific ideas, but any boosts that might be classified as weapons of mass destruction comes to mind. Or boosts with powers that would make them impossible to restrain.

Are cosmetic mods a thing? People getting modded purely for fashion over function?

Of course! People will be people.

Does Armadillo like their powers? Would they have preferred having something different?

Armadillo likes their powers, and there's no use wishing things were different anyway. That would only make you sad.

What did Ortega and Argent blow up in the innocent step escape to draw attention away from Daniel carrying Sidestep?

A car.

Has Steel ever gone drill Sargent on the Rangers and made them do weird punishments for messing up?

I think that would go VERY badly. They're all stubborn adults here.

What are the general vibes among the PR team when they have to deal with some scandal for each Ranger? Who are they most worried about slipping up?

I think most worried is a constant battle between the Argent team and the Ortega team. They probably have a betting pool going, not that it's a competition or anything, but they obviously have the most challenging job. Herald's team is chill, he probably brings them donuts. Steel's team is half trying to get him into more public appearances.

Did anyone on the team during the Void incident have theories about what happened after Ortega and Sidestep vanished? What were those theories?

I prefer not going into that right now for reasons.

Do scientists and handlers live on-site at the Farm?

Yes.

How do Regenes generally escape?

They don't.

How common are hero-sidekick relationships? Do they get dragged as problematic because of the power dynamic?

All famous people relationships gets dragged for being problematic eventually... It's like any workplace romance. Complicated, but it happens, because people who spend a lot of time together sometimes realize they like each other.

Does the farm keep mute Regenes?

Yeah, that's not a reason for recycling.

Do regenes ever come out wrong with things like missing or extra limbs or organs?

Oh yes. That's quite often, and can sometimes be surgically corrected, at other times might even be an advantage.

Are the other cities' Ranger teams as messed up as LD's in terms of secret pasts and intra-team drama? Or is LD's team a unique case?

I think all teams have drama. Just look at sports teams. Ortega would claim the LD team has the most drama because they are there, and knows how to make things interesting.

Is there any Green Sky cult equivalent organization that's obsessed with Modding? Like Maelstrom from Cyberpunk 2077?

Oh probably! Haven't detailed any yet.

Has Argent ever tested how far her control over her nanovores reaches before she can't control them anymore?

Kinda? She tests her limits, but she's also very careful of keeping it within what she can handle. So not fully, no.

Ortega implies it in the last lore post, but could they have really gotten to Sidestep in time if they hadn't stopped for Chen?

Probably.

If Sidestep managed to cure their chronic headaches, would that have any impact on their telepathy? If so, what impact would that be?

None.

How much Spanish does Ortega use in private when dealing with ghost from the past Step that denies being a telepath, dodges Ortega at every opportunity & won't see a therapist?

A lot.

What were some of the ways Ortega used to identify if they were talking to a ghost of Sidestep?

Touch. But that was hard, since Sidestep often avoided touch even back in the day. Same with other people noticing, Sidestep tended to remain unseen. In the end, mostly food. Things like coffee, alcohol, sweets or cigarettes. Things Sidestep usually didn't pass up on. So the coffee at their first meeting in Rebirth was the BIG tell for Ortega. Like WTF?

would Chen like cuddling with an RO laying on top of him or is that uncomfortable for his stomach given his injuries?

I think it would be comfortable, most of the weight won't be on the stomach if fully stretched out.

What does Argent's family think of her as a hero(without the context of knowing her real identity)

Spoilers.

Was Ortega's plasma core built specifically for them? Or was it repurposed from a different project?

Specifically for them.

From Chen's perspective, what are his team's strengths, weaknesses and fears in and out of combat?

Spoilers.

The lore post about the formation of the Guardians mentioned that conservatives might object to Blaze due to rumors about his sexuality. Was that mainly because Blaze was the leader/face of the team, or were there also concerns about Zephyr being openly nonbinary?

Mainly because Blaze was the face and leader. Zephyr only became leader once Blaze was dead, and I assume there were some discussions there too. But they were the most qualified one.

Meh, I'll give it a shot; will the gates variable go up while the MC is puppet stuck?

Hahaha good shot. Not answering that.

If a Sidestep were to accuse Argent of being an alien (something I unironically believed was the case until like my third or fourth run), would she play along and play into that theory?

Hmmmm space is not as big a thing here, but maybe? Certainly if she was accused of being a cryptid.

If Step resists HG's threading and refuses to work with them, HG is, naturally, a bit surprised. If you reveal your telepathy, they basically go "Oh, that explains it." However, they're still surprised when a known telepath Step resists threading. Are they simply that confident/arrogant that they can thread telepaths if they know what they're getting into, or is this a rare screw up on their part and they didn't think that through?

They are that confident/arrogant. A bit like... it's worth a shot, maybe the dampeners will help?

Why is it that Sidestep can't feel the group mind of Argent's nanovores?

Oh Sidestep have sensed it many times in the books, but it's not what Sidestep would identify as the nanovore hivemind anymore. It has changed as much as Argent has. So Sidestep simply is not sure what they are picking up on.

Were any of Steps tattoos redone in their second stint at the Farm? For example if they had to cut thru the barcode in the surgery after the fall, or did they work around the tattoos?

No, some of the tattoos are broken now. Most of them heal back over, though.

Do Argent's nanovores keep her home sterile down to eating any single celled organisms that make their way into Argent's home?

Not normally. If they were starving, they might. But they do keep the place impeccably clean.

Does Precognition scale the same way as Force/Subtle (i.e. 1-100 with 50 as a baseline of usability and an advanced breakpoint at 80)?

Not exactly, it is 1-100, but the breakpoints are in different places.

Has anyone ever tried to sabotage the The Farm through the implanted memory process or are they too good at selecting memory donation candidates for that to happen?

Too good at selecting subjects.

Are there any variants of the Boost drug that gives temporary powers?

No.

What's the most boosting one person has survived?

I dunno, you should probably ask the Catastrofiend.

(Catastrofiend George, who eats boost drugs for every meal and snacktime, is an outlier and should only be noted)

Shit, I answered before I read that. Hmmm I would say that there are probably one or two triple boosts or more out there. They might not be more powerful though.

Considering the Catastrofiend munches on boost drugs like they're regular degular breathmints, does it have any silly powers?

Not that I have come up with yet.

How many people, and in which departments work at Rangers HQ?

Ahahaha I really have NO idea. NONE.

If Danny fired a gun while flying? Would his powers interfere with the bullet? Reducing its weight and making it more susceptible to wind? Increasing velocity out of the barrel?

Normally, no.

In terms of body counts(kills) how would you rank the current LD Rangers, including Sentinel, Anathema, Hood, and Ashfall from highest to lowest?

Steel - Sentinel - Hood - Argent - Ortega - Ashfall - Anathema - Herald

Seeing as Danny can toss Tega cross a room and slam Argent into a wall hard enough to crack it, does he violate Newton's second law?

Kinda.

Considering the most common (survivable) boost power seems to be regeneration, do people with serious illness or injuries often take it? Would they be less likely to survive anyway?

A fair number of people taking it are people who have some form of illness or disease they don't think they can recover from. A bit like a last resort, why not try? They are no less likely to survive than anybody else, but there is no guarantee that the powers they get might stop them from dying.

Did anyone else in Argent's family get minor powers from Project Stripes?

No.

If a Sidestep who romanced Argent made a big deal about her birthday, making sure to give her the best day they can with lot of affection and things she likes, how would she take that? Could we make her birthday a happy time for her once again, or would she be more likely to lash out at Sidestep for trying to do such a thing?

Bold of you to assume she'd tell you her birthday. The one in the system is fake.

What is the oldest anyone has been when taking the boost drug and surviving?

Probably in their sixties.

Does the strength of the boost affect how well Shroud is fed? If she nommed on someone with a non flashy/mundane power would it be less than that of someone with a more impressive/dangerous power? or is a boost a boost to her?

It varies greatly depending on the boost.

Is there trust between Shroud and Lord Ember or is their association purely business? Would Lord Ember ever have made her his right hand if he didn't feel he was safe from her death touch due to his fire powers?

Spoilers.

Has Daniel ever beaten any of the other Rangers while sparring?

Oh yeah. Just not regularly.

How solid is Argent, in a relaxed state? If she wasn't trying to stop you, could you push your hand all the way into or through her? (Setting aside both the risk of losing the hand and any solid bodily remnants of hers)

You could push your hand in until you touched flesh if she let her. However, her default configuration is a stable and steady fused armor outer skin lattice.

Kinda NSFW, but does Julia generally wear lacy bras? That seems a bit uncomfortable.

Bad bras are uncomfortable no matter the materials. Good bras are comfy, even with lace. But, she varies.

Has Chen's leadership style changed any since they left active duty & became a Ranger or has it remained pretty much the same?

It has changed a LOT.

If you cut the Catfiend precisely in half, would the halves attempt to re-merge or would they regenerate into 2 separate Catfiends?

Re-merge. Or, worse, the bigger half will eat the other.

Does Argent have a sense of smell? If so, is it hers or do the nanovores also have their own sense of smell? Do the nanovores, when not controlled, have any sense of direction or do they just swarm indiscriminately?

She... kinda has. It's not just entirely hers. It is the nanovores that she taps into. They can "smell" and indeed partly navigate through sensing airborne molecules. Uncontrolled nanovores still have base programming, that is the one that decides what they do.

What did the Catfiend think of the taste of Void blood?

Nom.

Do cuckoos ever win in training spars against combat Re-Genes? Are they even expected to win?

It has probably happened, but they are not expected to.

Is Poland still under communist rule or did they break free like they did in our time line?

Hmmm I think they've broken away. Still aligned, a bit like Finland, but their own entity. Part of the "wall" of friendly but more neutral ground between the communist block and the EU.

Has Psychopathor had any other careers besides villainy?

Nah.

Did re-genes as a concept end up changing since early game development? I feel like I remember a demo where Sidestep viewed their minds as emptier than the current one, but I could be delusional.

I don't think they have? I can't remember having changed that, but I will also point out that Sidestep do suffer from some self-hatred and negative feelings about Re-Genes. They are not exactly a neutral observer.

How would Steel react to a baby being named after him and someone trying to show him? Just coming up and saying "this is my little babby Steel" while brandishing a child in his direction.

"Oh that is very nice. He's very small. No, I can't hold him, I don't want to risk hurting him. Yes, you can take a selfie." A bit awkward.

Is it common for boosts to take up hobbies where their powers give them an edge (as an example, people with powers like Jake taking up urban exploring or caving because they can get into and out of places most other people can't)?

Of course! It's fun to use what you have. Though Jake would be like "why the hell should I crawl into a cave? There's just more dirt there."

Are there sports leagues for boosts with relevant powers (like marathon races for speedsters or MMA for boosts with superhuman strength)? Do those ever get televised?

I don't think so, there are not enough to really get it going. I do think there are shows and tournaments though, where you can have famous people competing to see who is the fastest and stuff. But not an organized league.

The public is vaguely aware of Regenes existing, but are they aware that cuckoos exist?

No.

If the og rangers had the choice to, would they do the heartbreak mission over again? What would they change?

Nuke the site from orbit.

How badly would Ortega have reacted if one of the other rangers had taken sidestep to base to help Argent at the start of rebirth. If they hadn't known sidestep was alive?

Pretty much the same! More hugs for the other Ranger too.

If the rangers got turned into animals what would they be? Would they still have their powers? (Would heralds powers still work if he was a bird?)

Just having fun here with what my brain decides right now. Argent would be a rabbit, Daniel a Kestrel Hawk, Ortega a sea otter and Chen would be a groundhog. They would all have their powers. Herald's powers would work.

We talk about Ortega and Chen having their own Heartbreak scars, but didn't we (Step) also inflict something similar upon Argent after possessing her? Or are those completely different?

That's different, and a lot milder.

What are your favorite TTRPGs?

RuneQuest. Not too fond of the basic roleplaying system it is based on, it is okay, but the world is gold. I've played in that world since the eighties, with 5 different systems now... and I don't think I ever will run out of things to play. They also have a big humble bundle on offer now for charity! It's a timed offer, so if you are curious, hurry. <https://www.humblebundle.com/books/runequest-chaosium-inc-books>

Was upgrading the generator Ortega's choice, or a choice made for them? If it was their choice what was their state of mind at the time?

It was their choice, but I wouldn't say they were in a right state of mind when they made it.

does ortega ever lie awake at night wondering how their life got so weird from being a kid doing adrenaline junkie stunts to a direct pipeline of a life of fighting cross-dimensional entities, boosted abominations, and more with one of their friends being host to a nanovore colony (assuming they Know) and their best friend being a regene/secret sibling to their worst enemy?

Nah, that tracks.

Is Elena secretive with her recipes or does she share them freely?

I think she shares them!

Did Eisenhower give his speech about the Military-Industrial Complex in this world? And did the concept get altered in anyway by how the timeline diverges?

Oh yes! And I would urge anybody who don't know what is to go check it out. I think the speech would essentially have been unchanged, but the background would have been slightly different. Less focus on atomic bombs and rockets, and more on human modification and warmachines.

When talking about Los Diablos is it roughly the equivalent of L.A. the city, L.A. the county, or the Greater L.A. metro area? And if it's 1 of the latter have any or all of the cities sprawled together into 1 supercity or is there still a noticeable distinction between them?

I would say it is more L.A the city, but with a lot less population. First of all, we need to remember that L.A in the eighties had about three quarters of the population it has today, (9,5 - 12,5 for the metro area), and the L.A of the FH world never had the chance to go through the changes and growth of L.A in the eighties since the big one happened so early. And a lot of people died or was evacuated after the big one, and I would say it is only in the last decade or two that there has been any serious population growth. So, Los Diablos is surrounded by a lot of "independent suburbs" which would be located in the county or the greater metro area. These suburbs have proper names, and some treat them as independent urban centers while others treat them as part of the greater Los Diablos area. Most are very determined to stay independent, they are not governed by the Mayor and the Council, they often have their own electricity plant, water plant, school, doctors and so on. Some still remain independent, even though the urban sprawl of Los Diablos has caught up to them and in some cases surrounded them. Owl lives in such an area, and Sidestep's Waterplant base is in the ruins separating one such area from LD proper. Buses are commonly used as transport between hubs.

Is it more common for heroes to be like the Long Beach Heroes & mainly do their thing in a specific area or to just drift around/go where they're told?

Most heroes/vigilantes tends to be local. Their power level influences how large the local area is. But, most heroes who start out wanting to protect something will start with their local neighborhood. Like Daredevil in Hell's Kitchen. Some have stepped up to a city wide arena, but most remain in their territories. Some can be quite aggressive towards interlopers.

Was there any lynchpin breakthrough in Modding that let cybernetics jump ahead of what we have for prostheticsirl?

Not to go into detail with my fake science, but there were two discoveries that really changed the game. The first one was finding a way to keep the mods integrated with flesh and bone. New materials functioning like titanium, where the body will mostly accept it. This enabled things like strengthening the skeleton to accept heavier burdens, implanting muscle weaves or other support systems to enhance the flesh part of the metal-flesh system. This could also be done without adding a cybernetic limb. Ortega is an example of some really skillful work there, a thoroughly modded body without any of the limb replacement. Everything is below the skin enhancements. The second one was being able to integrate the control system with the nervous system, and with muscle fibers. This enabled fine motor control, and direct neural connection to things like power armor. Once these two issues were solved, the sky was the limit.

Are there any healing boosts that work on other people? It seems like at the very least there are none available in Los Diablos, since they seem like they could solve quite a few of our cast's problems.

I think there are, but they would be very rare. And anybody with the luck to get them would be highly sought after, and could have the most lucrative career as a medical specialist. Its these kinds of powers that would be celebrated even on the east coast, and in the EU. So I doubt any remain on the west coast. They could live the dream elsewhere, especially in places that would have moral qualms about things such as clone-organs and limbs.

What did the other Rangers think about Chen setting up the fridge shelf for Sidesteps' civilian identity? How does this change with each romance and poly option? Who chips in to help set it up and stock it?

I don't think Chen told anybody. So people might think other people did it, and people friendly to Sidestep (varies) might help stock it.

Was the accident a necessity or a lucky happenstance for the impostor? If the impostor had somehow hijacked Sidestep's body while they were piloting Argent what would happen to Sidestep?

Lucky happenstance. They needed a catastrophic thing. Just Sidestep being "out" wouldn't be enough.

Of the characters we currently know, who sleeps with a nightlight? Surely there's at least one...

Argent.

Does Argent have the same voice she had pre nanos? Did she try to make it similar? Does her voice sounds like a normal human or is there a metallic/otherwise non human tone in there? Are nanovores capable of making any sound on their own?

She does not have the same voice. I always pictured it rougher, a bit more whiskey in it. She sounds like a normal human. Nanovores make no sound of their own.

Could anyone else drive Mortum's car or is it only drivable by them?

Argent could. Ortega could after frying some systems.

If Spoon understood that Sidestep had telepathy and could understand him and read his thoughts, would he have any messages for Chen?

No, he would be convinced that Chen can already understand him perfectly.

None of the options that have a threshold for a certain level of telepathy seem to take the amount of open gates into account, but if opening gates is meant to make Sidestep more powerful, why is that the case?

Opening the gates is not meant to make Sidestep more powerful. On occasion, the same event that opens a gate might also increase Sidestep's telepathy, but that's correlation, not causation. Also, opening a gate doesn't necessarily mean using what is in there...

Does The Truth that justice motivated PCs want to expose have any strong connection to whatever the prepare them hunter is prepping for?

Yeah, but a wider scope.

Has there ever been an observed case of someone taking the hero drug and having zero effects? As in, not only did they not manifest any powers, but processed it like a placebo?

Probably. But it's hard knowing if that wasn't the drug being fake, or that the person have gained powers of a sort that's not readily discernible to humans.

We know Sentinel was close to Hood but was he close with any of the other og Rangers, before or after Hood's death?

I think the second closest would would have been with Chen.

So how often does the Farm kidnap people only to find out they are escaped Regenes?

Once.

In honor of the USA's Independence Day, is the day of the FEZ's ratification and implementation a holiday within the FEZ itself? Like do the various corporations, mafias and governments celebrate the creation of the FEZ as if it was their Independence Day?

OH yeah!! I can imagine that is the big holiday these days!

Did the person who started the Nanosurge have any contingencies to stop it when they thought it was "done" or got out of control?

Yes. Would they have worked? Hmmm... doubtful.

If Vera hurts herself in bird form, does that injury stay when she turns human again? Or does it go away once human? What about vice versa?

It goes away. However, if she turns back quickly, the injury will return.

Are the nanovores edible? Like if I had a pile of dead specimens, could I munch on them like chips?

I mean technically you can eat dirt too if you're in the mood...

Did Sidestep ever interface with the nanovores during their second farm stay?

Oh clever, clever. Hmm. How to put this without spoiling too much. I think I will simply say: Yes. Yes they did. Make of that what you will, I won't elaborate...

[Questions for this month!](#)

[Jun 29, 2024](#)

Been on vacation, but please give me your questions for this month!

[Stagnation](#)

[Jun 17, 2024](#)

Well, not a full puppetstuck demo yet, but we are getting closer. 16 400 words of path 2.3, the puppet arrested by Steel after helping to free the broken MC. Would have been more, but we have a thunderstorm so this is it. I want it up tonight.

As always, it is not complete, missing choices, variants, stat additions and lots of stuff. Still, a peek behind the scene to see what is going on if you don't mind spoilers.

....

*comment 3_2 and 3_3 previously broken bones.

*comment 2_3 arrested by steel. Main path.

*if gender = puppet_gender

*set samegender true

*if voluntaryreveal

*set guiltymc true

*elseif notthevillain

*set innocentmc true

*else

*if hghelp

*set innocentmc true

*elseif ((wounded) or (auctioncaptured))

*if oc >= 50

*set guiltymc true

*else

*set innocentmc true

*else

*if oc >= 60

*set guiltymc true

*else

*set innocentmc true

*comment if the impostor villain is innocent or guilty. add argent and steel variables later

The air smells stale. Stagnant. Breathe in. Hold it. Breathe out. It smells like you, though you know there are vents here. They just don't work very well, the stillness of your cell is oppressive. It clings to you. Around you. Inside your lungs. No escape. It's technically not jail. You know that. You're still in Los Diablos, under arrest, instead of having been shipped off to work for free in some secure factory jail elsewhere. A holding facility. Such a pleasantly neutral term for suspended animation. Not that you're unfamiliar to that, you spent the worst part of your life on the Farm, subject to a similar mind-numbing routine and boredom.

*if character_2_3

But it's different this time.

This isn't even your body.

Not your hands when you do push-ups. Not your lungs when you're out of breath after working out on the minimal area allotted to you, a narrow cot, a stinking toilet, window with a hint of daylight, too high up to look out. No bars, just bulletproof glass. Can't even use the ledge to do pull-ups. Its only use is to mark the path of the sun as yet another day pass.

*else

Broken. Body hurting to the point where you can't stand it anymore.

You should rest. You know that.

Instead, you do your best to regain your strength. You're out of the casts, but you've lost muscle-tone and mobility. They still roll out the wheelchair when taking you places. Giving you crutches might be giving you a weapon, and it's easier to handcuff you when you sit down. Between the stinking toilet and the narrow cot there's not much place to work out, but it is enough for you to painstakingly teach yourself to stand. Lift your legs. Embrace the pain. Move. Again. And again. Lay on the cot and stare at the narrow window near the ceiling when you're exhausted. Watch the spot of sunshine move across the cell.

Keeping track of time is important at this point, so you do. Little marks on a wall, vandalism in the name of sanity. One day the reverse might be true, forgetting the passage of time is the only way to stay sane. Living for the day. You're not there yet. Hopefully you'll never be.

*if character_2_3

*goto wholebody

*else

*goto healingbody

*label wholebody

Your only consolation is that as far as you know, your body is safe. Trust. You sacrificed yourself to make sure of that. Once your body has recovered enough you should be able to slip back inside \${chis} head. Right? This is only temporary.

Temporary is taking an awful long time, though. You've been stuck here for weeks. A month and a half. Marshal Steel has come to interrogate you a few times, a change of pace from the LDPD goons.

*if nointerrogation

He's still sore about you attacking him. Hurt pride. You take some solace in that, in being able to surprise him. He's added up the clues, of course. You were there to distract and delay him while your accomplice got \${name} \${surname} out. He's been trying to get you to give you any names, any information you have on \${surname}'s whereabouts.

*fake_choice

#I've said nothing.

You've given the Marshal nothing, of course. Keep your mouth shut and rest easy knowing that @{{boss Pelayo}\${hench_name}} got your body out of there. Hopefully, with time you will be able to regain control.

*set stonewalling true

#I confessed to helping, and let him know \${name} was safe.

The Marshal already knew you were involved. Your attack made that obvious, so you had no qualms to admitting to your part. Of course what he really was digging for was why.

*if knowssteelsuspects

You know he suspects \${name} \${surname} of being \${villain_name}, but he has no proof. And really, you're not about to give him that.

*else

You're not about to tell him that.

What you have told him is that \${name} is safe with friends, and that he should stop looking. If you can do something to defuse the heat, that's good. You don't need to be found, you need time to heal so you can regain control.

*else

*if stonewalling

Not that it has helped him any. You've kept your mouth shut this long, you're not exactly about to start talking now. You know @{{boss Pelayo}\${hench_name}} got your body out, at this point all you can do is to wait for it to heal enough for you to regain control.

*else

The fact that you told him \${name} was safe with friends has defused some of the heat of his questions. Of course that has also meant that he knows you're involved, and has valuable information. A person of interest. He's not about to let you go, so at this point you are stalling for time so your body can heal enough for you to regain control.

*page_break \${swear}.

*if ((puppetortega_relationship = "none") or ((puppetortega_relationship = "workout friend"))

*set puppetortega_relationship "bad"

*if ((puppetortega_relationship = "friend and confidante") or ((puppetortega_relationship = "eternally flirting"))

*if stonewalling

*set puppetortega_relationship "bad"

*else

*set puppetortega_relationship "on shaky ground"

*if puppetortega_relationship = "semiofficially dating"

*set puppetortega_relationship "on shaky ground"

It's been too long. Even with a bad concussion, you should have recovered. How badly were you hurt? You don't know, and that's terrifying. This can't be permanent, of course not, but what if you're temporarily stuck? Your current theory is that the shock of the crash, combined with your injuries, led to this. Maybe at this point distance is the issue. This body is not telepathic, and if the reflexive recall mechanism that boots you back when falling asleep or unconscious has been broken, maybe you need physical contact? Proximity. You needed that at the start with your puppet as well, touching \${phis} skin to slide into it. That's why you had your apartments so close to each other, despite the risk. It took you months to be able to do it without touch, from one apartment to the other. Only practice made distance a non-issue, your puppet accessible across town without issue.

That's the explanation that makes sense. That gives you hope. A plan. Unfortunately that plan must include getting out of here, and from the look of things, that's not happening any time soon. You're more than stuck, you're trapped.

Trapped in the no-man's land between suspicion and sentencing. You can't do anything but wait for a chance while you switch between working out and staring blankly at the wall. And while you wait, you need to suffer through interview after interview staring at the table in front of you. Calculate your options. Play the doll for real. Be mute. Uncooperative. It's not like your publicly appointed lawyer has shown much interest in helping you, a perfunctory gesture, pretending you have rights when

*if puppet_gender = "woman"

the creep does little but stare at your breasts as you talk.

*else

the useless asshole does little but yawn himself through your talks.

No help there. Maybe that's the point, to remind you that you have no allies left. Still, your meetings provide variation if nothing else, a refuge from the self-inflicted hell of you thoughts. Your doubts. Your regrets.

*goto forgetnot

*label healingbody

*comment write later

*comment A month and a half. Marshal Steel has come to interrogate you a few times, a change of pace from the LDPD goons. He's a temptation. Knows too much. Might know what you need to know. Maybe. \${swear}. You want to ask Steel if \${name} \${surname} is safe. But you can't. Nobody knows \${che} is \${villain_name}. Nobody can know. And so you can't dig for information, no matter how cleverly disguised your efforts might be. Steel is not stupid, and giving facts away for free would mean you were. That's why you're still here. On hold. Because the Rangers don't know what you know and they are desperate to find out. An admission as good as any that \${name} is still missing.

*goto forgetnot

*label forgetnot

*fake_choice

#I messed up, bad. I need to do better.

Getting captured wasn't your worst mistake. That's what this body is for. Plausible deniability, a way to make sure your goals are accomplished no matter the price you need to pay. Replaceable. No, your mistake was agreeing to meet up with Hollow Ground. Too much of a risk, especially in a club like that. Too many minds to keep things straight, even disregarding Ortega's curiosity. You should have been careful. Gone in this body. Made some introductions.

*if daring >= 70

You hate to admit it, but not all risks are worth taking.

*elseif arrogance >= 70

You hate to admit it, but you're not invincible.

*else

That would have saved you a world of pain.

#What if I can't I get back to my body? Ever?

This has never happened before. Being locked inside your puppet. Remaining there even though you fall asleep. What if your theory of why you can't get back to your body is wrong? What if you get out, touch your face and still there's nothing? What if your comatose body will just lie there, forever out of your reach? Thoughts like that terrifies you enough to hyperventilate, biting your hand until the pain brings you back.

Did something else break in the crash besides bones? Brain damage? Is this some sort of healing response? Like pain forcing you not to walk on an injured foot so it has time to heal? Is it some instinct inside your body that is keeping your mind at bay until your brain has time enough to heal? Will it? Can it?

You hope so. The alternative is too terrible to consider.

#I feel like I am losing myself.

Who are you even? Being stuck in this body has unmoored you, removed foundations you didn't even know you needed. Your telepathy. Your Re-Gene nature. What if this is who you are now? What if everything else was a dream you were just waking up from? Too impossible to be real. Too painful to want back.

You keep scratching your arms, as if looking for tattoos under your skin. Only red marks now, no blood, but irritation. Itching. Not even your reactions feel right, or maybe the problem is that they do. Feel natural. As if this is who you always were. Nothing else.

If you lost yourself in here, would anybody ever know?

Being trapped inside your puppet for this long has made you realize one thing for sure. You're seen as a criminal here. None of the guards care whether you live or die, except perhaps to the point it might make their work more complicated. A prisoner. A nobody. And yet... you're human.

They despise you as a human. You annoy them as an individual. They ignore you as a pain in the ass. You're there. Real. There is nothing of the detached blankness of the farm, where you might as well be a lab animal stuck in a cage, no, because you know there were people who cared about the rats even though they shouldn't.

Too dangerous to care about the Re-Genes. You weren't a lab animal, you were a sample stored in the fridge. A petri-dish of value only for whatever experiment they were running that day. You were nothing. A blank slate with an unnervingly human face. Not blue. Look away. Ignore.

*if motivation = "anger"

Anger is better. The guards affirm your existence with every push and snarl and insult. You feel more grounded than you have in years, trapped in one spot, in one head, no thoughts, gut roiling with fury.

And yet you can't [b]do[/b] anything with it.

*elseif motivation = "justice"

If you ever had doubts about your disdain of the legitimacy of the Los Diablos justice system, you have lost them now. This is where people are kept before being brought to trial. Suspects, not criminals. Innocent until proven guilty and all that.

And yet the guards treat you all like scum.

*elseif motivation = "fate"

And now you're here. Ignored in a different way, as if it was an inconvenience to feed you three times a day and lead you to your next interrogation. You should be angry. You should be frustrated. And yet it is all so familiar. As if this was where you were meant to be. As if you're waiting for something. For someone.

A sign will come, of that you are sure.

*else

Was that better? Is this worse? Never having anything compared to having lost it all? You wish you knew. You wish you had an answer. Not that it matters. Not really. You'll take it back. Everything and more. This is a temporary setback, another hurdle you need to clear.

By this point, you're a very good jumper.

You let out a breath and hold it. Counts for as long as you can before you turn dizzy. Longer than when you first arrived here. A different kind of training. Oxygen. An annoying necessity.

*if precognition >= 30

[i]This too, is important. Hold your breath and go towards the light.[/i] You shake your head to dispel the vertigo. This cell does strange things to you, but you're used to that. Still not as bad as the Farm. Focus on what you can.

Bodily functions. Pain. Sweat. The feeling of concrete under your fingertips. Grounding.

Your body. Not your body.

*if samegender

*if trans

A real \${puppet_gender}. Human.

*else

Human.

*else

*if nb

Human.

*elseif trans

\${puppet_gender}. Like they designated you.

*else

A \${puppet_gender}. Unlike you.

*if ((samegender) and (genderquestion))

Lately, you felt like it chafed, being seen as a \${gender}. After spending this much time as your puppet, eating, living, breathing the \${sex} experience you've come to a conclusion...

*fake_choice

#Being a \${gender} wasn't the issue, being a Re-Gene was.

You thought you didn't want to be a \${gender}. But, being immersed like this, in another body with the same gender have shown you that your issues lay elsewhere.

In your lack of humanity.

You've never had a choice not to be the outsider, to be a pale imitation of what you are living now. That's what your issues were. Not in whether people saw you as a \${gender} or not.

*set genderquestion false

#I really don't want to be a \${gender}.

You always wondered if it was a reaction to being a Re-Gene. If maybe what you weren't longing for was the easy acceptance of humanity. But, being trapped in a human body for this long has proven that's not the case at all. This body is handsome, fit, desirable and human. And yet you want to crawl out of your own skin as people keep treating you as something you're not.

\${sex}. The Farm designated you as that, but right now you want to be anything but.

*set genderdoubts true

#I don't know. I'm still confused.

You really don't know. There's too many things mixing together, humanity, gender, attractiveness. You love this body. You hate this body. You want your own body back. How are you supposed to know who you are? What you feel? You've had too much time to think, trapped here, but none of your thoughts makes sense.

You wish you had someone to talk to.

#No time to think about myself right now. Only the mission.

You've got bigger issues right now than whether people see you as a \${gender} or not. Really. You need your proper body back so you can get on with your work. Feelings are irrelevant. Unprofessional.

So you push them away, your comfort is not what's important right now.

*elseif genderquestion

A puppet_gender. You roll that thought around in your mouth for a moment, almost speaking the words out loud to the concrete wall like a mad {puppet_gender}. It shouldn't matter, but it does. Somehow. You've never immersed yourself this deeply in your puppet body before. Not just masquerading. Living. Breathing. Day and night. Not on your terms. With other's eyes on you.

It's made you come to a conclusion.

*fake_choice

*if (not(nb)) #Being a \${gender} wasn't the cause of my discomfort.

You thought you didn't want to be a \${gender}. But, being immersed like this, in the body of a real \${puppet_gender} have shown you that your issues lay elsewhere.

Not in your body. Or your presentation. Maybe in your lack of humanity? Maybe in how you always felt like an impostor, pretending to be something you were not?

You're not sure. Maybe it's simply that you don't like yourself very much.

*set genderquestion false

*if (nb) #Gender really isn't for me.

Being immersed like this, in the body of a \${puppet_gender} have shown you that you were right all along. Gender isn't really for you, the binary is a trap you don't want to be a part of. You acted like a \${puppet_gender} in this body because it was simpler to play up the act. Be something people could slot into a box.

Be the \${puppet_gender} of people's imagination. A useful act. But, in the end, just an act. Being trapped in here proves it.

*set genderquestion false

#Being a \${puppet_gender} feels more natural than ever.

You always wondered if your unease with your body was a reaction to being a Re-Gene. If maybe what you weren't longing for was the easy acceptance of humanity. But, being trapped in a human body for this long has proven that's not the case at all. You're unwashed, dressed in an ugly prison jumpsuit, and are lacking all the things you used to do to make this body desirable. For others, and for yourself. And yet, it feels more natural than your own.

The guards treat you like garbage, sure, but they treat you like a \${puppet_gender}. And that matters more than you ever thought it would.

*set genderdoubts true

#I don't know. I'm still confused.

You really don't know. There's too many things mixing together, humanity, gender, attractiveness. You love this body. You hate this body. You want your own body back. How are you supposed to know who you are? What you feel? You've had too much time to think, trapped here, but none of your thoughts makes sense.

You wish you had someone to talk to.

#No time to think about myself right now. Only the mission.

You've got bigger issues right now than whether people see you as a \${gender} or a \${puppet_gender}. Really. You need your proper body back so you can get on with your work. Feelings are irrelevant. Unprofessional.

So you push them away, your comfort is not what's important right now.

*elseif ((samegender) or (nb))

It feels...

*fake_choice

#Strange. Like I will be found out at any moment.

Human.

*if trans

\$_{puppet_gender}.

This body is that. And now so are you? You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and everyone treats you as if you were what you look like.

So why do you still feel like an impostor? As if you'd accidentally scrub too hard and reveal tattoos underneath? Is this what you would feel like if you ever managed to magically remove the tattoos on your own body?

*if trans

Remold yourself to be who you are?

Would you still jump at shadows? Dread your own reflection? How deep did they scar you?

The answer is disconcerting enough to make you avoid it.

#Right. I need this. I need this so badly.

Human.

*if trans

\$_{puppet_gender}.

This body is that. And now so are you. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and everyone treats you as if you were what you look like. This place is a pit, but it is also the most deeply affirming experience you've ever had. A proof of concept. A blueprint for what it would look like to be human.

*if trans

A \$_{puppet_gender} down to the last details.

You want it. You need it. So badly.

#Wrong. I can't forget that I am a Re-Gene.

Human. This body is that. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and everyone treats you as if you were what you look like.

And yet you can't forget that no matter how badly they treat you, they still treat you as a human. And you're not. You're a Re-Gene. A tool. Not even cattle. You can't forget that. This body isn't an escape. It's a temptation.

It's a trap.

*elseif trans

It feels...

*fake_choice

#Strange. Like I will be found out at any moment.

Human. Something you never was. \$_{puppet_gender}. Something you left behind. This body is both, and now so are you. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and everyone treats you as if you were what you look like.

So why do you still feel like an impostor? As if you'd accidentally scrub too hard and reveal tattoos underneath? Is this what you would feel like if you ever managed to magically remove the tattoos on your own body? Remake yourself as the \$_{gender} you are?

Would you still jump at shadows? Dread your own reflection? How deep did they scar you?

The answer is disconcerting enough to make you avoid it.

#Horrible. I'm not a \$_{puppet_gender}, this is a nightmare.

You're not a \$_{puppet_gender}. You've spent too many years remaking yourself to slide back into that pit, and yet here you are. Drowning in people's looks, the way they treat you, talk about you, looks at you. Human, sure, better than a Re-Gene but also so much more gendered. You're an impostor here, not just pretending to be a human, but forced into a role you had left behind.

This is a nightmare. You need to wake up.

#Wrong. I can't forget that I am a Re-Gene.

A \${puppet_gender}. Bad enough, but you can deal. You've lived that nightmare for years, but this is new. This is worse. Human. This body. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and everyone treats you as if you were what you look like.

A criminal, sure. Contemptible, yes. But still one of them. Human. And you're not. You're a Re-Gene. A tool. Not even cattle. You can't forget that. This body isn't an escape. It's a torture device.

It's a trap.

*else

It feels...

*fake_choice

#Nervous. Like I will be found out at any moment.

Human. This body is that. And now so are you? You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and everyone treats you as if you were what you look like.

So why do you still feel like an impostor? As if you'd accidentally scrub too hard and reveal tattoos underneath? Is this what you would feel like if you ever managed to magically remove the tattoos on your own body? Would you still jump at shadows? Dread your own reflection? How deep did they scar you?

The answer is disconcerting enough to make you avoid it.

#Being a \${puppet_gender} feels strangely comfortable.

Human. A \${puppet_gender}. This body is that. And now so are you. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and everyone treats you as if you were what you look like. It feels strangely comfortable. You've never stayed a \${puppet_gender} for this long before, it feels more and more natural as time pass.

Is it your humanity or your \${puppet_gender}hood?

You're not sure, but there is something precious here to be found in this otherwise disastrous situation. Something to learn about yourself. You just wish it was under better circumstances.

*set genderquestion true

#Wrong. I can't forget that I am a Re-Gene.

Human. This body is that. You sleep, eat and drink the human experience, strip down naked for showers, and everyone treats you as if you were what you look like.

And yet you can't forget that no matter how badly they treat you, they still treat you as a human. And you're not. You're a Re-Gene. A tool. Not even cattle. You can't forget that. This body isn't an escape. It's a temptation.

It's a trap.

"\${puppet_name} Doe." Your name with your government-assigned surname tacked on at the end makes you wince, but since you haven't offered them one, they went with the classic. "Prepare to be transported for questioning."

"Again?" You sigh, but assumes the position so they can enter the cell and cuff you for the walk. Are they really that afraid of you, or did the Rangers' involvement just make everyone paranoid?

*if (((steelhurt) or (steelmodhurt)) or ((steelinjured) or (shotsteel)))

You suppose that what you did to Marshal Steel would put everyone on edge.

*elseif steelfoughtpuppet

You suppose that Marshal Steel would have warned everyone about you.

*else

Wouldn't want to lose the Rangers' star witness.

Cuffs. Hands and feet, not clenched tight enough to hurt, but enough that you wouldn't be able to slip out of them. Chains connecting everything, enabling you to walk, but not at more than a slow shuffle.

*fake_choice

#Chains. I hate them.

Chains. You hate them. They used restraints at the Farm as well, though you never rated more than soft kevlar straps. No clinking in the hallways there, no metal to interfere with scanners or similar things. The kevlar was better. Light. Quiet. Hygienic. Not so obvious.

They want it to be obvious here. The chains are heavier than needed, the clinking adds to the ambiance. A show of force. You're a wild animal again, led by your handlers, all that's missing is a muzzle. Oh well, you haven't bit anybody this time. Yet.

There's a time and place for everything.

#They mean to humiliate me.

It's not the first time you've been restrained, they used similar means at the Farm. Not chains, just soft kevlar straps. No clinking in the hallways there, no metal to interfere with scanners or similar things. The kevlar was better. Light. Quiet. Hygienic. And, just like it was there, you suspect it's not just to keep you from escaping.

No, they want to humiliate you. Drive home the point that you are at their mercy. You move at their command, at their speed, which of course is slightly faster than what would be comfortable with the chains. They want you to stumble.

You do your best to remain on your feet.

#It's strangely validating.

Being restrained is not comfortable, but it is strangely validating. It means they see you as a threat. You remember the times you were restrained back at the Farm. No chains there, just soft kevlar straps. No clinking in the hallways, no metal to interfere with scanners or similar things. The kevlar was better. Light. Quiet. Hygienic. It also meant they couldn't be sure you would obey. Even though you shouldn't understand the concept of disobedience.

You wore that distrust as a patch of honor, even when your resistance was ground down and you went back to being the obedient Re-Gene you kept that memory close. You were capable of rebellion. Of free will. Of saying no.

You do the same now, though this body might be weak and powerless compared to your own, they think you are dangerous enough to need chains. That means that they fear you. And that means that you are someone to be feared. You need that strength.

The shuffled walk ends, as always, at the interrogation room. Routine. What awaits you inside is not.

Who. Who awaits you inside.

Ortega. \${swear}.

You try not to look at \${him} as you're led to the chair, and your cuffs fastened to the frame. A security measure, as if you were about to get out of the chair and slam \${him} over the head with it.

*fake_choice

#Tempting, but foolish.

It is a tempting thought, even if the repercussions would probably not have been worth the moment of brief satisfaction. Could you have done it even if the chair was of the normal variety? Doubtful, the chains doesn't give you enough leeway to raise your hands over your head, and you really want that to get good leverage.

Instead you settle for a harsh glare.

#Keeping your composure is hard enough without violence.

You need to keep your composure, not indulge in reckless thoughts of violence. The only advantage you have so far is your temper, you've been holding up against hope and desperation both so far. You can't let a change of interrogator rattle you. You're in control here, at least of your own temper.

So instead of moving, you smile. Calmly.

#Breathe. Look down. Don't tear up.

Breathe. You tell yourself that, because your lungs have cramped up. In. Out. Look down at the table until you have stared hard enough that the sting in your eyes is from effort, nothing more. You can do this. You can't afford to crack now.

Looking up, finally, you meet his gaze head-on.

"What are you doing here?" Your voice is steady. Inflectionless.

*if character_2_3

*goto wholeinter

*else

*goto brokeinter

*label wholeinter

"Silly me, here I thought you should ask why I didn't come before." Ortega's face bears no marks of the crash, enough time has passed that any remaining scarring would be easily hidden by makeup. Of course \${he}'d look impeccable for a visit in jail, the clothes understated and expensive, with an official feel to them you haven't seen since \${his} Marshal days. You're surprised \${he} didn't show up here in \${his} Charge suit to make an impression. Or, worse, leave a strategic button or two open.

"Don't flatter yourself." You look away, letting your gaze train across the walls, the one-way window where you wonder if others will be watching. You doubt it, Ortega always liked \${his} privacy. "You'd have no reason to visit."

*if puppetortega_relationship = "on shaky ground"

"Huh. So this is really masks off then, is it?" Ortega pulls \${him}self up straighter in the chair, as if \${he}'s trying to pretend that \${he} isn't wearing a mask right now. Hypocrite.

"I thought that was the case when I was arrested." You keep your voice even. Cold.

*if ortega_flirting_puppet

None of the smiles you usually aim in \${his} direction. None of the heat. Both of you are cinders and coal, no diamonds, no fire. Matching each other once again.

*else

No warmth. Not friends. Not now.

"I was in a hospital bed when that happened." \${he} looks uncomfortable with your steady gaze, for once \${his} eyes does the wandering. A small victory, but you'll take it. "I didn't really have much say in that."

"And if you hadn't been?" You try to gesture, but all you get are rattling chains. Though you suspect that proves your point even better. "Don't tell me you would have argued the Marshal into letting me go? After what happened?"

"It is true then?" \${his} eyes meet yours. Trying to dig deeper.

"Oh don't give me that." Your anger breaks the surface at last. "As if you haven't gone over every shred of video evidence by now, interrogated every single staff member of the hospital. If you're just going to sit here trying to bait me into seeing you as sympathetic you might as well get the hell out of here."

*else

"You haven't exactly been forthcoming with your answers." Ortega pulls \${him}self up straighter in the chair, trying to project an air of authority.

"So you thought you could do better?" You can't stop the laugh, bitter and cold though it might be. "Trust me, you're not half as smooth as you think you are. I have even less to say to you than to the Marshal."

"Cold." \${his} mouth twitches.

*fake_choice

#"Honest," I retort.

"Honest," you retort.

"Really?" Ortega's mask cracks, the calm control exchanged for exasperated frustration. Another win for you. "Somehow I doubt that you even know what that word means."

*if suspect_ortega_uses_puppet

"Do you?" It feels good to keep control when \${he} is slipping. "Don't you think I know why you approached me by now?"

"That's beside the point," \${he} protests. Huh. You've long suspected that Ortega's intentions with \${puppet_name} was far from innocent. "And I'm not going to be baited into an argument."

*else

"Do you?" You toss the accusation back at \${him}, at this point you know how shady Ortega can be. Parkfield proved it, if nothing else.

"That's beside the point," \${he} protests, the look of guilt quickly suppressed. Huh. That hit a sore point. "And I'm not going to be baited into an argument."

"Fine," you say, narrowing your eyes. "we can stare at each other in silence."

##"Realistic," I say with a sigh.

"Realistic," you say with a sigh. "I've had a lot of time to think."

"A lot of time to repent?" Ortega tries a smile, but it doesn't reach \${his} eyes and both of you know it.

"That would imply I have something to be sorry for." You look down at your manacled hands, shrugging. "I did what I did for reasons that are my own. That's it, you're not getting me to talk."

"So you prefer to do what? Stare at me in silence?"

"Why not?" You proceed to do just that, daring him to speak first.

*selectable_if (puppetortega_relationship = "on shaky ground") ##"Hurt," I say with a look of betrayal.

"Hurt," you say with a look of betrayal.

*if ortega_flirting_puppet

"I thought we had something."

*else

"I thought we were friends."

"You should have thought about that earlier." Ortega's mouth twitches, as if \${he}'s biting down on something sour. "Do you really think you have the moral high ground here?"

"If you cared, I would have thought you'd at least show up to scream at me for my betrayal. The fact that you didn't..." you shrug, looking away. "That tells me that you never really saw me as more than a means to an end."

"Did you?" \${his} eyes meet yours. Neither of you look away.

"Sucks not knowing, doesn't it?" Denial of knowledge is your only weapon here.

"I'm not going to be baited into an argument."

"Sure," you say, narrowing your eyes. "We can stare at each other in silence instead."

*if stonewalling

*goto planfailed

*else

*goto frenemies

*label frenemies

"Fine." Ortega shakes \${his} head, giving you this tiny victory. "I'm here to talk about \${name} \${surname}."

"You're awfully free giving out that name," you reply, trying not to flinch. You're supposed to be a secret, not someone you talk about with the LDPD listening.

"You told the Marshal that \${che} @sv was|were} with friends. And that \${che} @sv was|were} safer than \${che} would have been in the hospital."

"You should keep your mouth shut, people might be listening." Your voice is cold as ice, but all you get in return is a chuckle.

"No, they are not." Ortega looks too smug. "Any bugs or microphones here won't pick up anything but static."

*fake_choice

#"I can't trust that," I say flatly.

"I can't trust that," you say flatly. "You could be telling me anything."

"I am telling you the truth." Ortega gives you a convincing smile.

"You're hopeless." You grit your teeth, the name is out, nothing you can do about it but hope \${he}'s correct.

#"How?" I haven't seen that before.

"How?" You haven't seen that before. A new mod, or has Ortega learned to modulate \${his} powers to that extent?

"I'm full of surprises." Ortega gives you a cocky smile.

"Or false confidence." You glance towards the window, hoping \${he} knows what \${he}'s talking about. Your name is out there, nothing you can do about that now.

#"That doesn't matter. You need to be careful."

"That doesn't matter," you say with a frown. "You need to be careful."

"Well, talk to me and I don't need to go around saying things like this." Ortega winks at you.

"You're not exactly inspiring confidence right now." You glance towards the window, hoping \${he} knows what \${he}'s talking about. Your name is out there, nothing you can do about that.

"All I am saying is that from the sound of things we don't have to be on different sides."

*if voluntaryreveal

That's rich coming from \${him}. You know you confessed to being \${villain_name} in the car, but you can't exactly tell \${him} that to \${his} face.

*elseif notthevillain

\${he} seemed fairly convinced that you were at Parkfield for innocent reasons. \${he} might actually be serious.

*else

Is \${he} telling the truth? Does \${he} really have no idea you're \${villain_name}?

*if hghelp

You did offer to help out with Hollow Ground, that would probably be explanation enough for your presence, anything else could be up to panic in the moment.

*elseif ((wounded) or (auctioncaptured))

You were pretty beat up. That would have helped dissuade any suspicion, whatever your reason to be there was, you paid the price for it. Nothing like being a victim to get sympathy.

*else

Blind loyalty can be handy.

"You are on that side of the table," you point out. "And I am the one handcuffed to a chair."

"Play ball and that might not have to be the case for much longer."

"You can't promise that. You're not the Marshal."

"That's right. I'm willing to do the things that the Marshal won't." \${he} looks at you with a steady gaze, trying to project confidence.

*if guiltymc

*goto guiltywhy

*else

*goto offerwhy

*label offerwhy

"That could be a threat as well as a promise," you point out. "If you have something to say, say it."

"I wish I could, but you're right." The admission is reluctant, but it's there. "We can't talk about it here. If I can get you out of here, would you be willing to cooperate?"

*fake_choice

#"I certainly would be more inclined to think about it."

"I certainly would be more inclined to think about it." You avoid giving any promises, not that you'd feel bound by them, but it never pays to seem to eager. \${he}'s the one that wants something here.

#"Yes, but I can't guarantee I can give you what you need."

"Yes, but I can't guarantee I can give you what you need." You make sure to sound eager but worried. Better to avoid giving any promises, not that you'd feel bound by them. \${he}'s the one that wants something here.

#"Guess there's only one way to find out."

"Guess there's only one way to find out." You don't bother to hide your smirk. It never pays to seem to eager, \${he}'s the one that wants something here.

"Good." Ortega looks relieved, as if \${he} hadn't been sure you'd agree. "I need to pull some strings to arrange this, try to lay low in the meantime."

"It's not like there's much to do in here. Laying on my cot is pretty much my number one activity. I'll do my best to not move too much." You don't smile as \${he} rises, if there's still a visual of the scene, you don't want to look too friendly.

"Good. Just be patient. I'll be in touch." The nod is nearly imperceptible as Ortega gets up to leave, but there's no trace of levity as \${he} heads to the door. Look like you both have the same idea, tell the LDPD nothing was gained and everything can go back to normal.

For now.

*set jailoutmaybe true

*goto walkback

*label guiltywhy

Does \${he} mean it? Really? Could Ortega be your ticket out of here?

*fake_choice

#"What do you want to know?" It can't hurt to ask.

"What do you want to know?" It can't hurt to ask. It will let you know what Ortega is focused on now.

"I need to know about *chisenemies*." *AtleastOrtegadoesn'tmentionanynamethistime.* "\${che} won't talk to me. Something bad is coming and I need to know."

"Why?" You remember all too well \${his} interrogations.

"So I can protect \${him}," \${he} says, leaning forward slightly, pleading with you.

"Regardless," you start, keeping your face under control. Protect you. Like you're the victim here. You're not the sidekick anymore. "I can't talk about that where people might be listening."

"I might be able to work around that." Ortega rubs \${his} forehead, glancing towards the window. "But it might take a week or two."

#"Get me out of here first, then we'll talk."

"Get me out of here first, then we'll talk." You know better than to offer information before getting something out of it. If Ortega is serious, then \${he} can get you out of here first. "Take me into your custody or something." It would be easier to escape from one person rather than jail.

"That's more complicated than you think." Ortega rubs \${his} forehead, glancing towards the window.

"If you don't have the power to get something as simple as that done despite your bragging, you're useless to me." Keep your gaze hard, you've got leverage now.

"I didn't say it couldn't be done, only that it might take a week or two."

#"It's not safe for me to talk to you, so no."

"It's not safe for me to talk to you, so no." You're not going to risk your own body on Ortega's judgment. Not this time.

"Don't be a fool. We both want the same thing." Ortega looks surprised and annoyed at your refusal.

"I told you all you need to know." You stare \${him} down, refusing to look away. Does \${he} really think you're going to spill anything with the LDPD listening? The arrogance.

"You don't understand." \${he} looks down at \${his} hands, then back at you. There's a tension there that's not hard to spot, but you have no pity. Let \${him} try be locked up for a couple of weeks and see how \${he} likes it.

*goto exitinter

"Then we'll talk once it's done." You make no promises what you'll talk about. That's not important. Getting away from Ortega would be far easier than jail, you know how \${he} works. One overconfident \${ortega_gender}. "You'd better hope people really haven't heard what we have been talking about, you'd be in trouble then."

"Like I said, I'm confident that they didn't." \${his} smile is thin but present. "Hang tight and don't make waves. I'll see what I can do."

"It's not like I can do much else." You don't smile as \${he} rises, if there's still a visual of the scene, you don't want to look too friendly.

"I'll be in touch." The nod is nearly imperceptible as Ortega gets up to leave, but there's no trace of levity as \${he} heads to the door. Look like you both have the same idea, tell the LDPD nothing was gained and everything can go back to normal.

For now.

*set jailoutmaybe true

*goto walkback

*label planfailed

"Fine." Ortega shakes \${his} head, giving you this tiny victory."Your plan failed. That's why I'm here."

"My plan?" You can't help the question, \${he} is giving you information for free, but that doesn't help if you don't know what \${he}'s talking about.

"Your kidnapping plot." An annoyed gesture with his hand. "\${surname} is safe."

"That would imply \${che} was ever in danger." You keep your face blank as you try to add up what this might mean. Has \${he} located your body? Taken it back? Arrested your accomplices? You need to know the details.

"Oh don't give me that bullshit, \${puppet_name}." Ortega sighs, leaning back on \${his} chair looking every single one of \${his} almost four decades. "I don't [i]know[/i] who you work for, or what your reasons were, but I have my suspicions. And if you're not interested in spending the rest of your life behind bars, then you'd better talk."

"Why not talk to your precious \${surname}? I'm sure \${che}@{sv 've| has} told you everything by now." You smirk, adding salt to the wound. Would be hard to talk to a comatose body, is that why \${he}'s looking for answers? For what might have been done to \${name} to leave \${chim} like that?

*if guiltymc

*goto dontget

*else

*goto meetyes

*label meetyes

"I have." Ortega looks tired as \${he} runs a hand through \${his} hair. "With admittedly limited success."

"I'm sure." Your voice is dry, talking to someone in a coma wouldn't be very conductive.

"But \${che} is the reason I came. \${he} @{sv wants|want} to meet you."

"What?" You blink slowly, confused. You must have misheard, but Ortega looks like \${he}'s said nothing strange.

"Can you blame \${chim}? You tried to have \${chim} kidnapped." A cold smile, as if Ortega doesn't think this is wise, yet is here anyway.

*fake_choice

#"Impossible," I say, unable to stop myself.

"Impossible," you say, unable to stop yourself. Your body is in a coma without you there. This must be a trick.

"It wouldn't be here, of course. I'd have to escort you to a secure location." Ortega glances towards the window, as if $\$ \{he\}$'s more worried about being overheard than $\$ \{he\}$ claimed.

#" $\$ \{surname\}$ coming here? That sounds unlikely." Try impossible.

" $\$ \{! \{surname\}$ coming here? That sounds unlikely." Try impossible. Your body is in a coma without you there. This must be a trick.

"No," Ortega admits. " $\$ \{! \{che\} @ \{sv 's\}$ are} no friend of the police. The plan is to escort you to a secure location." Ortega glances towards the window, as if $\$ \{he\}$'s more worried about being overheard than $\$ \{he\}$ claimed.

#"I'm not falling for that one." It's impossible.

"I'm not falling for that one," you say, not bothering to hide your disdain. It's impossible, your body is in a coma. Whatever trick Ortega is trying to pull, you're not going to fall for it.

"I'm not lying." Ortega glances towards the window, as if $\$ \{he\}$'s more worried about being overheard than $\$ \{he\}$ claimed. "We have everything planned. Not here, of course. I'd have to escort you to a secure location."

"A secure location." You try to calm down, thinking clearly. Even if it is a bluff, a different location would mean a chance to escape. Better than being stuck here. "Where?"

"I can't tell you. Away from prying eyes." A soft smile as $\$ \{he\}$ leans forward. "You'll be safe with me, don't worry."

"Fine," you agree. The problem with clever plans like this is that anything can go wrong. And you plan to make sure that happens. Whatever bluff Ortega is planning doesn't matter. What does is if you can use it. "When?"

"A week or two at the most." $\$ \{! \{he\}$ does $\$ \{his\}$ best to sound convincing. "I'll try to arrange for it sooner, but there are hoops I need to jump through. In the meantime, hang tight and don't make waves."

"It's not like I can do much else." You don't smile as $\$ \{he\}$ rises, if there's still a visual of the scene, you don't want to look too friendly.

"I'll be in touch." The nod is nearly imperceptible as Ortega gets up to leave, but there's no trace of levity as $\$ \{he\}$ heads to the door. Look like you both have the same idea, tell the LDPD nothing was gained and everything can go back to normal.

For now.

*set jailoutmaybe true

*set meetingmc true

*goto walkback

*label dontget

"Damn it, don't you get it?" Leaning forward now, less threat, more to convey eagerness and honesty. Ortega really needs some new material, you know $\$ \{him\}$ too well to be fooled. "I'm here to give you a chance. Talk to me. Help yourself."

*fake_choice

#"Help you, you mean." I stay cold.

"Help you, you mean." You keep your voice cold, focusing on reading $\$ \{him\}$.

"They don't have to be mutually exclusive." Ortega does $\$ \{his\}$ best to sound reasonable.

*if puppetortega_relationship = "on shaky ground"

*if ortega_flirting_puppet

"We cared about each other once."

*else

"We were friends."

"Somehow I doubt that is still the case." You feel your face twitch, but ignores it.

"Yeah," \${he} admits. "Kidnapping a friend is a hard thing to overlook. Even for me."

#"No." I smirk. I have the power here.

"No." The single word feels so good in your mouth. You have the power here when it comes to this. Not \${him}.

"Really? Is that all you can say?" Ortega doesn't look surprised. More tired. Disappointed.

"I'd like to think I've been consistent so far. Don't see why it should change now."

"Fine." \${he} sighs, running a hand over \${his} hair. "Have it your way."

*if puppetortega_relationship = "on shaky ground"

"Not going to tempt me over to the side of good?" You can't help it, rubbing it in. "Make some pretty eyes at me and watch me make a fool of myself again?"

"You'd really think that would work?" There's an honesty to the question that speaks of hope as much as foolishness.

"No." Your voice is dry. "Not after spending six weeks in this place."

"Yeah." Is that a look of guilt on \${his} face at last? "Are they treating you alright?"

"Nothing's especially bad has happened yet, if that's what you're getting at. I hear they save that until prison. When there's less oversight." You speak the last words as if they had been laced with poison.

"I..." That made \${him} react. Viscerally.

"You're a Ranger." You bare your teeth, daring \${him} to protest. "You know these things. You work with the cops. Don't tell me you're as stupid as you like to act."

"This was a mistake." \${he} looks towards the door.

*if guiltymc

*goto exitinter

*else

*goto offermeet

*label exitinter

"Send the Marshal next time. At least he has the good graces to not pretend he's there on anything but business." Since you can't walk away, the only thing you can do is to make sure \${he} does.

"I'll be back," \${he} threatens. "And at that point you've better have figured out what to say. There's more than one way to get the truth out of someone."

*fake_choice

#"I'm already shaking in my boots," I taunt.

"I'm already shaking in my boots," you taunt, keeping the smirk fixed on your face.

#"Torture, drugs... or do you have a stashed telepath?"

"Torture, drugs... or do you have a stashed telepath?" The last is an open challenge, rubbing salt in an open wound to see if \${he} flinches.

#"Get used to disappointment." I hold steady.

"Get used to disappointment." You would have crossed your arms if they weren't manacled.

"I'll tell the guards to treat you better." Ortega gets up from the chair, looking down at you. "Believe it or not, I'd rather we were having this discussion elsewhere. But you seem dead set on being uncooperative."

"What can I say, the manacles makes it hard to be anything but." You jingle the chains. "You could try releasing me and having a polite chat and a drink."

Ortega doesn't even deign that with an answer, \${he} just walks out the door, leaving you for the guards to return.

*goto walkback

*label walkback

*page_break Business As Usual.

*if meetingmc

You wish you could shake the unease that descended on you the moment Ortega mentioned \${name} wanting to meet you. It's a bluff, of course, but why are your palms itching? Your throat drying up? The chains are heavy around your wrists, clinking as you walk. This is bad. You just wish you knew why.

*if jailoutmaybe

You should be happy about getting an opportunity like this. Being moved somewhere. Outside the walls. Under supervision, sure, but so many more options. All you need is a single one, you know how to make the most of the chances you are given.

Chance. You twitch at that, enough that the guards pause and tighten their grip, as if they expect you to stumble.

*else

It shouldn't make any difference whether Ortega or Chen tries and fails to interrogate you, but in the pit of your stomach you feel that something has changed. The winds have shifted and there's a storm approaching on the horizon. Danger or opportunity? Both? Roll the dice and pray for sevens.

Dice. You clench your hands as if you can feel them there, the guards tightening their grip as if they expect you to resist.

No. Not yet. You let out a breath and try to force yourself to relax, you need to. You need to be ready.

[i]In a moment, you will look left.[/i]

*if precognition >= 30

Familiar. You hold your breath.

*else

What is this? Deja vu?

You feel a wave of nausea, of vertigo, and for a moment you think this might be it. Are you getting pulled back to your body? Was the shock of seeing Ortega all it took? Your breathing quickens, cold sweat breaking out, and the guards have to support your weight.

Their voices comes from so far away. Deep under water, ripples in the sky. Breathe. They shake you, and you feel like jelly, your self rippling in your body but remaining stuck.

To the left, a door opens, revealing a small break room behind it. More guards alerted by the others, ready for what trouble you will bring.

[i]In a moment, you will look left.[/i]

*if precognition >= 50

[i]You shouldn't. Don't. No.[/i]

You turn to look, catching a glimpse of a small television screen bleeding color and noise. The air is thick but you see what's on the screen with crystal clarity. News. Footage. No sound.

*if suit_cape

A sweep of a cape.

A familiar silhouette. A fight? Yes, \${villain_name}

*if suit_strength

lands a kick,

*else

sidesteps a blow,

sending one of the LDPD's powered goons flying into a parked car. The camera shakes, then holds steady. [i]You don't remember this.[/i] You don't remember this.

You don't [b]remember[/b] this.

"Stop making trouble." One of the guards yanks you to your feet hard enough that the pain tears you back into the here and now.

"Think $\{phe\}$ might throw up." Another guard, but you look past him at the screen as it switches to the weather.

This was news. Current.

*fake_choice

#This can't be real.

This can't be real. Whatever that was on the television must have some other explanation. You try to tear yourself free to look again, but the door is mostly shut, and the third guard is helping wrangling you to your feet to get you back to your cell.

YOu feel numb. In shock. You don't resist their unkind hands as they drag you back to where you belong.

#"Wait, what was that on the news right now? Tell me!"

"Wait, what was that on the news right now? Tell me!" You shout your demand at the guard who just exited, but he doesn't even look at you.

"Shut up," barks one of the guards, giving you a push.

"No, tell me!" You try to put your will behind the command, but this body has no telepathic powers, and all you get in return is a laugh and a fist in your stomach hard enough to make you gasp for breath.

You don't fight as they drag you back towards your cell.

#This is too much. I snap and attack them.

It's stupid, you know that, but your body isn't listening. Panic. Confusion. Anger. Too much emotion for one skin, and you throw yourself hard enough against one of the guards that he lets you go. Gives you an opening you repay with an elbow in the gut.

*if precognition >= 40

He gasps for breath.

[i]Hands from behind.[/i]

You throw yourself forward, the hands reaching for you barely missing. There's no way to run with these chains, and you don't have the reach for proper blows. But you do have your body, and tackles the guard in front of you to the ground.

[i]A boot being lifted for a kick.[/i]

Instead of pressing your advantage you roll to the side, using your chained legs to sweep the leg of the guard behind you that was about to kick you. He falls, hard, and you hear a crack as his head hits the floor.

[i]Left. Danger.[/i]

You roll right, avoiding the fallen guard reaching for you. You need to get to your feet fast, but with your hands and feet chained like this that is easier said than done. It's only a matter of time before they restrain you, you know that with bone-deep surety. All you can do is to make them pay, giving as good as you get.

By the time they finally have you under control, they are bruised and bloodied and you are grinning.

*elseif puppet_skill = "aikido"

You don't have the reach for blows with your chains, but you're good at working with what you have. Leverage. A knowledge of which parts of the human body hurts the most.

Steel-toed boots doesn't leave anything open, but folding a leg behind one of theirs lets you push one of the guards to the ground. Enough reach to slam the chains into his face, blood, broken nose and lips. He screams, it feels good, and then hands behind you drag you back.

*elseif puppet_skill = "boxing"

The chains restrict your arms, but you don't need much reach for a jab, a body blow with both your hands. The guard leans forward, gasping for breath and you slam your forehead into his.

You both see stars, but you were ready for it, and his nose is broken as he stumbles back. Good. You want to hurt him. You need to hurt someone to get this helpless frustration out of your system, but rough hands drag you back before you can press your advantage.

*else

You're not a fighter, but you know what hurts. Rough arms grab you from behind, so you let them hold you as you pull your legs up, kicking like an angry horse.

Your feet connect, pushing back the first guard hard enough to make him stumble. Fighting for breath, and if you could you would have kicked him in the groin, but you're held back, all your flailing amounting to nothing.

What ensues is not pretty. Nor kind. Still, the pain is preferable to the complicated terrors that shot of \${villain_name} awoke in you. Drown the fear in adrenaline and the anxiety in bruises, you can deal with being beaten up. They're not going to kill you. Nor hurt you enough that the Rangers will have cause for complaints. Most of the bruises will be hidden under your clothes.

*set puppet_status "bruised"

*fake_choice

#I play up the pain to make them stop.

To hell with dignity, right now you want to keep yourself as intact as you can. Even if that means playing up the pain while trying to make sure their kicks and blows doesn't hurt anything vital. They want to hurt you, and giving them proof of that will make them tire faster.

Not the first time you have put on a show like this. You know better than trying to appeal to their humanity, make them feel sorry for you. They won't. That's not the kind of people that work here.

#I know how to roll with the punches.

You know how to roll with the punches. Make it seem that the blows connects harder than they do. The chains are a hindrance, but luckily they try to avoid your face. Body blows are easier to mask, both for you and for them.

Not the first time you have put on a show like this. Make people feel they have the upper hand, offer them openings where you can control the result. These are brutes, not fighters.

#I fight until the end.

It is stupid to keep resisting, to try to get a final kick or headbutt in. But you keep trying. Keep cursing them. Someone puts a hand over your mouth and you bite down hard. Taste of blood. A scream. That gets you a proper blow that sends you to the floor, head ringing.

No explaining away the black eye you can already feel starting to swell. No stopping the half laugh, half cough that has you spitting blood over the floor. Yours and his.

*set puppet_wound "has a black eye"

In the end, it doesn't matter. You get dragged back to your cell all the same, giddy with pain and adrenaline.

#This is too much. I throw up.

You can't help it, the implications land in your gut, making it turn itself inside out. Your panic splatters the floor, and the guard's boots.

They don't approve of that, but their curses as they drag you back towards the cell feels distant. Numb. You remember breathing and things clear, though your anxiety does not.

Rough hands removes your chains, and then the cell door locks behind you.

Alone.

*if puppet_status = "bruised"

You wipe your lips. Try to swallow the taste of blood. Sore. Hurting. No serious injuries. Your rubs smart, but you don't think they're cracked. You can breathe alright, so you do that as you wait for the adrenaline to fade so you can think.

*else

You breathe. Count to five. Ten. Twenty. Think.

The television footage you saw must have been on the news. It adds up with the two o'clock slot. No sign that it was a retrospective of a battle you would somehow have forgotten. No reason to put that on the afternoon news. And there is no way you could confuse your armor with someone else. That was \${villain_name}, not a copycat.

Breathe.

*if puppet_status = "bruised"

Focus on the pain in your side.

*if rangersarmor

As far as you know, the Rangers have your armor. You doubt that anybody has stolen it from them, which means that this might be a trick. Some way of influencing you to talk. React. It could be anyone in there.

*if animatedarmor

Wait...

*if animatedarmor

You have seen your armor move before. When it saved you. Controlled by the Rat King. Could that be it? It makes sense, the clip was too short for you to analyze movement. But why? Could the Rat King be out looking for you? They are telepathic, of course they would realize if your head was empty. They've seen you shift back and forth between yourself and the puppet enough times?

Could the Rat King be that smart? The girls might be rats, but their brains have been joined together before they even remembered having bodies. How much have they learned?

*elseif boss

Could it be one of your crew in there? You don't think so, they're not exactly telepathically sensitive. The baseline functions should still be available, sure, but enough to fight like that? Of course you didn't see the end of the fight, just one clip, little enough that it might have been anybody in there.

*else

Could it be \${hench_name} in there? You don't think so, \${hhe}'s not exactly telepathically sensitive. The baseline functions should still be available, sure, but enough to fight like that? Of course you didn't see the end of the fight, just one clip, little enough that it might have been anybody in there.

Why though? An attempt to make sure that everyone knows that \${villain_name} is still active? Keeping up your reputation? Getting cash to pay for your body's treatments?

Or maybe you're wrong. Maybe someone did steal it. Your armor. Your identity. You wouldn't be the first villain who fell victim to that, even if your circumstances are stranger than just having been arrested.

You don't know. You can't know. And you can't [b]do[/b] anything about it.

Nothing. You're helpless.

*page_break Trapped.

That night you wake up sweaty from unremembered nightmares, wandering unfamiliar labyrinths trying to find what you've lost. But you didn't remember what it was, too busy with trying to put back the bodyparts that kept felling off. You had to check your teeth when you woke up.

Still there.

Past slides into present like dreams into wakefulness.

*if precognition < 30

You feel like you woke up on the verge of understanding something significant. Still your hands are unsteady, the shiver remaining. Touched. By something.

*set precognition 30

*elseif precognition >= 50

It's coming. Your opportunity. Breathing down your neck, close enough to almost be smelled.

*else

Something. Something on the tip of your tongue. You can almost taste it.

Disinfectant. [i]A flash of a doctor's office, no, of the corridor leading to it.[/i] Taste it. Smell it. Clean. Linoleum floor. [i]A hint of daylight through reinforced windows, the bars lining the floor like stripes.[/i] What?

You shake your head, looking at your own floor. Dark. Polished concrete. You could see the other floor so clearly. Focus.

[i]Shadows. Yours. A guard. A third shadow outside the window. And then the wall is gone and the noonday sun floods inwards as the screams begin.[/i]

You can see it clearly. More clearly than the dream. You know that corridor. It leads to the doctor's office, though it's really just a nurse that's on call. You were taken there for a checkup once, to tick off some box on a form to show that you were treated well.

[i]Your shadow on the floor, no bars now, just an encroaching darkness.[/i]

*fake_choice

#That's where I need to be, I know it.

You've had glimpses of what might be the future before. Hints of things that might come to pass. Nothing is written in stone, but this felt like an opportunity. You need to be there to take advantage of it.

#A chance to escape? It must be.

This is how you get out of here, you know it. You've had flashes like this before, and you've learned to trust them. This will be your chance to escape, you know it. That corridor. You need to be there.

*selectable_if (precognition = 30) #What is happening to me?

What is happening to you? This feels new and portentous in a way that reminds you of how you felt when your telepathy first started leaking through. Knowledge first, then understanding. You need to trust this. Trust your reactions. This might be a chance to escape, but you need to be there to make it happen.

You can feel it in the pit of your stomach. A premonition. Tomorrow is the day. You need to [b]be[/b] there.

*if puppet_status = "bruised"

It won't be hard to fake needing to visit the nurse. Not after the beating the guards gave you.

*else

You need to fake a reason to visit the nurse. Stomach pains would be the easiest, perhaps spitting some blood. Nobody wants to deal with a sick prisoner if it can be avoided.

The Rangers still visit you. Need you. You doubt the guards wants to take the chance to annoy them, no power trip is worth that hassle.

It could work. No, and you know this in the deep pit of your stomach, it [i]will[/i] work.

It's surprisingly easy to go back to sleep.

*page_break The Morning Is Inevitable.

The next day starts early as always, and you prepare for what is to come by pretending to be sick. Looking weak and nauseous is not hard, a bit of moisture on your brow gives you that look of cold sweat. Picking through your breakfast you leave most of it uneaten, keeping up appearances in front of the camera.

*if puppet_status = "bruised"

By now your bruises have grown, and you make a note to pull up your shirt to look at the remnants of the body blows you received.

Touching your stomach as if you're in pain.

It's weird, this tingling anticipation. Like a slow-motion fight, where predicting the next blow doesn't happen within the fraction of a second, but over the course of minutes and hours. You're starting to get a feel for it, how to listen to that inner voice when it's time to do something.

Put yourself on the knees in front of the toilet, pretending to throw up right as the guards arrive, forewarned by the knowledge that this is the right moment.

*fake_choice

#"I really need to see the nurse," I beg weakly.

You know that while you are in \${puppet_name}'s body, you're charming. Attractive. Convincing. What' you're going for is different from your normal manipulative methods of confidence and flattering attention. Can you look pathetic enough to make a hardened LDPD guard react?

"I really need to see the nurse," you mumble, sitting on your cot, holding your stomach.

*if \${puppet_gender} = "woman"

"Please, something is wrong." You give the guards a dose of your most soulful and desperate eyes, keeping them wide enough that the exposure makes them tear up. A little bit if shine, a shiver of your lower lip. "It hurts."

*else

"Something's wrong. Not kidding there." You do your best to walk the line between looking weak enough that they'd take you seriously, but not pathetic enough that they'd only feel contempt. You'd been in control so far, at least as much as you've been able to under these circumstances, but now? That look of fear in your eyes, the shiver of pain as you bite your lower lip? That could only be real.

#No need to pretend throwing up, I can do that on command.

It's not hard to vomit if you try to, it's been a useful skill to have if you suspect you've been poisoned. Or when you want to get out the pills before they take effect. You can even do it quietly, but this time you are going for loud and gross. Predictably the footsteps outside the cell slows, and you can hear sympathetic grunts of disgust. Humans are pack animals, if one of the pack is sick, chances are the rest might have eaten something bad too. As contagious as a yawn, but twice as gross.

"I don't feel so good," you mumble as you turn to look at them, leaning on the toilet without flushing. Something dribbles down your chin and you're sure it's not saliva.

#I bite my cheek to dribble some blood down my chin.

As you push down the handle to flush and hide the lack of evidence, you let saliva and blood dribble down your chin. Your cheek hurts from the bite, but it's for a good cause.

The look on their face as you turn towards them is priceless. Disgust. Worry. "I don't feel good," you mumble, wiping your chin, which only smears the blood further. You keep leaning on the toilet as if that's the only thing holding you upright.

"Shit," one of the guards mutters.

*if puppet_status = "bruised"

"I told you they went to far."

"What's the problem," the shorter guard says, voice raised as she approaches the cell. "Speak up."

"My stomach," you answer, doing your best to make your voice tight with pain, nearly hyperventilating. "It's getting worse."

"You make a mess in there, you clean it up," she retorts, unsympathetic. Not so the first guard.

"Let's get \${phim} to the nurse. You know the Rangers are interested in \${phim}. I'd rather not be chewed out for doing nothing." Better to dump the problem on the medical staff. You can see the other guard nodding thoughtfully as you bite back a whimper and let some saliva dribble out in long, disgusting threads.

"Assume the position," she barks, suddenly impatient.

"I'll try." You pull yourself to your feet, knees wobbly. A few unsteady steps later and they can put the chains on you like always. That should be a problem, but you know it's not.

[i]Your wrists burn, the air smelling like formic acid.[/i]

"Come on, try to keep things down." The first guard helps you out of the cell, making sure to stay to the side and behind. Hardly touching, as if they fear you're contagious. Which you might as well be.

*fake_choice

#Am I a fool for thinking this can work?

You can't help feeling unsure, even with the looming weight of visions bearing down on you. What if you're just having a psychotic break?

You can't really be seeing the future, can you?

#I need to focus, what do I need to do next?

You let your eyes drift close as the visions hover behind your eyelids. No defining moment, no break in the flow. Just the endless ticking of time, drops of water on an umbrella.

Is something trying to connect?

#I'm calm, like deep water. Things are in motion at last.

You pretend weakness and anxiety while your mind is calm like deep water. Only the surface moves, everything down here is clear and dark, heavy with purpose on your chest.

The world is moving towards you as you are standing still.

\$(puppet_name) is a boost. You're certain now.

*if ace

You've suspected since you saw the video Dr. Mortum showed you. But now you're starting to wonder if it really can be precognition? Not probability manipulation, or luck, or something similar. Precognition. Know what will happen before it does.

*else

It would explain everything. The coma. Could that have been when the boost kicked in? If your puppet has some form of precognition, did it come in all at once? Strongly enough to wipe \$(phis) mind with too many possibilities?

A dangerous power. Are you seeing the truth or options? You sure are not seeing context. Not can you summon it on command. And yet...

[i]A flash of the corridor leading to the nurse's office. A hint of disinfectant cutting through the smell of your own unwashed body.[/i]

Not there yet. Still on concrete floors. The ticking of bars sliding open as you pass through the doors. Wait until the ones behind you close before the ones in front of you opens.

Your heart pick up speed, and you don't bother to hide your shallow, nervous breaths. Something strains inside you, spoon failing to scoop out the inside of an egg.

[i]A hint of daylight through reinforced windows, the bars lining the floor like stripes.[/i]

Up ahead. A hint of daylight shines through the reinforced windows, the bars forming a striped pattern on the floor. You don't have to fake the nausea now, the future approaching the present like an avalanche.

"I need to throw up," you mumble, only half a lie as you step into the future, matches steps unto your shadow become yours, and you fall to your knees in the corridor.

Nobody catches you, the guards taking a step back to avoid any splatter. Nothing to worry about for them, you can't run anywhere in these chains. And even if you did, there's no way out. For long.

*fake_choice

*selectable_if (precognition >= 50) #Everything is clear as crystal, I [i]know[/i] what do do.

Everything turns clear as crystal, the world slowing down around you as things click into place. A shadow outside the window, you see it on the floor and roll up against the wall. Right where you need to be.

[i]A smell of formic acid, burning wrists.[/i]

You ignore the terrifying implications and press your manacles against the wall as the guards stand strangely immobile, as if they can't quite understand what's going on. The blank stare of people listening to someone else's voice.

#A shadow outside, that comes next, right? Right?

You think you remember the dream, a looming shadow outside, crossed by the bars on the floor. Being seen would be bad, so you roll to the side, pressing yourself against the wall.

The guards do not move to stop you, instead they stand strangely immobile, looking blankly at the floor. Listening to someone else's voice.

#The wall is going to fail, I hide against it.

The wall is going to fail. You know it by the ache in your gut, pretension turning real as you try to stay in the moment. You throw yourself to the floor and roll against the wall just in time to see a looming shadow on the floor, still trapped by shadow bars. Not for long.

It's strange how the guards do nothing to stop you, they stare blankly into place, as if they are listening to someone else's voice.

#No. No. [b]No[/b]. This can't be right...

The dread descends like nightmares. You suddenly [i]know[/i] what is happening. [i]Who[/i] is approaching. And you can't. You can't. You can't. So you do what you can, you throw yourself to the floor and roll to the wall. Out of sight from the window just as the shadow appears, still outside. Not for long.

The guards ignore you as you knew they would, staring straight ahead like unseeing statue. Listening to a voice you can't hear.

There is a thump as something heavy hits the wall, though you know the loudness is only in your mind. Layers of concrete, reinforced against explosions, ramming cars and exo-armors. Not high-security, but secure enough for most purposes.

Not this one.

The smell hits you first, the formic acid of memories, nobody would notice if they didn't know what it meant.

*page_break Nanovores.

Time slows. The moment holds. The guards stand immobile. The wall is there, but you know that in a moment it won't be.

Concrete. Insulation. Rebar. Rebar? Yes!

You hold your shackles and chains tight against the wall, praying that the nanovores won't care about the difference between rebar and steel, that they have been commanded to make a hole. You know the importance of control, how hungry they get, half-starved on their inorganic diet. It would take the finest of touches to pull them back immediately, and you hope that's not the case here.

It can't be. It won't be.

Daylight floods the corridor as the wall disappears, the smell strong now, scouring your nostrils, the sting around your wrists gentle nettle-marks as the manacles fall away, chains partly devoured together with part of your prison jumpsuit.

[i]In a moment, the shadow will shift and a hand will reach down for you.[/i]

But that is one moment from now, so you still have time to act. Avoiding the hand won't be hard, but what next?

*comment no daring, puppet_skill or similar added yet. Will be in the demo. So you won't know how to solve this yet. Also, no IP variations yet. Don't forget to add "ratfail"

*fake_choice

#I scramble back and get to my feet, ready to run.

The shadow shifts, and right on cue you roll away, avoiding the armored fist as it reaches for you. Reaching. Not a blow, that is good. Your breath quickens as you scramble back, getting enough distance to get to your feet and take in what stands before you.

*gosub villaindescription

Should you run? The hole in the wall is a beacon of hope and freedom, but

*if precognition >= 50

—

[i]— the arm slamming into you smacks the air from your chest, sending you spiraling to the floor.[/i]

A bad future. You can't let that become your present.

*elseif tactician

you know better than to go for it. Predictable.

*else

the moment that thought hits you feel nauseous. You've seen a hole like this beckon before, a window, a way out.

You won't fall for it this time.

Instead, you retreat, keeping the frozen guards between you and \${villain_name}, looking for the opening you know will come.

#I scream loudly, trying to attract attention.

The shadow shifts, and right on cue you roll away, avoiding the armored fist as it reaches for you. Reaching. Not a blow, that is good. Your breath quickens as you crawl back, looking up at what stands before you.

*gosub villaindescription

A moment. Not more than that. Then your paralysis breaks and you scream. Loudly, as desperately as you can. You're in a building filled with LDPD officers, there are cameras everywhere. And if they are out, screams carry. Someone will investigate, all you need to do is keep away until then. You hope.

In the meantime, all you can do is to scramble to your feet, keeping the frozen guards between you and \${villain_name}. Hoping help will come.

#I hit one of the guards, trying to snap him out of his daze.

The shadow shifts, and right on cue you roll away, avoiding the armored fist as it reaches for you. Reaching. Not a blow, that is good. Your breath quickens as you scramble back, looking up at what stands before you.

*gosub villaindescription

This is bad. You force yourself to break the moment, using one of the guards to get to your feet. If you could rouse them you'd at least have a distraction so you slap him hard, with all your force. No reaction.

\${swear}. You don't get the feel that this is a friendly rescue, whatever is in there feels hostile. A threat.

*if suit_speed

You know how quick the \${villain_name} armor is, the constraints of the corridor will hamper it somewhat, but the moment you escape to the streets that advantage will be gone.

*elseif suit_strength

You know how strong the \${villain_name} is, if you're caught there will be no escape. A mistimed blow could kill you, assuming that isn't already the goal. You have no room for mistakes.

*else

You know how reinforced the \${villain_name} is, there's nothing here that could even scratch the paint. Your only chance is avoiding it for as long as you can.

You need to get out of here, but how?

The moment you think that thought, that's when the guards begin to move. Turning towards you, eyes still blank, hands outstretched. Controlled.

Of course. Not like your day could get any worse.

"Afraid to put your hands on me?" you say, bravado in the face of certain doom as you desperately try to come up with a plan.

*fake_choice

#I will trust my precognition to get me out of this.

*goto precog

#Your powers are too unreliable, I need to solve this on my own.

*goto noprecog

*label precog

So far, your precognition has been handy, but can you trust it to work when you want it to?

*if motivation_fate

You feel your mouth twisting into a smile. Of course you can. This is not your end, you might not know the details, but of that you are sure. All you need to do is stop worrying and trust your instincts. You don't control fate, fate controls you.

*set precognition %+ 10

*if arrogance <= 30

You can't force the future to bend to your will, that's for sure. Some humility is needed here. Being open to possibilities you might not have planned for.

*set precognition %+ 10

*if precognition >= 50

It's like the early days with your telepathy. Don't push it. Let it come to you.

*else

The nervous weight in your stomach doesn't shift, so you swallow it and try to focus.

At least you don't need any help avoiding the approaching guards. They are slow and clumsy, more walking dead than the fine instruments you wield.

*if suit_telepathy

Is whoever is in the suit using the telepathic enhancers to boost what meager powers they might have? Must be.

*else

That they can do it at all is worrying. They must have some form of telepathic powers.

*if precognition >= 60

[i]A hiss of compressed air, the armor opening, a growl of frustration as you run.[/i]

You blink, back in the present, backtracking the path needed for that future. Time. You need time to get a headstart. The forced opening/closing cycle is not instant. It takes precious seconds to complete.

And it can be accessed from the outside.

It was a security measure installed in case you needed to free your unconscious body as your puppet. Gritting your teeth you barely dodge \${villain_name}'s arm by stepping in, instead of retreating. Down and left, under the side, the spot you need is exposed for a moment as the arm is outstretched.

There! You push the access hatch hard enough that you nearly stub your finger. It opens, so you immediately press down the release switch as hard as you can.

*goto opensesame

*else

You growl in frustration as one of the guards nearly grab you. Whatever future you're looking for is not there, out of reach, as impossible to read clearly as Ortega's thoughts in one of your endless training matches. The better you got at telepathy the harder \${he} became to beat, the more you relied on augmented reflexes the more infuriating \${his} wins. The tide turned back once you learned \${his} tricks, but there's no time for that here.

You need to leave. Now.

*goto badrun

*label noprecog

So far your precognition has been handy, but you can't trust it to come when you need it to.

*if precognition < 40

Too unreliable, there's been no pattern in what it has shown you so far.

*else

If you get another feeling, good for you, but you need to act now.

If there's anything you've learned over the years is that you make your own luck.

*if tech_savvy

Why did \${villain_name} send the guards to get you? They're slow, stumbling, they're not hard to avoid. Why not grab you right away?

Why would they be wary? Do they suspect you know more about the armor than they do? It would make sense, \${puppet_name} was the one who dealt with Dr. Mortum, and the plans to make it.

Huh. Maybe they are right to be worried.

While the armor itself is impervious to your bare hands or the guards' sidearms, there is a hidden emergency release. You put it in to be able to open it from the outside, if you ever were badly wounded, your puppet would need access.

Could you get to it safely? Or, at least, while avoiding being grabbed?

No time to think about it, you dodge under the arm of one of the guards, they are slow and clumsy, not the fine instruments you wield.

*if suit_telepathy

Is whoever is in the suit using the telepathic enhancers to boost what meager powers they might have? Must be.

*else

That they can do it at all is worrying. They must have some form of telepathic powers.

[i]The hand will reach for you—now![/i]

You dodge the grasp by stepping in, instead of retreating. Down and left, under the side, the spot you need is exposed for a moment as the arm is outstretched.

There! You push the access hatch hard enough that you nearly stub your finger. It opens, so you immediately press down the release switch as hard as you can.

*goto opensesame

*else

Why did \${villain_name} send the guards to get you? They're slow, stumbling, they're not hard to avoid. Why not grab you right away? Don't they have full control of the armor? Are they worried about hurting you? Good. That means they want you alive.

That also means you have a moment or two to plan. The sidearms the guards carry won't be any use against that armor, but they carry something else that might.

Communicators.

Dodging clumsy hands, you grab the communicator. No use calling a general alarm, if the people here were capable of helping they would already be on the way. No, you punch in a code you shouldn't know, thank Mayor Alvarez for the new integrated systems, and speak loudly as you back away.

"Code Orange at the LDPD holding facility. Walls breached, exo-armor intrusion. Urgent assistance needed." You fake a cry of pain and throw the communicator against the wall before anybody can ask any questions. It breaks with a hiss.

Good. Now it's just a matter of time.

*goto backup

*label villaindescription

*if suit_terrifying

What. Not who.

The

*if suit_cape

cape billows behind it, as the

creature steps into the corridor. Heavy footsteps, metal on concrete giving the impression of claws sharp enough to tear you open though you know that's just your imagination. Even though you intellectually know exactly who this is, your body reacts with the instincts of a cornered animal in the presence of a predator. A nightmare.

Infrasound. Vocal distorters. The audioscape is as nauseating as the visuals.

\${villain_name} stands before you in all its terrifying glory, and all you want to do is run.

*return

*elseif suit_imposing

No. Not what. Who.

The

*if suit_cape

cape billows like a flag of war as the

armored warrior steps into the corridor. Heavy footsteps, loud enough in this enclosed space that you almost expect the concrete to crack. It's an illusion, you know that. The armor is not that heavy. You've just never been on this end before, cowering like a weak, fleshy thing before the approaching conqueror.

\${villain_name} stands before you at last, and all you want to do is run.

*return

*elseif suit_mysterious

It takes a moment for you to grasp fully, the

*if suit_cape

cape billows as the

cloud of smoke obscures the outlines. The mirrored helmet reflects the surroundings, concrete and smoke, and you're not sure of the outline of the armor.

You reflexively hold your breath before the fact that the guards remain upright makes you realize the smoke is just for show. Of course.

`\${villain_name}` wouldn't step into the dragon's lair without always liked making a show of things. However, the smoke works both ways, and you freeze as if the mist can hide you too.

*return

*else

No. Not what. Who.

The

*if suit_cape

cape billows as the

armored intruder steps into the corridor, a nonchalant glance to get an overview of the situation. No grandiose gestures, just minute movements giving clues to who is really in control here for the people who know how to look. You do. You know better than to fall for the understated impression the intruder cultivates like armor.

`\${villain_name}` is nobody's fool, and when the head turns to look at you, you find yourself freezing like a deer in the headlights.

*return

*label backup

"Hear that?" you say to `\${villain_name}`, doing your best to sound more confident than you feel. "You're running out of time."

Whoever gets sent, they at least will be able to delay and distract. The bigger issue will be to try to keep away until they do, already your words have made `\${villain_name}` straighten up and take notice.

`\${swear}` Maybe taunting wasn't the right choice.

*if suit_speed

You know that stance, the faint hum of `\${villain_name}`'s armor gearing up to *[i]MOVE—[i]*

*else

`\${villain_name}` take a decisive step forward, you need to *[i]MOVE—[i]*

You throw yourself to the side just in time as a man-shaped blur impacts `\${villain_name}` hard enough to

*if suit_armor

nearly topple them before ricocheting into the wall.

*else

slam them into the opposite wall.

The air fills with smashed concrete, the dust obscuring the scene briefly before you can make out what just happened.

"Gettosafetynow!" The words run together enough to be a continuous blur, and they're not aimed at you. At the guards, who shake their heads in confusion, free from control at last. The impact must have rattled `\${villain_name}`.

You doubt Zephyr can do much else.

The Guardians

*if blazedead

new leader and

resident speedster is quick on the scene, you'll give them that. But going up against \${villain_name} on their own? Not a chance.

*fake_choice

*selectable_if (suit_speed) #Though their speed removes one of my best weapons.

You hate to admit it, but Zephyr's speed does remove one of your armor's great advantages. \${villain_name} is fast, but Zephyr is faster.

Not that it matters, all you need for them is to focus on each other so you can get away.

#I don't need them to win. A distraction is enough.

You don't need Zephyr to win, and you have no expectations they will. They're here to buy time into the rest of the team arrives, and by then you'll be gone.

#Never thought I'd be happy to to see one of the Guardians.

You never thought you'd be happy to see one of the Guardians, but right now you are. This means you'll have a chance to escape, whatever Zephyr's faults might be, they are too fast to dare take your eyes off.

"So quiet \${villain_name}," Zephyr keeps talking as you move, the two of them are facing each other, hero and villain. Nice shot if you would have had a camera. "And they say you're so chatty."

You're half tempted to shout that's because it's not you in there, but you keep your mouth shut and make a run for it. \${villain_name} aims a threatening gesture in your direction, you can nearly feel the frustration when you don't react and keep running. As if you'd be intimidated by that. Zephyr's earlier move have led to the hole in the wall being accessible, and this time you don't hesitate as you leap through it.

You can only hope you'll manage to get far enough away in time.

*comment continue here, variants, add dialogue to some. Puppet_skill additions.

*label opensesame

The hiss of compressed air is as familiar as your own breath, and you can hear a muttered curse, chopped to syllables by the vocal distorters as the armor begins its opening cycle.

You wish you could stay and see, be face to face with this thief and impostor, and possibly sock them one. But you only have a few seconds, and you intend to make the most of it.

\${villain_name} stumbles to the side as the armor begins to partially open, shielding the chest and face from the cameras. Just the opportunity you need.

You leap through the now undefended hole in the wall, running as fast as you can. You won't have long, you have to make the most of it.

*comment continue here, temptation to watch? Too divergent?

*label badrun

*comment collected headline for all fuckups. Write later.

[May questions answered!](#)

[Jun 9, 2024](#)

I remembered this time...

Since Ortega apparently races and thinks that Sidestep used to steal fancy cars, has he ever thought about inviting sidestep to watch him race?

I think Ortega probably has done that in the past, yeah. Maybe Sidestep has even ridden shotgun.

Are you okay/comfortable with people getting tattoos themed off FHR?

Absolutely.

At the end of Rebirth Chen and Ortega can have a conversation if Ortega thinks the villain has a point; where Chen tries to shut down that line of thinking. If in Retri Chen also starts to think the villain has a point do they rehash this conversation?

I think there is a lot of talking going on behind the scenes, yes. Not as much as they should talk, and certainly not about emotional things, but the villain? Yeah.

Or would Chen consider this topic too dangerous to discuss with Ortega because he's had concerns about Ortega's potential to turn villain in the past or because Ortega might do something reckless/dangerous/stupid if they feel this idea was validated?

No, I think Chen would share.

Provided Hollow Ground sees Sidestep in a positive light/as their sibling and Ortega cares for Step, would they be willing to team up to save Sidestep? (from Farm or some other deadly situation). Or is their mutual hatred too big to ever cooperate?

Ortega is absolutely ready to ally with the devil himself to further their own goals. So yes.

Qulf HG touched Sidestep and said "Your pain gate works" would Sidestep's pain threshold go back to how it used to be?

Yeah, pretty much. Sidestep would know their paingate works, and thus not feel as much pain when it would have crossed it.

Why doesn't taking the name Sidestep increase SD clue? Especially if they're a known telepath?

It's not uncommon that villains take the name of older heroes or villains. There is a finite pool of cool names. And, Regina things that Sidestep would never be THAT stupid or obvious.

Does HG know not to try threading Shroud?

HG knows rumors about Shroud since she's been working for Lord Ember for a while. They would not chance it.

Why were Ortega and Anathema ignoring the tension between Sidestep and Chen? Is Ortega still ignoring it? Are Herald and Argent aware of it?

It's the kind of thing that is hard to bring up, even if you notice it. Think to your own work, class or friend group? Would you corner anyone who you thought might dislike another friend but didn't act on it openly? That's not something most people do.

Does 'shaken' make Chen afraid of Sidestep? It's one thing to assume they're always using telepathy on you, it's another to have it used offensively against you, and everyone else in the building.

Not afraid. Just re-evaluating a lot of things.

How experienced is Argent in romance/sex? Is she a virgin?

Absolutely she is.

You've said a few times Anathema noticed similarities between themselves and Step; did anyone else notice these similarities and did it lead to any theories about Step and Anathema having similar pasts?

I mean I think other people noticed, and draw the conclusion they might have fucked-up pasts. But not to the point of imagining they were connected, or anything like that. Few boosts are well-adjusted and come from good homes.

Following on from that were there any heroes from Steps vigilante days have a theory that was close to the truth of them being a rouge experiment?

Yes. One. Not telling who yet.

Do people affected by Projects Stripes experience the same unpleasant effects of the Boost drug like increased cancer rates, infertility, etc?

Yes.

Ortega tells us that Argent doesn't have any friends outside of the Rangers, is that actually true? Is she lonely?

It is pretty much true. She has acquaintances, but she can't allow people to get close. And yes, she is lonely.

From what I've been able to piece together it seems like Dove was active back in the old days? Did she ever have any run-ins with the Rangers or vigilante Sidestep?

Not really, she was mostly a thief back then, not in the Ranger's league.

If Charge had decided to prioritize following Sidestep up during heartbreak, do you think Steel would have still survived?

No.

Does Vera's opinion of Charge change at all between Julia and Ricardo?

Not much.

Does Arde like music?

I think they do. Probably country. Don't ask me why, that just popped in my head and fitted.

Do you think there are any boosts who's powers basically turned them into a vampire? Blood drinking and weakness to sunlight specifically, take or leave all the other stuff.

I think that has probably happened once or twice.

In regards to Fighter vs Tactician Steps: Would either of those stem from their Farm training? Like, as a Cuckoo, would Step's training have been more tactics oriented, and are Fighter Steps more self-taught?

I think it is more about their own preferences.

How feasible would it be for a Re-Gene to escape overseas, be they blue or cuckoo?

Unless they had powers that helped, it would be hard.

It's been said before that some blue Re-Genes resent the Cuckoos for various reasons. How common is that attitude among them? Is it common, or are most Blue-Genes accepting of Cuckoos?

I don't know. It's at least a loud minority.

Was it common for Cuckoos to be trained together at all or were they kept more isolated from all other Re-Genes in general? More isolated in general, if nothing else because there were so few of them.

How many people working at the Farm are aware that Re-Genes are sapient? Are the vast majority of them in denial?

Denial or don't care.

Which path you looking forward to writing most?

That varies depending on mood, sometimes I want sappy romance, other times depressed raccoon, other times just anger and destruction or mirthful competence.

I think you've said before that it might be possible for Step to willingly stay in the puppet body? Would such a thing be a guaranteed early ending for the story, or could such a puppetStep remain into book 4?

It will probably not happen. Too much escalation.

Is it possible for a Traumatic Boost Response to end up killing the boost?

Absolutely.

Any more links to merch/cool art stuff about the game? I love owning stuff that's got FHR on it

I don't think so at the moment? But if people are considering making stuff, just reach out. I am not averse to let people do it, as long as you ask first.

I remember you saying that you have your own personal sidestep. What are they like?

Charlie is an angry depressed mess who wants to blow up everything. Very destructive. This is his playlist:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6FDWi6EE8WRghOBXFUrWAo?si=c609fb9bcb154135>

In regards to the "hg's sibling" plotline, does that mean that we actually think we're their sibling or are we merely stringing hg and/or Ortega along?

Stringing along. Sidestep remember the tank days.

Regarding the vices, are they simply flavor text or are they able to get better/worse like the hb scars?

Mostly flavor, but some might get into worse territories.

What happens to catfiend if you don't release him during the auction?

The gun is still there, unfired. Might come into play in Revelations.

For the ROs- who would sacrifice the world to save sidestep and who would sacrifice sidestep to save the world?

Spoilers. But I would point out that without a world, Sidestep would have nowhere to love.

Anathema is dead ? But seem she is still here some how as a ghost with sidestep.

Sidestep saw Anathema die. As for what Sidestep sees when they're unconscious, that is unclear.

When sidestep killed Void what was they look liked in the Void eyes ?

Beautiful.

Will we give a new villain name as the story continue ?

I don't think so.

Still wonder what choice you will give in book 3 as sidestep power grow stronger ?

You'll see.

Was project stripes done to an unknowing control group or did you have to sign up for it?

The people involved had NO idea. Still don't.

If Sidestep said they can't see themselves as human or Re-Gene, but as something less, how would everyone feel about it?

Bad, probably? Sounds like depression talking.

**Piggy backing off of the question if the ros would choose the world or sidestep, how would they feel is Sidestep chose them with little hesitation?
What about Ardie and Mortum?**

Same answer as above.

How does Chen feel about Sidestep's surgical scars? What about everyone else? And would other ROs be just as interested in their tattoos as Ortega?

Everyone in the cast is quite used to scars. Some like them (Daniel), some ignore them (Argent), some doesn't think about them (Ortega). I think Chen just sees them as routine, something that is there. Neither good or bad. A testament to survival. Daniel would think the tattoos were pretty.

Cause I forgot to ask, how would Chen feel if we got Spoon Steel themed pajamas? What if we're out as the villain for Chen and give Spoon villain pajamas? Would Ortega dress Spoon in charge merch?

Spoon is a well-dressed dog, Chen thinks that sort of thing is cute.

I need the dynamic duo back together as well (Spoon and Rat King), so will there be more interactions with them both?

At least in certain paths.

Would Chen honestly have tried to rescue Sidestep if he knew they were alive?

Chen is not sure, and that disturbs him.

If Chen and/or Ortega knew Sidestep was definitely alive, what was their realistic chance of trying to rescue Step (either peacefully or forcefully), if rescue at all? For some reason, I'm thinking, metaphorically, of Ortega ringing the Farm's doorbell pretending to sell candy to get the youth off the street as a ploy to breakend.

Spoilers, not letting you know the Farm's capabilities.

The Unforgivable scene seems to be for a guilty-crashed Step who gets rescued. Is there going to be a different variation for Sidesteps who let the puppet crash, but told Ortega they are a re-gene? Also, will Chen still reveal what he knew to Ortega eventually? I think I have only seen bits of the Chen-Ortega reveal with a crashed Step.

It is one single option, yeah. No variables. Things will happen or won't happen depending on the path in the game, most things will never get written or seen. But people will start sharing more in general.

Depending on your Retribution game choices, Step can tap into what Chen saw/heard during Heartbreak. Are there going to be any other variations of that if you didn't see that in Retribution? As if you were not so friendly with Chen.

The truth (or a lot of it) about the Heartbreak incident will be dealt with in this book. So there might be other options for other info.

I know Danny does a lot of his heroing for his brother, but did he ever have a plan of approaching Sidestep when he first moved to Los Diablos and Step was alive? Or, was he just going to focus on becoming a hero, and it would just be a dream come true if they crossed paths?

The latter.

Might be more for the headcanons, but how did Sidestep pop up on the Rangers' radar? Seems like they started with vigilante work on accident with a few robbers and drug dealers. Helped someone out and got enough fuzzy feelings to keep going. Were they ever trying to do their own larger/planned missions? Also, how fast did the Rangers pick-up on their telepathy?

It is headcanon, but I have seen a lot of cute art of that first meeting. My favorite is Ortega getting robbed and then Sidestep clobbering the robber and Ortega being wtf about it while Sidestep panicked because they couldn't read Ortega (Yes Lazy, your art is wonderful). The telepathy was a long time coming, it took years for that to seep out. Sidestep was just a really good fighter for most of that time.

If Daniel were being watched over by his brother in the same way Themmy may or may not be watching over Sidestep, how would he feel about his brother dating Sidestep?

Oh there are a lot of assumptions in that question I am not touching, but I will say if Daniel's brother was still alive, he would NOT approve of his brother dating Sidestep.

It was said previously that Daniel's brother would be frustrated and angry at Danny dating Sidestep. Why?

Jealousy. Frustration. He wouldn't like Daniel being that successful, or having that sort of "game" so to speak.

How does the farm dispose of dead ReGenes?

Remove what organs/limbs that could still be usable, rend the rest down to the core components.

Are there places in the world where if you're found to be boosted, you end up in prison because that in and of itself is proof that you used illegal substances? If so, which places are they?

Oh yes. But it would just as likely be because it is illegal to BE boosted, not just because of the illegal substances. Many countries deal with boosted individuals just like they would someone owning a tank or an rpg. Unless you're licensed and have a permit, you'll end up in jail. I haven't decided which places deal with things like that, but I do think the EU has pretty stringent regulations. Harmless boosts might get licensed, but dangerous or intrusive ones might be deported or detained.

Do cults like Void's take any measure to prevent the creation of a new Catastrofiend or something even worse?

No, some would argue that would be a cool thing to be happen.

Will we get the opportunity to potentially give the other ROs nicknames in the future, or will that be reserved just for Ortega?

I am planning nicknames for all, it's a small thing.

How does the Rat King feel about Dr Mortum?

Very curious. Got interesting vibes.

On the topic of naming the villain persona "Sidestep" or "Anathema", how often do copycat named Enhanced show up, either on the original side or switched?

I think it's not uncommon. Cool names are few and far between, and many want to capitalize on someone else's fame.

Per the lore story did Daniel try to talk to a Sidestep he thought was possessed? Or did he keep it quiet as to not alert/alarm them before he knew more?

Spoilers.

How would Daniel describe his relationship with Marek? Asset? Ally? Shady friend?

Ally with a hint of asset and shady friend.

Do you know how Chen would deal with a twintega situation? How would their dynamics look when both Ricardo and Julia are in the picture? Would Julia notice Chen's crush on Ric and play wingman to get him to date her brother?

I rarely think about AU's, I leave that to the readers. I don't want to get invested in AU's when I need to be invested in the main story. But Julia would absolutely notice Chen's crush and wingman him with her brother.

Since their voice will probably never be mentioned how would Step having a vastly different accent compared to HG & their ancestry & insisting it's real affect HG/Ortegas "HG's long lost sibling" theories? And would HG attempt to do anything about it?

Ortega wouldn't listen to that explanation, obviously the accent is faked to throw off people who are suspicious. HG would notice, and look into things. But, people have been known to change their accents after traumatic injuries (check out foreign accent syndrome) so it's not unheard of.

I remember in previous QnAs that you've said you have several versions of Sidestep you keep in mind for writing different dialogues/paths in the stories. Can you tell us about them?

It is always changing, depending on what my brain projects at the moment. The Sidesteps of four years ago are not the same as the ones today, and things shift in and out. Right now they are very tied to my playlists, and have a lot to do with writing mood.

What's the Enhanced peacekeeping community(vigilante or deputized) like on the East Coast?

Vigilantes are rare and illegal on the East Coast. They are treated pretty much the same as villains, and they need to be very secretive about what they are up to. People might love some of them, but the government does not. In general, the Enhanced community is a lot smaller out east, the laws are harsher, the official teams more rigidly controlled, and the police has more things in hand. I would say that the main enhanced community is integrated within the police/FBI, and treated as separate units/armaments within it.

Has Daniel ridden a bicycle since he began flying? Does his powers mess with his balance on a bike? Or is it more like his driving skills (ie he never learned)?

Oh boy! I don't think Daniel has ridden a bicycle since he was a kid. I think it might be hard for him now, his powers would mess with the experience.

Is Mortum allowing a friendly or romanced puppet into their lab a very rare thing or something they feel comfortable with most people they think they can trust due to their security measures?

I would say it is a rare thing indeed. There are few people Mortum trusts with that, less than a handful. They have been betrayed in the past, that leaves scars.

Is it going to be possible for Sidestep to invite Mia to their base for an interview?

I don't know! Most likely not though, that's a private space. So it might just remain in headcanons.

From the last answer in the QnA about HG's red threads acting as a metaphorical cast for a broken leg that is Nocturne's mind; is that leg actually healing? Or is it just kept in a cast that keeps coming apart over time?

That's the terrifying thing: There's no way of knowing until they are removed. And Nocturne is not sure she's willing to take that chance.

What kind of documentaries does Chen like watching? Nature? Engineering? History? West Coast Mysteries?

Nature and Engineering I think. Physical things. Science.

If Anathema had survived heartbreak, would they have stayed in the Rangers? How would they react to hearing Sidestep also survived 7 years later?

Anathema would have stayed in the Rangers, and Sidestep would have gotten the biggest hug. To the point of having to be peeled off.

Was Iris expecting the hero museum to get hit opening night?

Nope, that came out of left field.

Does the emergence of a villain persona going by "Sidestep", increase public(and maybe Farm) interest and scrutiny into the history of Sidestep's vigilante days?

I would say marginally yes, but like I said earlier, it's not uncommon for names to get reused. There's probably been like six villains called "The Destroyer," maybe more than one at once.

Has 5 Pennies partaken of Void blood?

No.

Did Lady Argent move from San Francisco to Los Diablos because she got an opportunity to join the Rangers or was she already in LD when they recruited her?

She moved to Los Diablos after she got hired.

Sometimes people have personality traits or behavioral quirks that are eerily similar to those of people they're genetically related to, even if they've never met. Does Sidestep have anything like this in regards to HG and their family?

That would depend on the Sidestep. Since I am writing HG a certain way, while Sidestep can vary depending on the player, some Sidesteps might have a lot in common with them, while others nothing at all.

If Anathema had survived and stayed in the Rangers, would Lady Argent have been offered the position on the Rangers or would she be declined due to her filling a very similar niche to Anathema?

She would still have been given the offer.

If Ortega hadn't already decided it was HG that kidnapped Step after heartbreak. Would they have pried harder into why Step disappeared after they returned?

I think after Sidestep returned, Ortega was far too focused on the present and future to worry about the past.

is psychopathor familiar enough with step's telepathy that if he sensed it, he would recognize it as sidestep? like the way step is wary of touching Steel's mind because he's so familiar with them.

No. Sidestep has changed so much there's really no similarity.

Does anything like fear toxin from the Batman comics exist in the FHR-verse?

Not exactly sure of what that is, but from the name, I can guess. I think so, mind-altering poisons and gas is such a staple that I think it would exist here too. Especially with the more advanced biotech.

Would Mortum do coordinated/couples costumes for their annual holiday parties?

Absolutely.

Are events with multiple heroes in attendance (ex: more official events like the museum opening, or more personal gatherings such as Ortega's upcoming birthday party) generally at higher risk of attack from villains who may want to make a big splash/attempt to take out a lot of heroes at once, or are they broadly assumed to be safer due to the presence of so many heroes?

I would say that might be the case, though some would argue that having heroes present might also deter people. There's probably some risk consultants that has lots of numbers and graphs of the pros and cons.

Are there powers that give definitive answers to questions that religions claimed to have a monopoly on (powers that answer questions about life after death like talking to the dead, or being able to teleport to some afterlife; as an example)? How have the major world religions responded to any boosts coming forth with evidence that contradicts their worldview?

There are boosts that claims it, but there's no more proof that they are telling the truth any more than any preacher with faith does.

Are 5 gates considered the 'safety limit' for opening them? Is that why the people experimenting on Heartbreak only opened 5 with them to start with before opening the other gates? Are there physical strains on a person opening the gates, and do they worsen with the more opened? Does lowering the person's body temp help them deal with that strain?

Hmmm it's one of those things that there's no safe level really. When will the danger become too much to stomach? Who knows. I am certainly not going to give any clues. But more open ones are certainly worse. As for physical strain... hmm... I wouldn't say directly, lowering body temperature more helps deal with the mental strain. Like sedating someone before surgery. The hibernation reflex can be triggered if you know how, just like how newborns reflexively hold their breath under water.

If Sidestep never came back and argent's physical concerns weren't a problem, which Ranger do you think would have the hardest time getting a long term, stable relationship? The easiest?

The hardest? Ortega. The easiest? Herald.

If the telepaths were still around and worked together, could they heal the Zone and to what extent?

I assume this is about the Heartbreak site? If so, no.

Was the truck crashing into Step outside Parkfield caused by a force external to Step?

I mean a truckdriver is pretty much an external force, but I think I know what you mean. Did someone nudge the odds of that happening? Then the answer is yes.

You've said Chen has several osseointegrated mods, alongside the neural interface port, and you've also spoken about mod neural load. Chen has a high tolerance for mods, but does he need to take anti-rejection medication to ensure that mod rejection doesn't occur, and if so, does he has a slightly weakened immune system and need to take antibiotics as a result?

No, Chen manages without anti-rejection drugs. This is one reason he can tolerate that many. His immune system is still a bit wonky from it though, his injuries do occasionally flare up (focused specifically on his intestinal system) and he gets the odd infection at various sites that do need antibiotics.

Could we get a specific year when Sentinel retired please? The Kinetik dossier has him talking to Herald in 2018 about getting married, but in a March 2023 QnA he was in the last days of active duty when Chen was nearly assassinated, and previously in a April 2022 ask he announced his retirement alongside the proposal to his girlfriend. Did he retire first and hang about in LD for a bit before he left for the Cascade mountains, or something else?

He promised his girlfriend to retire when he proposed, the problem was that life got in the way, and he felt he needed to stay on longer than planned in order to help tide things over for the new team. I think he retired and moved for real a year and a half or so after Heartbreak.

Were there any large scale threats like the Void cult or Nanosurge in the years Sidestep was gone? If any, how were they dealt with?

No idea! I have not made up any in my head.

If things were like how Ortega theorized and Sidestep was HG's sibling, would HG have been proud of Sidestep's accomplishments or horrified at the danger Sidestep was constantly in?

Proud. The little shit is stepping up.

The minds of dogs are kind and happy, while the minds of seagulls are apparently madness itself, but what about other animals? If Sidestep were to go to a zoo and explore the minds of the residents, what would they find? What would be their thoughts on lions? Penguins? Exotic fish?

Fish have no minds as far as Sidestep is concerned. I think Penguins would be stressful, they really feel like they'd be filled with barely constrained stress. Lions, hmm... I think any zoo animal would be a stressed experience, at least if they are used to large habitats. I think Sidestep would avoid zoos like the plague, it would remind them too much of the farm.

We see that Step diving into HG's mind results in them getting pulled into it (and needing to be fished out by HG or Rat King).

-Is this phenomena similar to the way HB was pulled into Step's mind during the HB incident?

-Can this occur with other telepaths, or is it a Step-exclusive hazard?

-Can non-telepaths pull or be pulled in?

Oh this is an interesting question! I would say that yes, this phenomena is indeed similar to what happened during the Heartbreak incident. It is not an exclusively Sidestep thing, it can happen to other telepaths too. It is a question of feedback, of synergy. Mental waves overlapping and growing in sync, sometimes surprising the people involved with the strength of the connection. Telepath on telepath violence is always a risk. On the other hand, it might as well go the other way around, with the telepaths bouncing off each other's shields like rain on an umbrella, or two similar poles of a magnet trying to touch. As a final note I will say that weird things happens when you break the surface tension of a telepathic mind. This is not something that happens to non-telepaths. Or, well, non-psychics, there might be telepathy-related boosts with similar effects.

Self indulgent ask but. How does Ortega respond to/what's going on in their head if a regene copy relationship step flirts with them in and outside of the armor? How does past relationship affect how Ortega's taking it?

Oh that is something you need to explore in game. When it comes to asks like this, about characters inner workings about optional paths in the game that might happen, I rarely have an answer until I have written it. And, even if I did, I would only say that it is something you need to find out in game. I'm not going to tell the future story in asks and remove the tension in game.

How are you anticipating letting players fake being red threaded by HG in book 3 for those who were able to brush it off, but pretend it took? Will it be a matter of just selecting options that "agree" with HG as to not raise alarms that they aren't in control, or will it be a bit more in-depth and distinct in-text that you're playing them?

It will be both picking choices that wouldn't tip HG off, and I am planning to add a tag where you can knowingly play them if you noticed they were trying to thread you, to differ from the times when Sidestep had good shields but knew nothing about what happened.

Were there any LD Rangers who joined after HB, but left before Sidestep returned?

Hmmm. I don't think so. I do think there might have been a test candidate or two that didn't work out, though. Not the personal chemistry needed. But, I have no names planned, it might come up in game or not.

Is the reason that makes Lord Ember unthreadable, the same reason that allows him to work safely with Shroud?

Yes.

If the rangers had to guess Sidestep's Ljungstrand classification what would they put down?

The Rangers don't even know something like that exist!

Has Chen ever brought Spoon to play with Elena's dogs?

Oh yes! Cue Spoon zooming for fifteen minutes, then sleeping in the shade the rest of the day. He does NOT have the stamina compared to her farm dogs, though he is faster.

Is Snowball double Boosted?

Ehehehe. Bingo. That she is.

Could the current LD Ranger quartet win against a standard combat Regene deployment? Or against the Regene team sent to deal with Psychopathor in book 1?

It would depend a lot on the circumstances. But prepared team vs prepared team? Yes. But it would be tough as hell, and might require Argent to go... weird.

Would Snowball vaporize a vet trying to help her?

See. Maybe. Maybe not. But as Snowball hasn't needed a vet, that hasn't come up.

So how does Argent sleep exactly?

On good days, like normal people. On bad days, she has a containment pod. It looks a bit like those cryofreeze beds in science fiction movies.

What's Bo/Rosies role in the mob boss' crew? It's mentioned that Bo got promoted from driver but iirc it's never mentioned what they do now, are they like a consigliere/advisor to Step now plus a backup driver/muscle?

I would say they are the backup what their previous role were, as well as... hmmm... middle manager? Advisor? Trusted ear? Pelayo runs the military/team side, the puppet is the talker, and Bo/Rosie is the support for both? They both have villain contacts, they have both had their own careers, and they are tough/skilled enough to operate on their own if needed.

What's Wards deal? I've seen it mentioned that they give bad vibes to the civilians in Steps base but they seem pretty normal to me especially compared to ZaZa

Ward's statement-piece claw arm tends to freak civilians out. There's too much flesh/metal interface, and none of it hidden or smooth. A bit Mad Max vibes which Ward absolutely encourages.

Since there's sometimes an overlap between the targets of Thief & Boss Steps have Vera & Bosses ever unknowingly crossed paths?

Oh yes. Might add in more backstory in the future.

Does the mob crew actually have any territory or is that Step posturing/being full of themselves?

I would say yeah, haven't detailed it yet, but most gangs tends to have things like a favorite bar, hangouts, and places where they feel they are safe. Still unsure how to chart that, playing around with a few ideas.

Approximately how big do you think an book 4 ending version of mobboss!Sidestep's organization will get in terms of manpower and territory?

Los Diablos might be your sandbox.

If Mortum were actually only visible on Trans Visibility Day, would they still be out there villaining?

Look, near permanent invisibility would be a handy power. I think Dr. Mortum would still be active then. And a lot better funded.

What kind of models for dampeners are there? Are there types that always keep the same level of interference no matter what is happening? Are they more or less common than ones that seemingly adapt to how much telepathic activity they're suppressing? Is there a scale to measure how much telepathy they can suppress before a telepath becomes too powerful? Do different models have different ranges of their effectiveness?

I would say there are several models, but I think there's only one main manufacturer open for civilian purchases. It's a specialized field, and you need lots of security credentials for people to trust buying something like this that you can't even see/sense working. The difference between models is mainly strength and range. These two are related, but not entirely.

The field strength has a lot to do with how "steady" the signal can be kept, no matter the interference. Think of it like the clarity of a radio signal. The high strength ones tends to be for places like prisons, high-security facilities and the like. They can completely block any telepathy at the highest strength. These are the dampeners Sidestep would associate with the Farm. Just a solid block, weighing down on their brain. The lower strength ones are a lot cheaper, but the field can vary. It is more focused at disturbing the "signal," making it impossible to read clear thoughts, but not inhibiting telepathic powers entirely. These are what Sidestep encountered when fighting Blaze, or at the Auction. The "storm" that they can navigate with the Rat-King's help if they are strong enough. These dampeners are enough to stop industrial spies, cheating at gambling, and preserve people's privacy. Sidestep might be strong enough to circumvent them with effort.

The range has more to do with how strong the "speakers/projectors" are. This part saps a LOT of power, so few get a bigger model when needed. Once the dampeners are far enough to reach the limit of their range the effect drops off fast. Oh, it can still be felt, but not that far outside. It's not like sound, with a gradual lessening of the effect. It's more like a lantern on a dark night, outside the circle of light it goes dark quick.

Did it take time for Danny to enjoy his new gift of flight after losing Josh?

He wish he could say yes, but the truth is that even with all the misery during those months after the "accident," even with the loss of his brother, the skin-grafts, his parents disapproval, even then flight was an unfiltered delight. The most wonderful thrill. His greatest joy.

What does the Green Sky cult think about Boosted Animals?

There is a split there, I think. Some thinks it should be celebrated, others that they should be exterminated for mocking what humans will become.

Has anyone noticed and thought it strange that Step and Puppet are never in the same room together?

No. No reason to. They are not connected. (If they had, I would not tell you anyway, what Ortega knows stays with them.)

Is it unheard of for some boosts to use their powers to get unique and obscure jobs? For example, could a completely hypothetical telepath potentially be able to find work as some kind of human-animal translator?

Oh that is quite common I think, especially for the more "normal" boosts who doesn't get anything super strong. The issue tends to be that the people driven to take the boost drugs often have issues to start with.

Does Chen wear tight t-shirts when off duty on purpose? Why? I need to know for uh. Scientific purposes.

I do think Chen does that, he's not beyond knowing he can look good despite his mods and scars.

Will a non mob boss Sidestep ever encounter the mob boss crew on their own adventures?

I don't know!

What do the HG trio think about the villain's armor styles?

You'll get to find that out if you interact with them in game. HG is already judging some choices...

For Sidesteps who lean into being HG's pseudo-sibling, will HG try to bankroll armor upgrades to keep their new family member safe?

HG can absolutely be a source of money.

Is HG aware of the crash in all the book 2's end states?

Yes.

So, if sidestep transferred the memories one person had when taking the boost drug to another person who was currently taking the boost drug, would the person with the altered memory have a similar boost to the original?

No.

What was Elena's reaction to Sidestep and Ortega showing up with Snowball?

Surprise. Concern. Sympathy. She does not condone animal cruelty.

Are any otherwise-innocuous powers stereotyped as "villain" powers? If so, is it due to association with real historical villains, trends in superhero media, or some other reason?

Well, in general any power that controls/influences other people gets a bad rep. Telepathy, pheromones, things like that. Even though there have been heroes with these powers, they tend to evoke an almost reflexive terror in people. Losing control of your body and mind is bad.

Is Argent not worried that using the regenerator might lead to her losing her powers?

Yes, she is.

If we're not at the auction itself, does Shroud's still lose an arm?

I guess you'll have to see! But if it came to a fight between Shroud and Argent, she would.

Has there been any experiments conducted on using nanovores instead of the boost drugs to boost individuals?

Oh I REALLY hope not. That would be bad.

In a previous QnA it was stated that someone had tried to contaminate the water with the boost drug in the past. Has anyone tried something similar targeting the boosted people instead?

No.

Can Sidestep change their therapist, if they believe that Ortega has bugged Finch's office? How would Ortega react to it?

I don't know if I'm going to go into that kind of detail! That's a whole new path.

Did another telepath trick Daniel, telling him how to open his mind and project his thoughts while telling him that that is how you build telepathic shields or is he just that bad at shielding his thoughts? How open is his mind to telepathy compared to a random civilian with no form of counter-telepathic training or practice?

This is just how Daniel is. Things like this varies from person to person, there can be random civilians with tough shields, and trained heroes with weak shields. However, there's more to strength of mind than shields.

What's containment/prison like for the Enhanced? Is there an SCP-esque organization dedicated to holding superpowered criminals?

Yeah, there is! Most stronger boosts can't be kept in normal facilities, and I think there are probably some that has to be kept on ice permanently like in Demolition Man. Just keep them asleep and hope for the best. There's a certain amount of human rights that goes out the window when the person might be sitting on what amounts to a personal nuke. For those that can be contained more normally it would just be high security prison, but if they have useful powers? I wouldn't be surprised if there are things like let's say a fire-boost being hooked up to a generator for most of the day, using their powers for "good." Or at least the profit of the private prison.

If we used our nanovores on Argent, how would her own nanovores react? Would they try to assimilate their kin into team Argent? Would they get upset and tattle to Argent that their kin has been neutered?

Oh you will know if you try. The nano vs nano, telepathy vs technopathy scenario is so interesting. I think in the past I have likened it to a fast-draw scenario, but there are so many variants and outcomes. Not going to tell you though, but oh, I have thoughts.

Does Argent need to pre-program a new form that she wants to take (like when she wants to add a new arm replacement weapon), or can she just have the nanovores take whatever form she wants whenever she needs it? If she needs to program a given form in advance, how long does that take her to do?

She does need to program/train/practice with her upgrades. She has a bunch of things she knows how to do, but a completely new thing takes time. She needs the nanovores to understand what she wants, and then everyone need to figure out how to keep it stable together. The more natural nanoform is a thick mist surrounding her, anything solid needs work.

Will Ortega's birthday party be a more casual, or a more planned/formal affair?

It will be a big thing!

Are people more or less worried about the Yellowstone super volcano than they are in our world?

I would say more since they already had a preview with the west coast, and now when things are calming down, many are afraid that what happened there might be something that would set off Yellowstone.

If Chen wasn't threaded, how much would he buy into Ortega's theory that Sidestep is HG's sibling?

Oh he would still side-eye that one like mad.

if HG red threads someone, but the target misheard, does it still work? If it still works (assuming the misunderstanding made sense), does it work for what HG originally intended or what the person heard?

What the person heard.

Has Mia ever regretted an article she's published or is she proud of most of her work?

I mean everyone regrets some things. I think what she regrets the most is bending to pressure and softening some articles, instead of daring to be as controversial as she wanted to be.

What's Mias definition of a hero & villain? Is it different from her definition of a true hero/villain?

A hero is someone that does good for the people/the city. A villain is someone who hurts people/the city for their own benefit. As you can see, there's a lot of grayscale in there, what if you hurt people for good causes for example. I don't think she sees anything as being "true." But, she could see someone as a hero that other people would name a villain, if that's what you mean.

How would Nocturne react if we completely unthreaded her? Is her willingness to be threaded part of the way that HG threaded her?

Spoilers!

Are there any threats that have required international cooperation to deal with?

I think the Seattle Rangers have worked together with Canadian heroes on more than one occasion. Just like the San Diego Rangers often work with Mexican heroes and authorities. The Los Diablos Rangers have worked with Mexican heroes and teams once or twice, mainly to hunt down Mexican villains who have gone to ground nearby.

How did the other Rangers first hear about the crash? directly from Ortega via word of mouth or emergency beacon? From the hospital or the media? did it vary between Rangers?

I think the main thing was Ortega getting to the hospital, that would ring all the alarm bells.

How long is the grace period for a living multicellular organism to stay inside Mortum's gun without consequences? Or is any amount of exposure instantly harmful?

I would say that any amount of exposure would be harmful, but it wouldn't start to be dangerous until after a few hours.

Was Mortum's gun created after the Void "died"?

Hmmm... It was started before they died at least. Not sure.

Is the regenerator a quick thing where you step in and within a minute or so your body is rejuvenated or does it take a considerable amount of time to do its thing like a few weeks or something? Do you have to stay inside of the regenerator the whole time?

I would say that at a baseline it would depend. From a few hours to a few days. You would have to stay inside the regenerator.

Are enhanced folks banned from professional sports overall, or does their allowed participation depend case-by-case on their specific skillset?

You can get exceptions if your powers don't affect the sport, just like skiers who have asthma gets exceptions so they can use their medicine, which would be considered doping if healthy people use it.

what was going through Norma's head as she was painting the piece that danny and step look at during the art exhibit? was there a particular memory, emotion, or subject she was aiming for?

She paints her stories and dreams. That was a nightmare.

Is there a canon name sidestep has on Ortega's phone? Like ❤️🐱❤️?

Nope, that's headcanon!

Was the choice to have the Soviet Union still exist an intentional homage to cyberpunk stories of yore that failed to predict its collapse in their projected futures?

Absolutely!

Is danny on the autism spectrum?

I would say no, but I'd never stop anybody from headcanoning it.

How badly would the destruction of the Farm hurt the USA's military readiness? Would other nations try to take advantage of the drop in USA military presence?

Not as badly as the Farm would like to think. And... well, we'll see.

You mentioned that Argent has a shelf dedicated to corny, knockoff Rangers movies, but does that also include corny, knockoff Sidestep in those? Does any of this have anything to do with why she wouldn't let us see her movie selection?

Yeah, there's absolutely corny Sidestep stuff in there too. Ortega has been filling her mind with way too many stories, in her mind they were kind of a part of the Rangers. And yes, that is part of it but not all.

How does it feel to have gone from writing a story, with completely your characters, your plotlines with nobody else having any input on the story that you don't want to creating this community where everyone has their own Sidestep and puppet with drastic differences between the different Ortega's, Mortum's, Argent's, etc.? Where Sidesteps are used as a form of OC instead of the singular main character in a linear story that you are telling that they started out as?

I think it is WONDERFUL! I've said it before, but writing an IF for me feels a lot more like being a gamemaster than being an author. I craft something and tosses it out in the world and then I get to see people run with it, in many ways in directions I did not predict! Interaction with the community has definitely deepened the story. Not changed it, Sidestep is still the same Sidestep in my head, the story and the characters are the same. However, seeing how people

interact with it has led me to deepen parts of the story I didn't think people would be interested in. It has made everything more complicated, yes, but it also lets me delve into things I only tangentially touched on in the original story.

I'm not precious about how what I write is perceived. Words are only words, it is the reader that takes them and makes a world, characters and emotions. A sentence can be taken five different ways depending on what the reader brings with them, and I am delighted to see how people can interpret the same scenes and characters so differently depending on the surrounding context. That's why I am often so reluctant to answer things in a "canon" way, the text is the canon, and the text is fallible and can be interpreted differently. I love seeing people pick up textual clues and build mountains out of molehills, or overlook that elephant that is just standing there in the middle of the room. I'm so sad I can't read fanfiction, but oh boy, the fanart is glorious. I love all your weird little raccoons so much!

Is there any chance of having mirror image puppets setup in the Rebirth patch with steps that resemble their puppet in all ways except (current) gender? (eg. nb steps, or f!step with m!puppet?) I think it could add some interesting variety to trans/gender questioning step routes especially

Possibly. It is on the list of things I need to bugfix/update. I've got some interesting new additions planned to Rebirth with gender related things, it has just got put on the backburner until I finish the ttrpg supplement I am working on. That currently has hold of my problem-solving/layout/proofread brain. So close now! 95% done.

How does Agent plan to explain her human skin to everyone once she gets to use the regenerator? Is admitting to the Rangers that she used black tech really in the cards for her, or has she simply not thought that far ahead?

That's a problem for future Argent!

Were Void eyes a common side effect of drinking Void blood or something unique to Sidestep's exposure to it? What did the Void think about Void eyes(guessing more 'beautiful' vibes)?

I would say it happened on occasion, it's not Sidestep specific. Just a cool visual.

What qualifications does the Farm tend to look for in potential candidates for recruitment? Do they pull from a specific academic field or other population? Particularly where handlers are concerned?

I think it is very focused on academic/military related fields. Work in something related, and chances are you might get an interview.

Does Argent "cheat" when cleaning the dishes, letting her nanovores devour all the organic stains on the cutlery?

Oh that is not cheating, just handy. Her dishwasher has never been used.

Mortum is aware of and possesses Numbers, are they aware of Talodine?

Yep, they are.

What would a romanced Argent's reaction be to Sidestep painting their armor solid pink for their next fight?

Ahahaha she'd be tickled pink. Or complain that it's the wrong shade.

Considering HG's talent of making the most out of any opportunity + general priorities to uphold for their empire... What would they want to do with Regina, and all that she can possibly offer? Assuming they know everything she did to a Sidestep they've grown close to and love?

Oh Regina would get a bullet through the skull, no questions asked.

Pre-HB, all female group, some trashy magazine starts trying to paint the Rangers (including Sidestep) as Steel's harem. How annoyed does each of them get? What do each of them say if asked by a gullible fan about it?

Ahaha that is what you need the Ranger's media team for. And they'd better hope they shut it down fast before pre-transitioning Sentinel would get to them. I think the only one who would play along is Ortega, the rest would be mortified or annoyed. Chen would just put his helmet back on and walk away if asked about it.

Who do you think would connect more with Sidestep's weirdness or a friendship basis? HG or Nocturne? I see both of them like huge FREAKS/NERDS and I need to, idk, put them in a room to build Legos while Jake stares through the door's window

I think it would depend on the Sidestep. Nocturne would be more hostile at the start, but if she starts vibing, I can see her connecting. Just has to get past that out suspicious shell of anything that threatens her carefully constructed status quo.

Does the regenerator also repair the DNA of boots who use it, allowing them to be cloned?

Nope.

If Sidestep took Numbers, how would that affect their telepathy? Would it suppress their telepathy altogether? Would it make it seem like everyone else is on Numbers? Or, would it allow them to read the minds of other people on Numbers, sort of like tuning in to that frequency?

If Sidestep took numbers it would feel a bit like being drunk I think. Drowsy. Dizzy. Their telepathy would still work, and it would not help them read people on numbers. It would just be a very uncomfortable and bad experience.

What's Bo's/Rosie's sexuality? 🙄

Bo says that he's straight, so I have to believe him. Rosie would be pan I think, she appreciates a bit of muscle no matter who it belongs to. If any of them are on the demi-spectrum I have no idea or opinion.

Has a villain ever tried to show up at Ortega's birthday parties with the genuine intention of not causing trouble, exchanging pleasantries and dropping off a benign gift?

I think that has absolutely happened once or twice.

So Regenes get most of their early memories from their AI chip, but do they get any from their genetic donor similar to the Animus from Assassin's Creed?

I always was a fan of "physical memory," but on that level? No. Just like babies don't get their parents memories. I would say that might be possible since they are decanted as adults and don't go through that whole "baby memory reset" phase, but everything is squashed by the AI chip. It is so much stronger it overrides anything else before it has a chance to form and grow.

Has there ever been an event where a bunch of hero drugs got thrown out improperly leading to a surge of super powered scavenger animals (like raccoons and foxes)?

Ahahaha that is too funny. It must have happened somewhere.

Why are the Revenge, Hunger, and Outside scars the ones that see the most from the heartbreak incident? were they the emotions Heartbreak experienced most often/most intensely, so tapping into them gave step a greater insight to HB?

Yeah, I would say so.

Were there any old school anti-drug PSAs in print or as commercials focused on the hero drug? If yes are they/were they distributed in the FEZ, or are they mostly an east coast deal?

Oh that is definitely both an east-coast and FEZ deal. Nobody wants too many boosts. However, they are certainly more gruesome and pervasive back east.

Will there be a dance off?

I wish, I love a good telepathic dance off (if you've watched Legion you know what I mean). Can't say for sure tho.

If pre-HB Sidestep were powerful enough to overpower Steel's dampeners after a few minutes of being in their range without trying, would that lead to Steel relying on them for counter-telepathic protection or would it only make him more paranoid about Sidestep? Would Sidestep being that powerful scare off Anathema and/or Ortega from wanting to be friends with them/be around them?

That is too much of an AU scenario. I have no idea.

Did HG's sibling actually die when they were detained by the police? Or was the reason why they couldn't get their body back was because the Farm took them?

I would say the latter.

Re: the question of anti-boost drug PSAs—If they do exist, how surreal is it trying to craft messaging around that? How good are/were they at avoiding the "accidentally makes drugs look cool" pitfall?

I mean... that is hard. I would say the east-coast succeeded better at making it look gruesome, mainly by focusing on failed/ugly/gross boosts. A bit like those anti smoking ads with rotting teeth, or black lungs.

How does Benjamin feel being nicknamed "ben" or "benji"

I think he'd be into that. Ben is common, Benji is cute.

Was the spider lady regene you encounter when stealing the Rat King the Farm's attempt at creating a more stable, stealth combat version of the Catastrofiend before it got weird on the boost drugs?

Not directly, but a boost with many arms is very useful, so I can see it being an inspiration.

Why is the regenerator, a device that, if completed to do the task it is meant to do (even if it needs more testing and refinement) has the potential to go on to save countless lives by basically automating a large portion of hospital work (A&E as well as many life saving surgeries), labeled as black tech and forbidden from being developed to perfection?

Because it includes some VERY unsavory bits that are black tech.

Does Ben take his armour out just to fly around for fun. Or is it solely for the job and practice/testing?

Oh it can be for fun! Especially over the ocean, that's just beautiful.

Does Herald get driven places for official Ranger appearances? If so, does Herald have a list of excuses to try and dodge with?

Herald likes to arrive flying, that's his thing. And the Rangers media team agrees that is cool. He will be driven there if it's bad weather though, which is always annoying. He hates it. But rain is rain...

Does the Catfiend still have normal bodily functions? Does it actually need to breathe, eat, or eliminate waste?

On occasion.

As a follow-up: how much of its original biology remains? It has the shriveled arms, does it have any other body parts that have become vestigial?'

The naughty bits.

Does Jake ever take shortcuts, especially in HGs house, of just walking thru walls instead of using the door?

Absolutely, all the time.

How is the postal service handling the divide between east and west? Is ordering a product from across the continent a gamble due to package loss? Or do they employ large numbers of speedsters to accommodate demand?

Like between different countries. So yes, it is always a gamble. The world is a lot more isolated than our current globalist society, less international and long-distance communication and trade. You wouldn't order something from abroad (which the east coast would count as) unless absolutely needed.

Do the Rangers know the truth behind Tina, the aquarium director? Not just her secret villain career, but also married to Psychopathor? Do any of the Rangers know Teddy's name?

Nope.

What does Lord Ember look like? Is he blond?

NO idea yet, but he does look far too smug.

Can/Do pure psychic entities exist?

One might argue that.

Is their existence limited to a single realm ("reality" or higher dimensions) or can they travel between dimensions?

It's complicated.

Can Sidestep become one?

Some would say they already are.

Fallen Hero is pretty even-handed about providing opportunities for a variety of different builds. The one exception I can think of is the synergy between Fighter+Daring/Tactician+Cautious: I don't think I've ever seen a context where you specifically benefit from being a tactician with low risk aversion or a skilled fighter with a defensive approach. Is that onesidedness an intentional design choice (i.e., that daring fighter/cautious tactician are the "min-maxed" options, while the opposite are better-rounded but less specialized), or did it just work out that way?

That is not an intentional design choice, it just depends on the fight. I don't think about min-maxing at all, I rely a lot on my playtesters to point out blind spots when it comes to builds. I often think about opponents more. Like Ortega is more vulnerable to a balanced daring/cautions. Argent needs good daring to fight, while Steel benefits from having high Cautious. I would say it just worked out that way, this is not a game where you need to highly manage stats and thus all stats needs to be balanced.

How are you planning to tackle the Vera and SkyRaider romances in a way that makes them stand up to or feel just as deep as the romances with characters who've existed before b3?

We'll see. They will be different of course, as they can't have any buildup. Thankfully they are both easier people to get under the skin of than let's say Steel or Argent.

Especially when it comes to readers potentially missing out on content with pre-existing characters for the sake of pursuing the new romances. Do you envision them to be something you'll have to put a lot of thought and consideration into, or do you plan for them to be more like one nights or flings?

You can still have a lot of content with the previous characters without sleeping with them. All you're missing is a sex-scene. I am planning to write them as the characters they were intended to be in the book, but with the addition of romance content if you wish. How it is handled we'll see. But of course it can't be balanced. Just like Argent has less content than let's say Ortega.

Can Hollow Ground control how long a short thread would last? Say for a very brief, temporary thread needed to get their proverbial foot in the door for something.

Nope. It depends on the mind.

If Anathema survived HB and had to break themselves and a sedated Sidestep out of the Farm, would they do so as stealthily as possible or would they be more likely to try and cause as much chaos as possible and use that as a cover?

Stealth I think.

Will Argent have turbo allergies after getting healed, considering that the nanos have been shielding her from most outside chemicals for a decade?

Hmmm I am not sure how her immune system would react actually.

Would the regenerator also fix Sidestep's legs?

Good question.

For innocent steps would the rest of the Rangers(assuming Argent is willing to let them speak) understand why Sidestep wants to use black tech? Would or could any of the other three help get it operational?

Oh Argent would NOT bring it up to them. That's too big a risk.

Do you think Ortega would keep quiet about a no kill MC being a villain if they knew they would end up living together? Would this answer change depending on relationship?

I don't know, but Ortega is good at keeping secrets.

After their second escape or whenever they discovered their pain gate was removed/broken, was Sidestep ever at risk for painkiller addiction upon their return to LD? Or did they just whiteknuckle thru it all?

That depends on the Sidestep.

will we find out who placed the bomb in Carter's mansion in book 3?

You can, yeah.

Would any kind of EMP attack be dangerous for Ortega??

They are technically shielded, but just like with water, I'd avoid it just in case.

If in the snippet with Herald where he shares his fears with Marek; if Herald had instead gone to Steel or Ortega, would they have believed him? Would they have tried to cut him out of events and deal with it themselves? Would Herald consider sharing with Argent given her possession? Or would she have been too volatile in his mind?

There are reasons Herald doesn't share his worries with the team. He thinks they are good reasons.

You've mentioned before that sidestep's vices can get worse, and that the alcohol vice will likely have the earliest and most consequences. Is this still true, and how big could those consequences be?

It will depend on your choices in game. Like killing, that would be up to you if it's something you explore. Don't know how big a thing it will be yet, it might just be people getting worried.

Weirdest possible ending ?

I haven't found that one yet I bet.

What does each of the mob boss route's crewmates spend their paychecks on?

Nehal: Car stuff. ZaZa: Gun stuff. Ward: Savings account. Pelayo: Good life. Bo: Child support. Rosie: Party.

Aside from any NS like events where the city is on the verge of being destroyed, are there any official or unofficial truce days where the Enhanced on either side of the law aren't active?

I don't think so.

Do any of the impostors have their own understanding (personal or from an external perspective) of what Regenes are, from before occupying Sidestep's head?

Not telling you.

How does the Farm go about picking candidates for DNA sampling? Is it deliberately targeting certain individuals? Or more opportunistic?

It is deliberate but also opportunistic. Relatives of successful boosts are preferred.

How large of a DNA sample does the Farm need to make a batch of Regens? Strands of hair? Spit/blood sample? Do they need the whole body and that's why HG never got their sibling's corpse? Can they reuse the DNA samples or does it eventually run or wear out?

The more the better. You can grow DNA, but there's always a danger of things dying off. Most cells don't live that long, and even frozen, samples decay.

If villainstep were to keep beating Herold with telepathy, without him knowing that that's us, will there come a point where he will ask us to help him improve his mental defences alongside our normal training with him?

OH yes. You bet.

For cis Steps— how does/did Ortega feel about what they assumed to be Step's birth name and the one they go by now? Which name is more difficult or easier for them to think of Step as? Before the Regene reveal were they ever tempted to call them by the lost sibling's name?

Ortega respects Sidestep's chosen name. That's their name. They'd get it. They go by Ortega, not Ricardo or Julia García.

Did Sentinel wear ear protection when he used his powers? Does he have any hearing issues like tinnitus or hearing loss related to them?

Sentinel uses earplugs a lot, specifically the ones that help equalize pressure differences. While a part of the Rangers he had ones with inbuilt communication, radio capability too. He does have some hearing loss since his early career, and wears discreet hearing aids in civilian life. He doesn't use internal mods, since he needs to switch them for plugs anyway when using his powers and going all out.

So like has the appearance of Boosted animals in the states led to populations of Boosted animals around the world? Is Australia still inhabited?

We have no boosted Emu so far, so Australia is safe. And no, since boosted animals can't breed, there's no population growing in secret somewhere.

We get told early on in book 2 that there were multiple offscreen confrontations between villainstep and Argent, but were there any offscreen confrontations between Herold and villainstep during book 2? If not, how come? Have they been avoiding one another? Was one of them actively avoiding the other? Or did they simply not run into one another? If there were, how did it go?

Of course for headcanons, there might have been several. Not saying yes or no. But in general, the difference is that Argent actively sought out the villain to fight them, while Herald did not. In some paths (when he's afraid) he might have actively avoided it.

Have there been points where you've been planning to make things possible in the game but then realised that maybe it was a bit too much or taking things a bit too far into themes or ideas that you didn't want to get into?

Ahahaha SO MANY TIMES. I did cut some "Ortega dumping Sidestep for Puppet" content from Retribution and pets got removed because that might fix Sidestep. It is hard for me to prune themes, I could argue that I should have pruned Retribution harder than I did. I am trying to do it with Revelations, and have already had to cut out a big bunch already done because it was leading me down a path where it would be too many variable for too little effort. Kill your darlings and all that, I need to connect things and deepen the central events instead. It is the hardest thing when writing IF's.

Sidestep tends to find the mental white noise of large human crowds annoying or stressful, did Locus or Thunderhead have similar sensory issues with large groups?

No. Locus has excellent shields for that, and Thunderhead kinda got off on it.

Could HG train to the point they can thread remotely? Or would that kind of strength need a TBR?

It would need a traumatic boost response yet, that's not something you train.

What powers would Ortega want if they got Boosted?

Right now? Regeneration.

Have Mortum & 5p ever met?

Yes.

I vaguely recall a previous question answer saying a Step with 100 Force/Subtle would be the strongest telepath alive. So, who is the strongest telepath dead or alive?

Not saying.

If Sidestep had, on the roof instead of taking with him normally, gotten annoyed with Daniel poking them and gave him a copy of their memories of their perspective of Heartbreak, how would he take it? Would he beg for Sidestep to erase those memories again? Would he inherit the scar to some degree? Would all the therapy in the world help him recover?

Too many AU's and options, I have no idea and no opinions. This is what headcanons are for.

I'm kind of afraid to ask, but how did the Church of Scientology adjust its doctrine/practice to reflect not only the discovery of the hero drug, but also the Big One?

It did not exist in our world, but I have a certain organization in the FH universe that might be a bit of a comment on it. Loosely speaking.

Was Ortega an anchor for Sidestep during HB?

No.

Does epilepsy and numbers really make people completely immune to telepathy, or are they like the dampeners where a strong enough telepath could still do their thing to someone who has one of the above?

There is nothing like being completely immune to anything.

What happens when you Boost a brain dead person?

Body degeneration and death.

Does Mortum, have a body of active nanovores in their lab?

Hmmm... define "active."

Going to regret asking this, but how do humans taste to the nanos?

Like purpose.

On a happier note, do the nanovores have a particular confectionary or baked good that they ask Argent to get more often?

Chocolate.

From where or who did Sidestep learn how to make their gates?

They figured that out on their own.

Has the Farm ever resorted to kidnapping federal heroes or vigilantes?

It has happened more than once.

Could Jake phase out of the Void's Tesseract labyrinth?

Yes.

Will there come a point in the story when Sidestep will find themselves seeing Anathema in their everyday life and not just when they're on death's door?

Maybe. We'll see. If so, it would be book four content.

Did Hood ever meet HG without realizing they were HG (like how Ortega's met them at least once)?

Oh yes.

How would the powers that be react to someone getting a completely overpowered ability from the boost drug? Like if someone got power mimicry (like early seasons Peter Petrelli from Heroes) or energy manipulation (like Sebastian Shaw in X-men First Class)? Would someone with that much potential get disappeared before they could get too powerful, or would they be allowed to grow in power while everyone else tries to get them to their side?

Recruited or removed as soon as possible.

What would happen if Argent's technopathy was disabled? Is it possible?

I don't think it's possible with more than massive head trauma, and at that point Argent is dead.

Would Ortega visit a birthday party/similar event for Blaze if it meant a guarantee of meeting Sidestep there?

Absolutely.

How did Argent celebrate her birthdays in the years following the Nanosurge, if she did at all?

She did not. Or if she did, by crying on the bed with icecream and sad movies.

Did Argent accidentally inspire any Los Diablos legends from her time as a sewer dweller? Does she know about any of those rumors?

She did, and I think she suspects and is amused by it.

When Sidestep turned up alive, did Steel go and re-review the autopsy pics/vid? Would this have been a thing to watch with Spoon for comfort or without?

Oh Spoon does not get to see that. But yes, he did.

What are the chances of there being a future choice to describe Sidesteps past hero career beyond sidekick/vigilante/hero like with their villain career & the planned Farm past choice? And if it's a good chance do you have any ideas of what they might be?

No. Probably not. That is all headcanon.

CW has the Farm tried installing wiped brains inside mechanical bodies? Does the memory of having bodies play role in the catastrophic failures?

Oh they have tried alright. The problem is that the memory is only half the issue, it is how the brain is already wired.

There's an unused thief subroutine labeled "robber" in the Retribution code. What did that route look like before you scrapped it?

It was boring and didn't provide anything extra, so I scrapped it but forgot to remove the variable.

What would each of the rangers reactions be if they walked in on Sidestep holding Rat Kings's tank and seemingly talking to no one, since non-psi-sensitives can't see or sense rat king?

Look, Sidestep is weird, that might as well happen.

Will Sidesteps (Argent romance or not) get to admit they changed her disposition towards them?

Probably.

What was the plan for the Nanosurge if Sidestep hadn't stopped it? Nukes?

There are no nukes in FH (that are openly acknowledged). But it would absolutely have been a type of thermobaric weapon. Removing the food source would do a lot to slow the swarm.

Depending on Sidestep choices of course— would it be possible for Ortega to have been close enough to Step prior to Heartbreak to know where they lived before their “death”?

Yep, that is all headcanon.

if HG threaded someone physically close to death and told them to 'stay alive,' would there be a tangible physical stabilization?

Yes, there would be, within certain limits.

Does Ace still look at the camera if you don't meet Shroud?

Ooooh this is a clever question. You don't know. Schrodinger's look.

How powerful was Ace's precognition? How much of that ability came back after they woke up?

I would say it hovered around 50, but Ace had more specific focus for it than Sidestep does, so it would have been higher within those confines and lower without.

If Sidestep and Void had been the only ones to survive Ortega's electric burst, how would Void have reacted? Would she have cut her losses, and admitted that her plan was beyond salvaging, or would she have tried to recruit Sidestep as the chosen one in Ortega's stead?

Another AU I don't know the answer to! You have to understand that I am focusing on the story I am writing, not the one I am not. I leave the AU and headcanons to you!

If HG ordered someone to do something difficult/impossible, would they feel compelled to keep trying to do it until they succeeded, or would making an honest attempt be enough? Would it depend on whether they thought HG expected them to keep trying?

Depends on how the question is formulated. I go by Djinn rules, but if it is something that is clearly impossible the person would stop. It's only a friendly suggestion after all.

How many spatial dimensions was Void able to perceive/move through?

At least four.

How would each of the Rangers react if guiltystep had also confessed the truth about their puppet while in the car with Ortega before the crash?

I don't know, and if I did, I wouldn't tell you. Yet another thing you need to find out in game or have your own headcanon for.

In the Void story, Ortega was musing at one point about what it would be like to be a telepath like Sidestep, but if they somehow got Sidestep's level of telepathy overnight, how would that actually compare to their expectations? Would having to hear everyone's thoughts all of the time impact how they see Sidestep? Would they regret their wish of wanting telepathy?

Oh Ortega would 100% regret that wish. They are NOT ready.

Actually would epilepsy "cancel out" Boosted telepathy? Or would having epilepsy create an unreadable telepath?

I think epilepsy would cancel out boosted telepathy, but I'm not sure.

What was the puppet saying in their sleep in the hospital after the gala?

I never decided.

Does the Farm keep track of the biological or physical age of Regenes?

Years since decanting is all that matters.

Did the Big One have any effect on the length of a day?

I would say it sped up the rotation of the earth a bit, it's probably shorter by a few microseconds now.

How would Herald handle a stakeout? Get bored? Start doodling and get distracted?

Herald is patient, he might doodle but would keep focus.

Would he fanboy squee out if he got to stakeout with Sidestep?

I mean, he'd deny it, but yes.

Would it potentially be possible for Argent to be able to send her nanovores under the skin of Sidestep to eat through their tattoos, removing them without the need for the regenerator?

Potentially yes, but you would still have the healing all the missing skin problem.

So what would Sidestep's tattoos taste like to the nanovores?

Procreate!

If Anathema had actually been invulnerable would they have still tried to use their acid power on themselves? Would surviving HB's command due to not being able to fulfill have long lasting effects on their psyche?

Yes! And everyone in contact with HB got lasting effects...

What's the largest swarm of nanos that Argent could control?

She has not tried on more than her own. She is wary of that one growing too big.

Does dove have any favorite colors? are there any main colors on her suit or colors you'd associate with her? how about Sky Raider?

I honestly don't know yet? I am not a visual thinker. Dove feels more muted, while Sky Raider would be bright.

What does the Void and their cult think about "useless" powers like shrimp vision?

It's still a power.

What would the Void and friends have thought of Sidestep as they are now?

Glorious.

Did the Void still age?

Yes.

Does the general criminal underworld know the Puppet is who placed the bombs at the gala? If so has it affected how people perceive them especially if it was a massacre?

No. I don't think so. Maybe. We'll see.

After the Void's death, did Anathema ever open up to Step or the Rangers more about their past? Or did they clam down and never talk about it at all, or were things just weird for them for a while after, either good or bad, before returning to normal?

I think Anathema talked a bit. Not in depth, but a bit.

If Ortega had been the one to discover that Sidestep might be alive after Heartbreak, and somehow found the location of the Farm, would they have been able to get Steel in on a rescue attempt?

I will not say yes or no to that.

Did the Cat fiend know what Regenes were? Did it realize Sidestep was one?

Hmmm. I'd say yes and no.

How did Argent first learn about the regenerator?

She has contacts.

Who designed and built Argent's apartment?

The Rangers paid for it, though Argent adjusted some plans without anybody knowing. It is easy to add things when stuff has already been approved and remove all traces afterwards.

Would a critical mass nanovore swarm be capable of understanding the harm it inflicted to achieve that size?

No.

Before the Nanosurge, did Argent know she had technopathy?

No.

If Ortega's plasma core were to overload, how much energy would it release in kilo or megatons?

I don't know, enough to take out a city block at least. Perhaps a city.

The nanovores tend to prefer living, terrified human meat, do Boosts taste any different to them? Like how Shroud gets more nutrition from Boosts?

No. In some cases, they are less tasty.

Has a Regene ever met their genetic donor(who wasn't a Farm employee)?

I have no idea, and neither would the Re-Gene.

Do larger animals need larger doses of hero drug to have effects? Like a large dose to a human is very small to something like an elephant?

Yes.

Can Shroud be killed by "overfeeding" by just chucking people at her until her powers drain too much "energy"?

Hmmm. Don't think so.

Could Shroud drain Anathema?

Probably not.

What was the Void's favorite food?

Seafood.

Can we give Lord Ember the nickname "San Fransicko"?

It is so funny I hope I remember it.

Since Sidestep seemed to have had a pretty good chance of doing it but couldn't follow through, what would of happened to the Rangers & the power balance in Los Diablos if they had managed to kill Herald & Ortega at the gala?

No idea! Never thought about it.

If Argent was aware that her opponent had a vulnerability that wasn't widely known (like say a recovering leg) would she consider targeting it to be cheating or fair game? Would it depend on her relationship to this hypothetical opponent &/or their behavior?

Oh she would consider it fair game in all cases except when she REALLY respects her opponent.

If Sidestep were to die with no one but Ortega knowing they were the villain would they do anything to stop or at least be bothered by tall tales about their Villainsona that make them worse than they actually were (like a nokill Villain being a killer)? Or would Ortega be unbothered by it because in their mind "Legacy of Villain != My memory of Sidestep"?

These are all hypothetical and AU questions. I have I no idea! I rarely think about this unless it goes in the book. Enjoy your own headcanons!

If the Rangers called a press conference without mentioning what it was about and then gave the floor to Sidestep who went on to confess about being a regene, showed their tattoos live on television and then talked about the things that the farm had done to them, how would the farm react?

Did you really think I would spoil that for you? Really? Tell you how the Farm would react and ruin any tension for book four?

If Sidestep had come to the HG meeting at the end of book 2 with 100% subtle and forceful manipulation AND 9 gates open, then went on to call HG weak when they tried to thread them, going on to mind control Jake and Nocturne while the dampeners are active, how would HG have responded?

Look. We are getting into EXTREMELY specific AU/headcanon answers here. What do you want me to do? Validate your own fantasies? I'm not going to do that, this is why fanfics exist. Don't ask me, this is not the book I am writing.

If Ortega got an offensive power from being boosted, would that lead to them getting rid of some of their current mods in favour for more stable mods since they wouldn't have to rely on their zappy zap as much?

Nope! The more the better.

Is Spoon more of an obedient good boy or is he the kind of doggo that would take treats from strangers and eat leftovers from binbags when he thinks he might be able to get away with it?

The latter, absolutely.

Was the Void the favorite food of anything in the weird spaces?

I have no idea if Void even liked food.

Does Los Diablos or San Francisco have a drag racing scene? Are there folks who get modded specifically for it?

I think so, and absolutely! Bo and Nehal would probably have been a part of that a few times.

If you drugged a telepath with talodine then read their mind, would you notice any difference? (Aside from them thinking "holy shit you just drugged me".) Would it feel like a non-telepath's mind, or have a negative effect on the mind reader?

I'm not sure. I need to think about how that interactive. I would say it would have a negative effect on everyone involved.

How old was the Void when they were boosted? Was taking the boost drug their choice?

Not old. Tween. And yes.

Is it acceptable or unusual for anyone to show up masked or hide their face at Joes'?

It is acceptable and not too uncommon.

building off the masks at Joes question, can villains show up in armor/suit? or is Joes purely villain casual?

As long as you don't make a mess, armor and suits are okay.

If Argent had managed to find Locus before the auction but after Sidestep "helped" her "remember" what was going on while she was possessed, what would she do to her? Would she bring her in to Rangers HQ or would she take revenge into her own hands for what she thinks Locus did to

her?

See, yet another hypothetical scenario that might happen later in game. I am not going to tell you.

Why is Argent so secretive about her real name, going so far as to hide it from her co-workers?

She doesn't want her family connected to her or what happened to her.

What does Argent plan/expect to do with the nanovores after she's used the regenerator?

That's a problem for future Argent.

As a follow-up to the Joes dress code questions: How do villain/hero venues that forbid weapons handle unremovable mods? Are they treated the same as boosts with dangerous powers, or differently?

As long as you play nice, there's no issue.

What kind(s) of boost would someone under immense grief be likely to get?

The same as someone who would not grieve would. There's no direct correlation close enough to be likely. And, the slight change to what kind of boost it would be would still be very variable depending on the cause. Like, a boost to help them take revenge? Mute their own feeling? Die to make it stop? Too many options.

Does Shroud know what will happen to her since she absorbed Ace's memories of the context behind their warning or was that detail of what's coming drowned out amidst the other memories she was going for?

That was drowned in everything else.

You mentioned in the previous Q&A that Shroud would fail to consume and then try to flee from a 9 gate Sidestep. At how many gates does Sidestep go from tasty boost to run for your life for Shroud?

Not going to tell you. That might come up in game.

How much would Argent be willing to change her physical form for a romantic partner?

She's always up for some fun.

Does HG need to pace themselves when making new threads, or is it only removing threads that is dangerous to the person?

HG needs to pace themselves. It is a delicate art.

If Themmy were still alive and still with the Rangers, and suspected Sidestep of being the villain, would they have been more likely to talk to the other Rangers first or confront Step directly?

Probably confront Step.

In the innocent MCcrash Argent can say she was gonna kill Sidestep & erase the evidence until she found out they were a regene, did she mean while Sidestep was in the hospital or was that in the long run?

We'll have to wait and see.

How would Hollow Ground have reacted if Sidestep had come to Parkfield still masked, and refused to unmask but offered alternative blackmail material by revealing their tattoos?

That sounds like headcanon/AU territory.

If Argent dies, do her nanovores just fly off and start mindlessly reproducing again, or are they tamed enough for them to not cause another NS the moment Argent isn't there to rein them in?

Oh you will just have to wait and see about that...

Hmm, do nanovores have a lifespan or metabolism? Would a single nanovore in a sterile environment without food eventually die of hunger or aging?

They would break down eventually, yes.

If we found irrefutable proof that Josh planned to have him and Daniel be villains and use their powers for personal gain and showed that to Daniel, how would he react/take it?

He wouldn't be surprised, sadly.

What about if he caught us trying to hide it from him?

He'd understand.

How would Step's infamy in the villain community be affected if it became public that they were the reason behind a Ranger (or more :bigcrimes:) switching sides?

Depends. It could both go up (good for you) and go down (suspicious). Mostly up tho.

Are there rules that you have for powers that can never come from a boost, or is pretty much anything free-game as long as the narrative calls for it?

I have no rules about anything. It is all open when I need it. But in general, I don't mess with time travel.

Is there a term in-world for people who become boosted but their powers are believed to be something that will not reveal itself? (Like how you said there are no aliens, so if someone gained the power to telepathically communicate with any sentient creature at least 1 light year away, nobody would find out what that power was for that person)

There is no term for that.

If someone reached out and touched HG after they started speaking, would their powers activate? (Assuming what they said was a command, that is.) Or does contact need to be made before they start talking?

Contact needs to be there when the words are spoken.

Are there any characters who would be likely to become a Regene rights activist or start a movement along those lines to honor a deceased Step post-canon?

No idea, but probably Danny.

What's the furthest Daniel has flown in:

A) one trip B) one day C) while ready to pass out

I honestly don't know. I know he has flown to San Francisco with little effort. It doesn't tire him to fly more than it does being awake in general.

How fast can Daniel fly if he pushes himself?

About 500 km/h. That takes effort and equipment though, not something he does on the regular. He can fly faster the higher up he is.

What was Daniel's flying like back when he first got it versus now?

Less controlled. Slower.

any plans for another beer & questions? 🍺 maybe... an nsfw questions one?

No plans, but who knows when I have beer. And I rarely answer too nsfw things due to that mostly being headcanons.

Since aging is a buildup of errors in DNA, does the regenerator undo aging to mid-twenties?

Hmmm. Not exactly, but a little bit.

What was going on in the nightmare loop that Sidestep trapped Argent in shortly before the first book started?

The nanosurge, drowning, eaten, unable to reach the surface.

Ortega feels a bit stung if we confide in Daniel before them about being a regene, what does Daniel feel about being told first?

Pleased and embarrassed.

Would Ortega have the same reaction if it was Argent in Danny's place?

Yes.

What was Argent thinking when the Sidestep that was romancing her said that she was beautiful? Her reaction seemed...lukewarm.

Oh Argent knows she's beautiful. She spend a lot of time making herself that, it's not really a compliment that connects at all. More like, sure, yeah, move on.

If Sidestep got a romanced Argent a plushie of their Villainsona in response to her Herostep hoodie message in the leg rights epilogue would she accept it?

She probably would.

Has Argent ever used her technolpathy on Ortega and/or Steel?

No.

Does the Special Directive becoming another potential enemy just feel like more weight that's been added to Ortega's already swamped plate? Or is the Regene reveal secretly a relief in some form— now they don't have to worry about Step picking HG over them in the future, etc. etc.?

Ortega doesn't know what to feel or think yet. It's all new and overwhelming, they need to redo their entire conspiracy board now.

How would each of the Rangers react to one of their own joining villainstep on the other side of the law?

You might see that in game.

Has Argent ever tried sprouting wings to be able to fly around?

No, but she has pondered it. Lacks the control though.

How and why was Anathema in a situation in their life where they joined Green Sky?

Grew up among junkies, addicts and homeless.

Will we have the opportunity to treat our crew as our found family or is it too unprofessional?

I don't know yet.

How did Anathema train their mental defences? Who helped them?

I think that started with the Green Sky.

Are there things most Regenes would know about their work or just Regene life in general that Sidestep didn't get a chance to learn about because of their initial escape?

I would say some, yeah. They were not a part of the combat teams, or the way normal Re-Genes interacted when the handlers were not around.

Would there still have been residual bad vibes at the HB site if the Ranger team never went on site and just bombed it from a distance?

Yes.

How intact does something have to be for the regenerator to work? Can you use very small samples like blood, hair or chunks of meat?

Mostly intact.

Would another telepath like Locus or Thunderhead have fared better or worse at HB in terms of resisting HB's effects, ending the crisis and surviving?

Locus better, Thunderhead worse.

Why did Sidestep not feel the pain that Argent apparently constantly feels from the nanovores, and only the pain of incoming damage when they possessed her?

Argent doesn't always feel pain. Most of the time that feedback is blocked, which also sadly blocks much normal sensation. Sidestep was coasting on her baseline block, but could not adjust the nanovores when things outside the norm (like physical impact) happened.

If, instead of possessing her, Sidestep had accidentally swapped bodies with Argent, would Argent embrace going back to her own body again or would she fight it and try to stay in Sidestep's body?

I don't know. She'd probably go back, she feels responsible for her nanovores.

Argent says that she sees the nanovores around her as her friends, but does she know and telepathically communicate with each of them individually, or does she talk with them more so in groups?

It's a group-mind.

What is this server about anyway? Liking the people here so far

I don't know! A place for people to chat? It's got no real purpose other than that.

Argent's relationship with the Nanovores ostensibly appears more like a partnership, whereas Step (during the nanosurge) was more outright, albeit severely limited, control. So, do the nanovores ever outright disobey Argent? Not just get a bit off the leash but complete disregard of command(s)

No. Argent likes to think of it as a partnership, but it is every bit as much control as what Sidestep does.

Is the magnitude of powers gained from Boosting(like classification) scale with the level of DNA damage sustained?

Not at all.

How does each of the HG trio treat retail / min wage workers?

I don't think any of them treat them in any special way. They're there.

Do Ortega's eyes glow when they use their mods?

No reason they would, but it sure looks cool in pictures.

Has the average potency or strength of the Enhanced community been increasing over time?

Yes.

If the Regenerator works, will Argent have anyone who would recognize her if they saw her on the street/ in the media and come looking for her?

Probably not.

Argent had to work on her face for a long time, but what about her voice? Did she have to practice control until she got it right or is there enough intact of her vocal chords that still can talk without the nanovores? Would she sound different after getting healed?

Enough of her vocal chords was intact. Maybe she sounds a bit huskier now, I always imagined her with a whiskey/blues voice.

How would Locus feel if she knew Sidestep could read the minds of animals? Jealous? Thank god I don't have to put it with that too? Curious?

Curious.

For the Sidesteps still in possession of their OG leggings and who did not confide their regene status to anyone, is Chen going to try to expose them as being a regene?

That sounds like you want me to tell you what will happen in game. Not going to do that.

Does the Griffith Observatory still exist in Los Diablos, or was it destroyed and never rebuilt after the Big One? Would it even work with the light (+ general) pollution?

It wasn't built. There's less interest in space than in our world.

Is there only THE Hero Drug or are there also chemical mixtures that achieve similar effects? Have there been any searches for alternatives if none currently exist?

I would say it is a collective name for a bunch of closely related substances with similar effects. There has been a lot of research done for safer variants, but so far nothing.

Was there anyone Anathema wished could've left Green Sky with them?

Not sure. Probably not. They might not have left if that was the case.

How does Spoon fare in the rain? Does he like it? or refuse to go outside when its raining?

He needs his little raincoat.

How smug is Ortega that ranchstuck steps are wearing their shirts? (and how crazy is it driving them for complicated/open/ortega_realize_crush&secretcrush relationships?)

I think you know exactly... No need for me to tell you.

Could the Rangers have taken on the Farm post HB with Sentinel, Steel and Charge all active and get Sidestep back? Including their allies like the other cities's teams and vigilantes like Ashfall?

We will never know.

Would you say that the Farm staff are more loyal to the Farm itself as an institution or the US government?

To the Farm.

There's no real precedent for someone suddenly losing their boost, right? So what was Ortega's thought process on asking Sidestep if they were still a telepath, anyway?

A way to segue into asking Sidestep to help. Making the question less abrupt.

Is Sidestep learning their own history in time with us, the reader? Or maybe 'learning' isn't the right word. More like... they know their own history the same way you know the layout of your bedroom in the pitch dark and are gleaming details the same time the reader is.

The Reason: This theory comes from reading other stuff and playing the game. I am getting the vibe that Sidestep had to sacrifice a good chunk of their own memories in order to stay sane. What's left is this crude caricature of Sidestep who is only peripherally aware of what is going on. Returning to the dark room analogy, Sidestep can remember the rough outline of things but if they were to turn on the light to see all the details, they could very well go insane. In other words, part of the reason Sidestep doesn't ever fully contextualize the experiments performed on them or go into any kind of detail about what is coming is because they can't. That would mean turning on the lights and going insane. So instead, both Sidestep and the reader are getting snippets of the truth. That's why we don't learn Sidestep is a ReGene until book 2. Sidestep never forgot they were one, it just wasn't a thought they could safely shine a light on until they were mentally recovered more.

Anyway, I was just curious if I was reading into all of that correctly or if I'm way off base. It's a great story either way, and I deeply enjoy thinking about it. Thanks so much for sharing this world of yours with the rest of us! It's truly amazing 😊

Oh you are touching on some very interesting subjects here, and all I can say is that you are so right about some things you are saying. Not completely, but this is absolutely something that is going on. Sometimes it is safer NOT to think about certain things.

Did Ortega's dad ever throw glass bottles at them?

It has happened. He did drink.

In terms of manpower and dollars spent, who's had more research invested into them: Ortega with their plasma core or Sidestep up until their second escape from the Farm?

Ortega.

On a lighter note, does Chen in F!Ortega world thank god that Julia isn't a man, or does he think he wouldn't have a crush anyway?

Oh absolutely the former.

You know those studies on how various drugs affect spiders' web-spinning? Does this imply that too much caffeine would weaken HG's powers/psychic defenses, or that a low dose of LSD would strengthen them?

You know what? That is too funny. I know exactly what you're talking about, and I am kinda into it. Might have to make that canon.

Do we know the circumstances under which Sentinel got Boosted?

No. But it was post the big one, so probably bad circumstances.

Does 5P smell rancid

To Sidestep, yes.

[Breaks Vol. 2 is out!](#)

[Jun 7, 2024](#)

Well, Pride month is here, and so is Breaks volume 2. If you fancy reading my comics writing, here is where you can order it from the publisher, though it should appear at a bookstore near you. Hopefully.

<https://store.orbit-books.co.uk/products/breaks-volume-2>

So what happens in this volume? Well, for one the problems don't stop when you've decided that kissing might be a good idea. Cortland's buried secrets are coming crawling back, and trying to keep the relationship secret is not exactly making things easier. I think you should all appreciate our restraint that we kept

the will-they-won't-they to one volume, no dragging things out here.

Oh, also our publisher is being hip with the kids! Here are all the tropes. I chuckled at least.

There's some reviews already:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/211916378-breaks-volume-2>

In other news, my ttrpg thingy for RuneQuest: Glorantha is coming along splendidly and looking gorgeous. I thought I'd be off the hook with someone else doing the layout, but there's still proofreading, checking things, a lot going back and forth. But the finish line is approaching. It is a good thing to have when I don't have the brain for creative writing or coding. Different parts of the mind being engaged. Balanced diet and all that, and hopefully establishing future income that doesn't rely solely on my work. We'll see if it pays off, sometimes you need to take a chance, and so much of the source material was already stuff I had written for the ttrpg campaign I am gamemastering. Would be a shame not to use it.

In Fallen Hero related news, I have written a midpoint thing that needed to be written for me to figure out how to write the things beforehand. Just like the post-crash hospital Ortega scene was one of the first ones I wrote for Retribution, sometimes you need to get the brainworms out so you know the vibe you are going for. It has led to me being able to compress the narrative somewhat and have it be less sprawling than I feared. Some changes in things already written will be needed, but I knew that already.

It's been interesting working on the structure, I didn't do that from the start at Retribution, which is why it was written so quickly at the start, but had to spend SO LONG in the edit stage to fix things. Hopefully this approach will work better this time, the start being slower in coming, but the final editing needing less massive additions and rewrites. We'll see.

Thank you once again for your support, this is always a busy time of the year!

[Unforgivable](#)

[Jun 5, 2024](#)

Alright! Time for this month's lore post. This time we are delving into the fallout between Chen and Ortega after the reveal of Sidestep's autopsy. This takes place early in Revelations, and will be repurposed as a scene in some paths where Sidestep still has enough of a relationship with either of them to be a part of this. If that doesn't happen, something like this might go down...

Enjoy!

Ortega's apartment, some unnamed time after Sidestep and Ortega were in a wreck together, and then shared too much in the hospital. Reveals of all sort, broken trusts and unearthed secrets. And now, a portentous absence leaving a hole behind for others to project into. For old friends to argue about.

Nothing cuts deeper than betrayal.

"How could you?" Ortega was pacing again, unable to sit still, channeling anger through action. Chen was familiar with that, but it was never nice to be on the receiving end. "You had pictures all these years... -pictures- of them on the operating table," she repeated, slightly louder. "And you never told me."

"I made the call," he tried, sacrificing a pawn to force a draw. Hopefully. Julia never played fair, in fights or arguments. "I decided the information was unreliable, at best only confirmation of what we already knew. An autopsy. Sidestep was dead. At worst..." He let out a sigh. "At worst it was a trap. Intended to wipe the rest of us out as well."

"Except that you were wrong," Ortega snapped, dark eyes flashing as she stopped to stare Chen down. "Sidestep was alive. This whole time. Captured. In pain. Thinking we abandoned them. That -I- abandoned them." She stressed the last sentence hard enough it might as well have been a dagger she shoved in Chen's gut.

"You mean I was the one that abandoned them, is that what you're saying?" Calm. No use losing his temper too.

"Damn right I am."

"You're not wrong," he admitted, shoulders sagging. "I did. And they told me as much."

"¡A la vé!" She threw up her arms as she stomped over to her fridge, pulling it open with enough force to nearly dislodge the door. As it was, the unit wobbled slightly before it settled back in place. "You took that choice from me." Her voice was cold as she stared into its frigid depths.

"Choice?" Chen remained seated at the kitchen table. At least they were having this argument in private instead of at the Rangers Headquarters. Keeping up appearances. "You would have gone after them, if nothing else to retrieve the body. And you would have died. Or worse."

"That was still my choice." She didn't look back, each word quick and sharp as a jab. "Beer?"

"Might as well," he replied. "And I couldn't lose you too." Not the Rangers. Him. Personally. A tactical choice but for wholly selfish reasons.

"You wouldn't have." Ortega turned back around, a beer in each hand as she kicked the door shut behind her. The shelves rattled but it didn't sound like anything broke. She popped the caps open before slamming one of them down on the table right in front of Chen. The impact made the foam rise, escaping the bottle, puddling around it on the table surface. She didn't react, instead she stepped back and took a swig of her beer, remaining on her feet.

"You're not immortal." Chen sipped his beer as well, choosing to ignore the puddle though everything in him screamed to get some paper towels to clean it up. Somehow this was part of the fight as well, though he wasn't sure how. "You don't know what you would be up against."

"Did you? At the time?" She didn't look away from him, daring him to lie. There was no answer there that wouldn't be a bad one.

"I didn't," he admitted, and quickly continued "But I assumed it was military. It had that feel. Definitely black ops, not something we could lean on even as Rangers. My contacts were spooked."

"I can handle the military," Ortega scoffed.

"Even back then?" Chen hated that he sounded like he was pleading, but maybe he was. "Before the upgrades? What were you planning to do?"

"I don't know, alright?!" She stopped to glare at him. "I would have found a way. I have friends. Powerful friends."

"I know!" Chen realized he was standing up now, having slammed both palms against the table. Only a miracle had kept the bottle upright. "I know you would have done everything in your power, and I was terrified that would have gotten us all killed. We're useful, sure, but we're also expendable." Security risks were removed. Ortega had no subtlety, that had always been her biggest liability.

"Speak for yourself," she muttered, voice filled with unfamiliar bitterness.

"What do you mean?" She hadn't intended for him to catch that, he was sure.

"You're a soldier. I'm a -project-." Her mouth twitched. "Don't try to change the subject. I could have done something. I should have done something." The desperation nearly broke her voice at last. "And you made sure I didn't, and look how that turned out. It nearly destroyed me. And them."

"What do you want me to say? That I regret it? I do, of course I do." He wished he could tune down his feelings just like he could tune down the neural input from his limbs. "And if I got to make the choice again, with the same information, I would have done the same thing."

"Even if it made me hate you?"

"At least you'd be alive to hate me."

"You can't always be the bigger man, Wei." She emptied the beer, no longer pacing but still standing up. "Even if you had them make you taller. Don't play the martyr here. You're not the only one who can make tough choices. Don't keep them to yourself."

"You loved Sidestep." Chen was the first of them to speak the word out loud. "Don't think I didn't notice. I didn't want to put you through that. Even if you'd rip your own heart out and decide to be rational, you'd be living with the image of them cut open on that autopsy table."

"I lived with the image of them falling. Hitting the ground. You know how close I was?" She looked down at her hand. "A fraction faster. If I hadn't..." A quick glance down, and she didn't finish the sentence. Sheathed the weapon they both knew she was capable of wielding. That Chen was still sane because she had lingered. "It might have been better to see a corpse. Closure."

"It might have been easier to share this if you weren't busy destroying yourself and talking to ghosts at the time. I couldn't trust you." Another pawn on his conscience, but at last he was threatening her king. Circumstances. This was not only on his shoulders.

"¡Vete a la verga!" She threw the bottle without thinking, and he raised his mechanical arm to parry. The glass smashed against the metal limb, sending shards everywhere. "¡No mames! Son unas mamadas, and you know it."

"Do I?" He raised his voice in return, matching her energy. "What do you even remember of that first year? Because let me tell you, I remember everything." The grueling pain of rehab somehow lesser than the pain of seeing his best friend and almost sister drink herself into oblivion to escape a grief he couldn't share. Couldn't share because he was needed. Move on. Push through.

"What do you want me to say?" Her voice cracked, almost imperceptibly. "Yes, I broke. Absolutely. Because there was nothing I could -do-" a shaky breath. "Nobody I could save. It was Hood and Elyise all over again but worse. I was safe. Nothing in there could touch me, I was supposed to be the one that saved people and I -failed-. And you robbed me of the opportunity to even -try- to make up for it."

"I'm sorry." Chen deflated with a sigh. "I did what I thought was best. I really did." He awkwardly picked at the shards that had landed on the table. No way of putting them back together again.

"I know. But that doesn't make me feel better," Ortega echoed his sigh, carefully walking over to get a broom and dustpan. "I shouldn't have thrown that bottle, though. That I am sorry about."

"I shouldn't have put my actions on you." Chen remained seated, not looking as she started to sweep up the shards.

"Damn right you shouldn't." She hunched down, hunting for shards by reflected light. It also hid her eyes, which was probably the intent. "Did you know about the Re-Gene thing too? Was that in your precious documents?"

"Not as such," Chen admitted. "There were hints of the tattoos on the footage, but I didn't know what I was looking at. At least not at first. There was a lot of blood, and some of the suit was still on, but..."

"You suspected."

"Eventually. It was a possibility. Nothing more."

"You could have saved me from making a damn fool of myself." She dropped the shards in an empty takeout container, then turned back to look at him, temper back under control. "I had no idea."

"I wouldn't ruin their memory for you."

"Instead you ruined my relationship." Ortega grimaced, a twitch quickly brought back under control. "Put my damn foot in my mouth because I reacted badly. Again."

"I'm sorry about that." He was. Honestly. Even if her temper was the real issue here.

"What?" She gestured to the broken bottle as if she could read his mind, which at this point she might as well. Knew each other too well. "Not going to lecture me on thinking before speaking?"

"You've been under a lot of stress lately," he tried, voice even. "No harm done."

"Christ, Wei..." that seemed to hit the wrong spot in ways Chen didn't understand. So much for knowing each other well. "Don't justify me. I don't need to hear that." She looked disgusted, but this time it wasn't him that was the target of her ire. "That was on me. I shouldn't have. I should be better than that."

"Sidestep is still missing. I understand." And yet Ortega wasn't out there scouring the city for them. Which meant that Ortega knew something.

"They're probably safe with their criminal friends." Oh there was the twitch again. "Not like they want to talk to me again. Not after this."

"We are still talking," Chen pointed out.

"Against my better judgment." Ortega scratched her emitters, there had not even been a spark as her temper had flared. They were still on their lowest setting, the generator needing to be bled off every few hours or so. "I've known you half my life. You get special treatment."

"Even when I'm a dick?"

"Even when you're a dick." She sat down then, finally. "I just want to go back in time and undo like five different things. Fix everything. I miss them." The last was admitted with a small smile. "The way things used to be."

"Me too." Chen tried to smile but it felt awkward.

"If the pictures had been of Anathema... would that have made a difference?" The question wasn't phrased like an attack, more like a person wanting to know how deep the next cut would be. To get the infection out.

"No." Chen didn't like that the answer came that fast, but he had spent too much time thinking about it. "If I obtained pictures of Anathema undergoing an autopsy I would have assumed they must have suffered a catastrophic boost breakdown for that to happen. They'd be dead. No way they could still be alive. And it would still be a trap."

"You really thought Sidestep was dead?" Her question was quiet, as if she was unsure whether she wanted a positive answer or not.

"I did." Again, no hesitation. Chen did not like to consider the fact that at this point he wasn't sure. He had kept telling himself that version of events since Sidestep returned and proved him wrong. Had it just been more convenient to think that they were dead? Had he kept quiet to keep Ortega safe, or just because it had been more convenient? A person he hadn't trusted, gone? Sidestep's accusations had hit him hard. Hard enough that there might be some truth to them even if he didn't want to admit that. "I had to. I learned that in the army. Linger on the what-ifs will kill you. Especially if you never get to see a body."

"Is that it?" Ortega frowned. "Just because you wanted to go rogue behind enemy lines to find your boyfriend you think I'd automatically throw caution to the wind and do the same? Is your own personal guilt the issue here?"

"Julia." Chen shook his head, the accusations hurt but they were old and he had told them to himself for years. "Since the first day I met you, you have done nothing but throw caution to the wind. That's one of the reasons I love you. But in this case it would have gotten you killed, and I couldn't have that on my conscience too. Better to be your bad guy."

"Augh," she groaned, running both hands through her hair. "I hate it when you're reasonable. I'm still pissed at you, you know."

"I know."

"And I'm probably going to be for a long while."

"That's fair. Do you want help finding them?"

"No." The answer came quickly, but Ortega continued in a lower tone of voice. "It's safer if I look like I know nothing. Like the break is final. It might as well be..." she muttered the last.

"Do you think we're being watched?" Chen frowned, he had no such indications, but Julia had been right about things like that before.

"I have no idea," she confessed. "But assuming the worst, we might be. So I am angry and ignorant." A pointed look at him. "See, I can play it safe."

"We've all changed since back then," he admitted reluctantly. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why did you sound so sure you were safe from the military?" There had been something in her tone he had picked up on that still lingered.

"Oh that was just some bullshit." Her laugh was honest enough to be a lie.

"You know what happened to Cavalier." Everyone did. The cautionary tale of their age, the valiant military hero turned villain at the end.

"He attacked the Pentagon. Not like they could ignore that." Ortega looked thoughtfully at the ceiling. "It makes you wonder though..."

"No."

"What?"

"No. It does not make me wonder. He was a man that got hurt and had the power to do something about it. It was no different from someone bringing a gun to a staff meeting. Just on a grander scale." No need for a grand conspiracy when ordinary pain would do.

"Speaking from experience?" There was something careful about her voice right then, enough that Chen took it seriously and not as another jab.

"No. I've never been tempted." He hadn't. Taking his anger out on other people like this never sat well with him. "But I've heard of incidents. Most don't succeed. But people break in war. They need someone to blame. Someone in power."

"Some would say it's the people in power that should be blamed." Sharp words. Chen suspected that by some, she meant Sidestep.

"Including us?" he asked, because that was the crux wasn't it? They were complicit in this system, integral to it. "Including you?"

"Maybe," she admitted. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not about to start subscribing to the notion that everything needs to burn so we can start over, but... Maybe some things should. Maybe we are to blame."

"You could always—"

"Could I?" She interrupted him before he could finish. "You know I can't. They own me. Like they own you. With the difference that my mods can't be downgraded to off the shelf stuff. There is no way I can ever afford to retire. They got me by the short hairs." She grimaced, rubbing her neck. "Never know when they're gonna need their pet emergency measure."

"I'm sorry." Chen hadn't forgotten. It had been one of the reasons why he'd argued for Ortega to be reinstated as a Ranger. The alternative would have been worse back then, and now? After the latest round of surgery? Some things you could not walk back.

"It's fine. I'll deal." She made a dismissive gesture. "You're not going to win me over with sympathy. I'm still pissed at you for what you did. Just mature enough not to storm out over it."

"It's your apartment," he pointed out.

"That has never stopped me before." She shook her head. "You know what messes me up the most?" She continued without giving him the time to reply. "The fact that I feel I can't trust you anymore. Oh sure, you'll have my back. But when will you decide you know what's best for me next time? When will you fuck over someone else to save me?"

"It feels like you have a scenario in mind." Chen didn't meet her gaze. He could guess. Most likely connected to Sidestep. Better to focus on that than the fact that the assessment hurt. Especially since he couldn't automatically deny it.

"Do I need to?" Ortega's eyes narrowed, trying to read his face. "Am I wrong?"

"I..." Chen hesitated. He didn't know. Couldn't be sure. And perhaps that was all that she needed.

"I thought so." She rose once more. "Thanks for not lying straight to my face about that anyway. Now get the hell out of here."

"Of course." Chen eased himself to his feet, trying to read her. She was angry, yes. Furious in the cold, calculated way. But was it really aimed at him? It felt... different, like that storm had broken with the bottle. Or maybe it was just his own need to have this blow over as fast as possible. "You will be back to work soon?"

"When they clear me for active duty." Her lips twitched in a cynical smile. "I suspect you know more about my status than I do. Perks of the Marshal and all that."

"Are we going to have a problem?" He paused, halfway to the door.

"I'll do my duty," she said with a sigh. "Just don't expect to be forgiven quite yet. Don't worry, I'll play nice at work. Nobody will notice a thing. This is between you and me."

"Understood." Chen could respect her wish to keep this private, considering how much was tied to Sidestep and their shared past. He doubted it would work, though. Daniel would notice, though he might not work up the nerve to ask. Would Argent? Care or ask? He wasn't sure. "Take care. Please."

"Stay out of my business," she retorted. "Please."

Neither of them said goodbye as he left. That would have felt too final.

[April questions answered!](#)

[May 28, 2024](#)

So sorry! I forgot that I hadn't answered them while swearing about my computer. This month has been chaotic as hell, it really slipped my mind, I thought I had already done it.

Thank you for reminding me!

There are certain villains who forged Sidestep into the person they are today. How does Sidestep rank in their minds?

Well, of the ones that are still alive I don't think they are really taking Sidestep seriously. Or, well, took them seriously since they believe Sidestep is dead. The ONE exception to this would be the Catastrophend. That one always knew a lot more of what was going on than most people. Not so easy to fool.

It seems like there are more powerful mods in mid to upper tier than boosts, but in the top tier boosts start to blow mods out of the water. Are there any mods that can rival the top tier Alpha boosts?

Yeah, but the problem is at that point they are rapidly approaching warmachines instead. There's very little human left in something that huge and powerful. Indeed, at that point they often need artificial intelligence to help manage the mods, and the line between what is a human controlling a machine, and a machine augmented by human judgement is very blurred. Add to that that these mods are classified military secrets, and it is kinda obvious why they won't appear on any "strongest" lists.

Would the 'offspring' of Sidestep's nanovores already be neutered and able to eat non-organic matter, or does Mortum have to redo it every time?

The offspring is neutered too. The nanovores pass along their "mutation/change" so unless something unforeseen happens the nanovores should be safe even if they procreate. The issue is that for mass procreation, flesh is the best source of fuel, so they don't procreate very fast. Just replenishing their numbers, no swarming behaviour.

Could Argent's nanovores teach Sidestep's how to turn into a supersuit?

That is an interesting question. I would say technically yes, the issue for Sidestep's nanos is that they are not fast breeders like Argent's are. If that hurdle could be overcome, I can see Argent and Sidestep managing to work something out together.

How aware were the rest of the Rangers of the tension between Sidestep and Chen?

Neither of them was very subtle about it, so I think most people knew. Anathema and Ortega were the ones who were steadfastly ignoring it though...

Chen's clue goes up faster and more easily than Ortega's. Is this because he doesn't have blinders on regarding them, or is it because since he already knows the truth he is able to connect the dots better?

Both. I would say that he's also less married to his theories than Ortega are, so he reacts faster to new information instead of wanting to push it to fit his own agenda.

If it was Ortega or Themmy instead of Sidestep in the autopsy pictures, would Chen have gone looking instead of assuming they were dead?

Hmmm. That is a good question. I would say yes for Ortega. Chen would absolutely know it might be a one way hopeless mission, but Ortega is the closest thing he has to a family. So I think there his heart would override his logic. The thing with Anathema is that they are invulnerable, so it would be hard to do an autopsy. But if we assume a picture of Anathema's horribly mangled corpse? Hmmm. I don't think Chen would have gone looking. He would justify it as if Anathema really has died/suffered a massive boost breakdown which broke their invulnerability, they really are dead. Nothing to do, Anathema's body can't look like that and still be alive.

How does a regenerated Lady Argent think she'll explain her new appearance and powers if the machine works out for her? What about Sidestep?

Oh she's burn that bridge when she comes to it. I think part of her thinks it wont work, no need to worry about that yet, and another part is quietly pondering just ghosting everything and going civilian for good. She's undecided, and I have some discussions with Sidestep about that planned.

Is Doctor Mortum modded? It's mentioned that they're stronger than they look and also have connections everywhere. It's also that their surgery scars are near invisible if I remember correctly.

Dr. Mortum has minor quality of life mods, some related to their transition, some to their control of their car and similar simple things. Nothing big, all of it very subtle. But yes, they are stronger than they look, but not overtly so.

I need to chase Ortega/HG around with a creepy crawly like a bratty little sibling. I think it would be very healing for Sidestep.

Sidestep really needs to heal... too bad they also have a job to do.

Does Chen panic when Sidestep books it during the kiss scene? In an "I fucked up" kinda way? Or is it something different?

Absolutely!! He is convinced that Sidestep will never show up again, and that he pushed too hard, too fast. There's a lot of anxiety there until he runs into Sidestep again.

What made Shroud fall in love with San Fransicko?

She felt it was a city that allowed for her old-timey eccentricity.

Before HB incident what kind of stuff Ortega and Sidestep used to argue about?

That depends a lot on the Sidestep, but I think at heart of many arguments was the fact that Ortega was kinda pushy and wanted to be closer, be trusted, know the secrets. And Sidestep wanted to keep their distance and be safe, even if part of them wanted to go closer. That strain triggered many arguments I think.

what would taking numbers do to someone that's psi-sensitive or telepathic???

Make their mind hard to read, much like for everybody else. In addition, their own telepathic talents would be... not suppressed exactly, but muddled? Like trying to drive while very drunk? You can, but... yeah. Not a good idea. It feels bad, most telepaths wouldn't take them after they've done it once.

what kind of stories has ortega told herald and argent about sidestep??

Ahahah oh a lot. But it depends on the Sidestep. Not all of them would be true, as Sidestep saw it either. Ortega likes the drama more than the truth, and at the time they thought Sidestep was dead, so nobody would be hurt by stretching the truth a little.

did chen ever contribute any information to these stories???

Yes, when he could contradict Ortega.

can chen drive? if so, does he have normal pedals, or a special rig for driving without use of his lower legs (since the lack of feeling/fine motor control might make it hard)?

Chen can drive, but yeah, his car normally has a special rig (he can plug into it with the same plug he uses for his armor). He can drive normally too, but as you say, the lack of sensation makes it harder. He has to focus real hard, and it's nothing he does for fun.

would chen be a good cat dad 🐱🐱

I think so. Probably a bit too attentive for some cats, but he would allow himself to be trapped if a cat blessed him with laying down on him.

What happens if Jake stops phasing while still inside of something?

That would be BAD. Could kill him if he didn't immediately go the opposite direction and become very hard. Then the object might explode instead.

Can you boost a tardigrade? What do you think the survival rate would be?

I don't think so, but it would be adorable. Insects and invertebrates have so far showed no sign of boosting ability.

If Sidestep full possessed another telepath, how would they perceive other people's minds? Would it be based on the body's telepathy or Sidestep's telepathy? Do you think there would be a long lasting impact on powers for either of them?

Oh that would be interesting! Could they? I'm not too sure about that. Might clash too hard. Or maybe. Hmmm. I need to think about this. But if they managed, it would be based on the telepathic powers of the body, though Sidestep might be able to utilize them better.

Why do the people around Chen keep wanting him to settle down and find someone?

Because they love him, and Chen seems like the kind of person who needs to stop living for his job and get a life before it's too late but doesn't know how. So he needs a push.

I think this was answered already, but is the person that hired Chen and Vince to act as bodyguards the same person?

Not exactly.

How do you come up with a backstory that works for your characters after you nail down the vibes?

In bits and pieces. I never bother with a coherent one from the start, there's an episode or two, but the rest comes out as I write. I learn about them as I go along. I don't need to know all their secrets from the start.

Has Ortega had any of those Sidestep hallucinations since Step's return?

Funnily enough, no.

Is Ortega always the one who hires Vera to break a romance bad guy killstep free? Or is it actually hollow. ground? Or is it someone else entirely...

It is variable, sometimes three people can pay her for the same job. Vera approves.

Is it possible for Sidestep's pain gate to be repaired/replaced? Failing that, will we have a definitive answer on what happened to it?

Technically yes, but there's a lot of scar tissue there so it would be very hard and might backfire. I mean Sidestep isn't sure what happened, but it did break in the fall from the window, and the Farm removed the remains as they operated to save Sidestep's life.

Do Shroud and/or Arde consider themselves human?

No.

Does Arde have plot armour? Or...

For book three.

Will Vera's romance progress at a faster pace since we're only meeting her halfway through the series?

Yeah, it will. She is also an easier person to get under the skin of.

Will Anarch-Steps have the chance to start a city-wide riot? With or without telepathy?

I'll take a note of that.

Will the Imposters have anything to say about Step's villain name?

Hmmm. Some might.

Did Ortega ever think that their hallucinations could've been Sidestep's ghost?

I don't think they ever ruled that out entirely.

The next time Ortega asks Step to stay the night, can we say yes?

You will have the option to, yes.

Would Ortega kiss Step's barcode?

Absolutely! And probably make a bad joke about it at some point...

If the villain has a bike (as per that path in Retribution), can we have a bike chase with Charge?

I do want to fit in a chase scene somewhere.

Are any of the imposters invited to Ortega's birthday?

The imposter thing will hopefully be resolved before then!

Can we bring Dr.Mortum or Vera to the party?

It would be very funny, so yeah.

Some of the Rangers are still willing to pay Vera to break out a Step that's murdered vs just breaking them out manually. I'm wondering, what's the reasoning there? Or is it a question of time passing and loss of opportunity?

It varies a little depending on the person. But in essence, the people who do the breakout immediately at the end of book two act from instinct, worry, friendship and love. They don't consider the consequences. A Sidestep which has pushed people further, done worse things, generally doesn't get that treatment. The things they did are too big for that initial panic to get over. The Rangers are angrier there, more focused on the betrayal and hurt. However, once that dies down, some might start to realize that keeping Sidestep trapped might doom them. And regardless of their crimes and how much they personally hurt, they don't want that. But, they are more aware of the consequences and can think more clearly, so they hire someone to do the job.

Will a puppetstuck Step be able to shunt the imposter back into the puppetbody when reclaiming their own? Or is a more unsavory method required in that scenario?

Ehehehe well. You'll see. But yes, you can do it without outside help if you choose.

If psychological trauma can strengthen telepathic power, can mental healing and stability weaken it?

Yes.

Is Sidestep moving in with an RO (or vice versa) within the scope of the story? Or is that headcanon territory?

I think headcanon territory, but I'm not sure.

If Julia were to get married, would she prefer to wear a suit or a dress?

Oh she could do both. Oh boy. I am really not sure. I don't think she is either. She would have to talk to the person she marries. I would say slightly more dress, because that can be a lot more dramatic and cool.

How's HRT in the fallen hero verse? Is it around the same as now, or is there any further advancements to it?

I think there are a lot more advances, haven't gotten into the details, but the medical science is ahead of our own.

In the heartbreak flashbacks- if you're able to see the woman she has green eyes, and then in the hospital they are pushing her into psychic 'depths' and such. Is there a connection with void in any of this? Sidestep had already fought void before that so surely it's not the same person but... Is it just a coincidence with the green situation?

I would say that Sidestep is haunted by several sensations that might be adjacently tied to the Void experience though they don't think of it. The color green. The feeling of being deep underwater. Vertigo and nausea. Things like that...

If steel fell into a large body of water, ie off the bridge, while in his full armor, what would happen?

Internal air supply going on and then he'll have to walk to shore if it is shallow enough. There is also an emergency floating device, but that makes him a sitting duck, especially as that part detaches much of the armor apart from the core.

Is Ortega planning on confiding about the, y'know, sidestep ghosts?

I think so. But Ortega has issues with being vulnerable.

Also, how long does it take for a book to go through hosted games once it's submitted? Do they make you change things about it or is there some creative freedom?

It takes about six months or so on Hosted Games end, though that can vary. I get a full editor report with comments, and I can decide whether I will act on what is said in it. I am more worried about the app store than Hosted Games...

Heartbreak network... What is this and what affect of it does to the city. How it connects to sidestep?

I'm honestly not sure exactly what you are talking about here?

If our mind strength reach to a impossible level, could we unlock some hidden power using opinions of mind power? Sidestep can see and interact into other people mind no other could do. Can we also create moster and nightmare in our mind which make them alive for help us control mebe even break other mind like puppet. Using other as our puppet? I see it possible since thare is sidestep scar exists.

Eheheehe this is indeed possible. Sidestep has the potential to become truly frightening.

For Manipulations if it reaches impossible level,can we change people mind , thought, personality without they notice? Like the feeling, we can just make someone can only feel positive to something and the negative will not be feel or think to control other only could feel and think the things that sidestep allowed ? Since red string of HG showed a excellent way of Manipulations of sidestep can do as their power is stronger than HG,I think they can do better than HG did.

Oh yes. Sidestep's biggest issue has always been making things last for a long time, in the short term they can rewrite people extensively. The one thing Hollow Ground is a lot better at is making things last, and integrate themselves into people's minds (the threads). Sure, they need to top them up eventually, but they still last a very long time for telepathic modifications.

The big difference is that Sidestep generally forces and pushes the mind into the shape they want. Misdirects, changes connections and so on. Sidestep does it TO someone's mind. So they need the skill and power to make it happen. Hollow Ground on the other hand uses the other mind against itself. HG suggests a feeling, or a course of action, and the other mind bends itself to do so. HG doesn't need the power, the mind they thread do. Thus, if the suggestions are closely enough aligned with the mind in question, the hold can be very strong. In a way, HG is better with strong minds, Sidestep is better with weaker ones.

Because from what I've (probably) picked up, does Physcopathor know the HG sibling? Or his wife?

Hmmm I would say no. Know of, probably.

In the 4.2 path I see sidestep can control the impossible number of people with ratking help.How much people can sidestep control now?

It would depend on the people and the situation and Sidestep's power. If the people are already in synch, like a military unit or a marching band, Sidestep can control more of them.

Is the Dreamweaver doing things to us / our puppet behind the scenes?

Not gonna tell you that!

Approximately how many pairs of cowboy/girl boots does Ortega own, if any at all?

Oh how big is Ortega's walk in closet... I would say at least six pairs, including one ostritch skin.

When you make a new character in retribution, you get to manually select all the major choices (scar, motivation ect.) but what about minor variables? Are they randomised or are there default ones?

Some are default, some are deduced from the major choices, some are randomized. In general, all minor flags for doing rare stuff are not implemented. You get the vanilla flavor.

So if Ortega's mods are dangerous/potentially life threatening to them currently, hypothetically, what would a healthy resolution for them be? Minor adjustments with no real change to them? Lowered or no zappy powers? Would a full de-modding be needed and they wouldn't be able to walk again? Would they ever consider the latter if that was the case?

The biggest issue is the generator, the rest is spoilers.

Sidestep wasn't the only lost friend at Heartbreak, will we ever get a chance to talk about Anathema with Chen/Ortega?

We do need an Anathema talk, yeah...

Would any of the ROs wear Sidestep or the Villain merchandise?

Argent already does. Herald probably has Sidestep merch in his closet.

How hard is it to acquire numbers and talodine? Can anyone just grab those at a drugstore? Prescription? Go though the uh right channels, if you will?

It's not drugstore stuff. Can't be prescribed. It's more military/company stuff so you need to know someone. Of course, everything trickles to the black market eventually.

If the accident never happened, and they managed to gain access to it, would Ortega have taken the gamble with the boost drug? (Bonus what would their powers be?)

Hmmm I don't think so. Ortega likes to defy the odds, but those were too bad, and they were not that desperate.

Do we know for a fact that Anathema is actually dead?

Sidestep thinks so.

Will an innocent step be able to willingly confess to being the villain while recovering at the ranch/ranger apartments?

Yeah... I can see that.

We know there are techniques non-telepaths can practice to shield their minds against intrusion. Are these more active defenses (like "do this if you think a telepath is listening") or passive ones (like "practice this form of mindfulness until you do it automatically")?

I would say both. Whichever one works best depends on the person.

If Ortega saw the autopsy video, would they have seen somebody or something else that they could imagine being the subject instead of sidestep?

No.

Does Sidestep have any physical scars from when the tapes Chen saw were recorded? (cw medical) Since you've said they weren't autopsy scars, is it more like vivisection? open chest surgery? keyhole? Or is there self healing tattoo shenaniganry at play?

I would say more like open chest surgery scars.

If Sidestep was mind controlling someone, and that puppet body got nabbed by Mortum's teleportation gun, would Sidestep be able to leave their puppet body from within the gun's cage?

Ahaha nooooope.

You've mentioned a couple times that you're too much of a metalhead to detail everyone's taste in music, which makes me wonder: are there any characters whose taste would overlap with yours? Or who you think would get into metal if you introduced them to it?

I always saw Chen as being a bit into metal/rock as a teenager.

What did the Rangers(or whoever approves the Rangers' budget) think about Argent's extremely specific and likely very expensive accommodations?

Oh there are ways to hide that if you know who and what to speak to...

How does 5P track his five particular pennies? Does he have a 6th sense that leads him or his followers to them?

Yes, he has.

Who did the Void think was more beautiful: Sidestep as Sidestep was killing them, or Ortega? If they had survived the Void lore snippets, would they have switched their obsession to Sidestep?

Hmmm.... obsession yes, but not in a good way. If Ortega was an angel, Sidestep would be a devil.

If the Void were to return, could Sidestep romance them?

Hell no.

Just to be clear, aliens will not be involved through book 4 right?

No aliens in this world.

Is the Void lost through dimensions and hanging out with aliens?

No aliens.

How did the Void train their powers, or was it all instinct? Could they have manifested new uses for it with further practice or Boosting?

Instinct and exploration. They could have continued to grow all the way to Omega level if they had the time and the inclination.

Is the Eternal Queen of Britain Boosted or naturally immortal?(You answered that there's no known prominent boosted politicians)

Well, there is always advanced medical technology too... which they claim is the secret.

I know people are excited to reveal everyone's dramatic plot secrets to each other—but more importantly, can we tell Daniel how many of his coworkers gave us the "you'd better not hurt him" spiel behind his back? Because I feel like he might not appreciate that.

Ahaha yeeah. Hmmm. Danny might also see that in a positive light, as in they care about him.

Could there have been a poly between the Void, Sidestep and Ortega?

No. Hell no. Please don't make me think that.

How did the greater Nanosurge swarm visualize or feel Sidestep stopping them? Was this different than what Argent's swarm felt or saw? Did Argent feel or see anything?

It was very different from what Argent's swarm felt and saw. Sidestep was pure command and control, very frightening. Argent's swarm felt that, and that was one reason they clung to their new host so tightly.

Does Sidestep specifically have physical scars on their body resulting from or matching the incisions pictured in the autopsy photos found by Chen?

I would say yeah. But Sidestep has a lot of scars...

What would the Void think about Argent, especially if they learned about her nanos?

Fascinating. Frightening. Better off dead.

So last month, you answered that the Void thought they should've ended things after boosting, did the Void want to be killed?

Hmmmm it's complicated. At one time yeah, but that changed.

Spoilered due to being a morbid question and totally ok if not answered but due to the nature of Anathema's acid powers did they ever have to dispose of bodies for the Green Sky? Those that didn't survive the Void blood?

Yes.

Why does Argent enjoy fighting so much? I'd assume that it would make her chronic pain & control issues worse but it seems like one of the few times where she seems consistently happy. Is that the nanovores influencing her?

I would say it is one of the moment when she feels the most in harmony with the nanovores, they are working together like a well-oiled machine. She is distracted from everything else and highly focused. For her, that adrenaline is freedom.

And building off that do the nanovores have any affect on her personality that shes aware of & if so is she worried about becoming a completely different person without them?

I think she worries about it, but at this point, how can she be sure?

Are there other similar entities to Dread Reactor out there? Like a UFO like big ugly and fat B52? Or a stupidly large tank?

Probably. I kinda want some weird big landcrawler monstrosity in inner Mongolia who escaped military control or something.

Is there any extra funky shit going on in this timeline's Bermuda Triangle as opposed to ours???

The Bermuda triangle is always funky. Good place for a villain base.

Also, I'm fascinated by the politics we've seen so far on a federal level. Will we get to learn more about the initial human rights violations case in Panama that was glossed over before GeniTech moved west? How did they manage to win that case?

I might get into it one day when my head is wired towards politics again!

Will we ever attend one of Mortum's villain Halloween parties? or perhaps as a lore/pov story?

Probably more a lore story, but we'll see.

Did Ortega tell the other Rangers(like Steel or Sentinel or even Ashfall) how Sidestep killed the Void? Or were they also kept in the dark and only given the official story?

Only Ortega and Sidestep knows.

A few things about Project Stripes—

Firstly, you said a few years back that 1) Argent got her technopathy from Project Stripes, and 2) Project Stripes has something to do with regenes. Are those things still true?

Yes.

Secondly: does Project Stripes have anything to do with the Core?

Nope. Nothing at all.

Does the Green Sky cult also revere Mods? Or do they only exalt Boosting for transhumanism?

Only boosting!

How horned up would the Void be for the Catastrofiend?

Not at all. That's an abomination.

Could a Sidestep that's got voideyes wear contacts to hide the eye colour change? Would they show through?

They can wear contacts, no issues.

Between Ortega and Chen who would you say is more ruthless?

Oh boy. I really don't know there. They both have it in them to be bastards, but also have soft sides. Maybe Ortega by a hair...

I know what the timeline says but text in the books themselves seems to contradict and the exact times seem kind of vague (intentional?) so ...approximately how long was Sidestep stuck being tortured at the farm after HB?

Not sure exactly, a couple of years. I never intended to detail it, the timeline came afterwards.

As part of cuckoo training was Sidestep kept informed when it came to pop culture references? Or were they super lost when anyone quoted anything post-escape? If so, did anyone pre-HB notice and try to remedy this?

Only what was needed for the job, so they would be lost most of the time. Anathema absolutely noticed (like seeks like) and did their best to get them up to date.

When it comes to flirting, is Benjamin shy, awkward, smooth, forward, cautious, something else? How about when he's flirted with? Does he get shy if someone's flirting is very forward or risqué?

I need to write it before I know it, but he's very confident in his own body.

Sidestep's mug in Ortega's place, was it the only thing Ortega had to remember Step? If it wasn't did Ortega lose any of the other when the couch was slain?

I would say one of the important ones. There are a thing or two more, but with less symbolism.

What would Nocturne/Jake have done if they found that HG was killed by Sidestep, who telepathically adjusted the aims of the formerly mind controlled guards so that HG was caught in the crossfire?

Either collapsed from broken strings, or done their best to kill Sidestep.

Are there mods that telepaths/other psychics can control remotely? Like a hand that can be manipulated by a boost power rather than by attaching it to the arm via the normal modding procedure.

Hmmmmm I think not yet.

How often does Ortega think about Elyise?

When the nightmares come.

Did the Nanosurge gain anything other than numbers and mass from eating people? Is there a critical mass where it becomes more intelligent or gains/absorbs Boost powers? Or was it pure gray goo through and through?

There are critical mass developement points where they start to act with more cohesion/intent. They can't absorb powers though, and I am not sure intelligence is the word to use.

How common is it for people to end up with identical boosts? Has it ever happened before?

Not identical, but they might look similar. There are many fire boosts, many strength and durability boosts etc. But not more identical than people are.

how's carter doing, in cases where sidestep left him alive but slurped out the info in his brain?

Probably still in a psychiatric ward somewhere recovering.

Would Ortega have been more pushy and nose-y into Step's background if they hadn't tinfoiled themselves? Would they have been able to find something out from a source other than Step if they had kept digging?

Possibly. But that is neither here nor there.

So far we know four types of regenes: cuckoos, SCOs, MBOs, and Terror Beasts. Are these the only standard types for operatives or are there more?

They are all I have needed for now, there might be more in the future!

How much of the Void's behavior was their original personality vs whatever their powers were at the time of their death?

Powers do influence personality, so I would say at that point Void was deeply changed, but they were still them.

Is the SD going to be more or less suspicious depending on who broke us out, especially for the guilty routes?

Hehe someone noticed I had not added suspicion stats yet... Not going to tell you!

We've asked before what the Catfiend would taste like to Shroud, but what would Shroud taste like to the Catfiend? Would she be "tastier" if recently fed?

OH YES! Turducken.

Any other named characters that have destroyed/damaged Ortega's cars?

Not that I know right now.

If Sidestep were to die at the Heartbreak site, how would their death impact it?

Spoilers.

Is Argent's original and weaker technopathy really naturally occurring? Or did she develop it from trace exposure to the Boost drug, like from tampered water supplies?

Project Stripes. Nothing natural about it.

Does sidestep have any lasting physical damage from the fall itself, besides scars? Like nerve damage or back pain?

That depends on the Sidestep. Some might live with chronic pain, some might have healed fine.

Since Halabi can address a Middle Eastern puppet in Urdu, whereabouts in S(W) Asia/North Africa is she from?

She's from the USA, of mixed Syrian/Indian heritage.

How different is the tornado situation in Fallen Hero America? Would their frequency and location of tornado valley change due to all the near apocalypse events that shaped the landscape? If so, has LD been hit with a tornado? (All assuming natural tornados only)

I would say that it is slightly less than in our world, due to a colder atmosphere over all, which would lead to less energy. I don't think there's been a natural tornado in Los Diablos.

Would have any of the rangers die in the og book(Don't need or want details. If that is still too spoilery then it will be my bd question for this year when the time comes)

Yeah. The person who Chen replaced did. Though I hadn't written the end, which is where the person who Ortega replaced would have got it or not.

What would be the Farm's procedure if an escaped cuckoo was found to be in the public eye? Like if Sidestep's face had gotten published alongside the Rangers in the old days?

Extract as soon as possible. Then find out who might know... and take measures.

Are there any Regenes copied from living people's DNA? Or does the Farm only use dead donors to minimize potential mishaps if a meeting occurs?

Oh living DNA is used frequently. No qualms there.

When they take samples, do they kill the people they're grabbing DNA from? Is that how the HG sibling died?

Unless it is necessary, they don't kill people. HG's sibling's death is spoilers.

There's information on the hero drug that mentions that it has a 95% death rate, but what percentage of those is due to their body failing directly because of the drug and what percentage is due to them getting powers that kill them (like the "power" of turning all of your blood into sand whenever you blink, or the "power" to turn all of your DNA into gold)?

I would say about 60% body failing outright, either immediately from a heart attack or system shock, or after a few weeks of suffering, with like advanced cancers, immune system breakdown and shit. The remaining 40% would be from incompatible powers, some of them might live longer than others (like fire powers with little protection), but they would die pretty soon.

Is it more common for regenes with telepathy of some form to try to escape?

I would say yes, they would be more aware of the outside world and options.

What would happen if Shroud touched:

a) the Imposter

Om nom, tasty.

b) a 9 gate Sidestep

Turn, run, scream, die.

c) catastrofiend

All you can eat buffet of rancid shrimp that will give you the runs.

d) Ortega

Om nom, zap.

e) locus

Om nom, tasty

Will we get a second chance to dethread Chen if we failed previously, especially since we can dethread Jake in the 4.2 demo?

Oh yes.

How did Mortum take being ignored by people when busting the puppet out of the hospital? Weird? Fascinating? Wrong? Was there a difference in reaction between subtle and forceful?

Fascinating. Mortum realizes the possibilities. I think they had to avoid people walking into them more with the forceful approach.

In puppetstuck ask-Argent-to-check-on-Step's-body ending, we see Argent use her powers to contact a "Project Manager" > is PM the pseudonym she uses for Step? or is the PM a different person?

A different person.

Can I get a lore snippet that's the Void's pov of their death? 0u0

Oh boy can I even write that?

What would the person who deployed the Nanosurge think about Argent's colony of nanovores?

Absolutely fascinating.

Re: the lore post. Has Danny taken his suspicions to anyone else on the team? Has he spoken to Chen, given he seems to talk to Chen about step quite often?

Not yet.

Is Marek one of the people aware of Sidestep's return to LD?

No.

How difficult is it for Chen to wrangle Spoon into a sweater? Does Spoon sit still or is he wiggly?

I think Spoon is wiggly when he is not sleepy. Gotta pick the right moment.

Could Void blood be used as the genetic template for a Regene? Or is it too unstable for that? Would a Regene clone of the Void inherit some of their weirdness? Or even be a vessel of their reincarnation?

Huh. I... am not sure. It is... yeah. Look. You gave me something to think about.

Will Mortum get to meet their armour up and walking about with a little rat-brain assistance? How fascinated would they be?

Absolutely delighted and enthralled.

Addendum: How terrified would Mortum be that Step has left a colony of nanovores in the care of rat brains without adult supervision?

Sometimes you need to do these things. They are neutered after all.

Has there been any research or progress in Unboosting people?

Not that I have decided on yet.

did sidestep ever so briefly clock the voids “that’s so hot” moment whilst in the process of murdering them?

No.

What does the current world trade economy look like? Is there much/any exchange going on between countries that don’t share land borders?

It is not as globalized as our economy, it is more like it was in the sixties, with the majority of trade being with neighbours and within the same power block.

What's the current banana flavor like

The banana epidemic happend in the FH world too. We have the same second-rate bananas.

Are there any other Regenes or handlers/Farm staff who still think or wonder about Sidestep specifically and if so, why? Did Sidestep have any help with either of their escapes or were they always carefully planned, one-person shows? Were they unaware they had help?

Yes, but all of that is spoilers!

Argent at the auction can tell villains she needs to bring them down without killing them. Is this a challenge she feels she has set herself to accomplish by herself? Or is there a reason why she doesn't think getting the other Rangers to pummel villainstep 4v1 would work the way she wants?

Oh this is her challenge!

What is Spoon's favorite dog toy?

A really chewed up soft toy, mostly used for Chen to pull at so they can have a tug of war.

How would the Rat King feel about Snowball?

Intimidated.

Can we call Hollow Ground a hypocrite for getting angry we tried to invade their mind, when they regularly do the same to others?

Sure!

Does HG name their fish?

Only the big ones.

Is Boosting more or less fatal for animals than humans?

About the same.

What does the TTRPG scene look like in the Fallen Hero universe? Are there more/less superhero themed ones to ours?

Less. I mean how many sports themed ttrpgs are there?

How would Psychopathor react if he saw the girls in a robot body?

Surprised and kinda proud.

Would a true generally intelligent AI be perceptible to telepathy? What would it feel like to technopathy?

It would not be susceptible to telepathy. Technopathy might work similarly though.

What is HG's favorite species of fish? Or second favorite, if the first favorite is a moray

Oh that's not his favorite, that's just impressive. I would say that puffer fish are adorable.

[Your questions for this month!](#)

[May 27, 2024](#)

Clarification, put them all in this post, I realize my last one could be misunderstood!

[Questions for the month and news](#)

[May 26, 2024](#)

Well, as some of you might have noticed, I have not been very much online for the last few weeks or so. Well, for a while now my computer has been breaking down. It has made it very annoying to work on, finally breaking down entirely. I've spent a lot of time trying to fix the issue, but the sad truth these days seems to be that laptops just aren't repairable anymore, especially when it comes to physical parts. Not even professionals seems to want to do shit, apart from "oh we'll keep it for a couple of weeks and see if there's something we can do, and it might cost almost as much as a new one."

So, yeah, this week it finally gave up the ghost for good, so to speak. I didn't lose any data of importance thanks to having it on dropbox, but oh boy is it still troublesome. I bought a new computer (probably more expensive than I should have, but I didn't want it to break down again and stuff gamers like tends to be more durable) but now everything needs to be downloaded, adjusted, sorted, filed and oh boy, my autism is not handling this well. I now have to learn how to live with win 11, and try to figure out how to hunt down and remove copilot as well as cortana. I had forgotten how terrible it was to surf the web without all the layers of privacy protection, just wading through things with edge at the start before downloading my usual stuff was... wow.

So, anyway, long story short, new computer, nothing feels the same, the keyboard is nice, but also weird, and the keys glow like bloody rainbows when I type. I don't even know if I like that or hate it, guess time will tell. It will be a while before it feels mine again, I do not handle change well. The power cord is in the wrong spot even! Yes, first world problems, but I just want to get to the point of feeling comfortable with it again so I can write instead of having to go uuuuugh to fix stuff so it feels right.

Thank you so much for supporting me! Seriously, it is thanks to you that I am able to go and buy a new computer right away and having this be an annoyance and not abject misery. Thank you so much, truly. I don't know what I would have done without you.

In better news, I have been working on the puppet in jail path, so you'll get a taste of that soon! Not the full demo, there are another path I need to tie in there first, but I am having fun writing it.

Aaaand in the meantime, please ask your questions for this month here!

[History is a circle](#)

[May 6, 2024](#)

Well, thanks to a timely placed nightmare this morning I realized exactly what it is that has been bothering me about the puppetstuck path. So, history time.

Back when I was writing Fallen Hero as a book (working title a supervillain writing experiment) back in the Livejournal days, this was the point where I ran headfirst into a brick wall. Until then, everything had flowed great, but at the point when our antihero (named Cyrus back then) got stuck inside Yasmin's body (the puppet's name, from the Bratz dolls) everything became real. It was both a revelation and a kick to write, right up until the point when it wasn't. Suddenly the book made me deeply uneasy, I stopped writing, and only came back to it a decade or so later when I needed material for an IF game.

In the intervening years I had figured out some things about myself. You might say that my egg had cracked, and I realized that the reason why I stopped writing was my own issues with gender and femininity (hint, they have never been good). Cyrus having to navigate being a woman for an extended period of time, not just dressing up as an act, hit too deeply, I tapped into some deeply (for me) unnerving feelings.

If you're not interested in my stuff, skip the next section.

For context, my gender/sexuality journey was pretty much as follows: I grew up as a boy, in the countryside, with boy friends, treated no differently by my parents. I didn't even know there was anything like being trans, girls were icky, I was just me. Then school came and I faceplanted into having to be treated like a girl and hating it. Found a book that had a character that could change gender with a magic ring, which was really neat, and got myself a male name (together with my equally butch friend) when I was thirteen or so, going by that until high school. There, I could reinvent myself, had a brief moment of counterculture girlhood since I made female friends, experimented with makeup and thought being a lesbian was pretty great. Then metal happened and who cared about gender? The death metal uniform in the nineties was essentially unisex, all my friends were male again and off to uni and a brief mental breakdown I went. So went my twenties, then online happened and I met someone, and fuck, guess I was bisexual. To make a long story short, I've been rummaging in the gender/sexuality grab bag enough that by now I've settled for queer/genderqueer just not to have to detail this every single time. I answer to all pronouns, but prefers he/him. I don't bother correcting people because fuck, I hate being perceived, but also I hate being put in a box and sometimes it is fun to switch things up. Dressing feminine still feels like crossdressing (I am old, excuse my language) but I can do it now and then. Most of the time it gives me severe anxiety and loathing of my own body. I feel like a man, I look and act like one, or I suppose a butch he/him lesbian because labels are... yeah. Queer is easier.

And so we are back to Fallen Hero. And me waking up at 5 am from a stressful nightmare where I have been packing for a trip that included a fancy dinner, and I needed to find a dress and underwear that worked for that. Light flashback of last summer's wedding that I went to. Yeah. Thank you for that subconsciousness, you hit the nail on the head. Guess that's what's stopped me from being happy with the puppetstuck path. I've balked at getting back into that mindspace again. Of being stuck in a body not my own. Being someone else. Not having a choice. Helpless.

Of course not all paths will have that. For some it might be a dream come true, with temptations of their own. But, regardless, it is not a thing where I can remain clinical and in control. I tried to be, tried to do the whole plan things out first (which is great, mind you) but now I need to let go. Get ugly.

So yeah, I know why I stalled, now I just need to build that bloody playlist and get over myself. Thank you for your patience.

[1.1.4 Pretensions](#)

[May 5, 2024](#)

Well, a change of pace. I have grown increasingly frustrated with my "voice" in the puppetstuck path, so instead of banging my head against the wall there you get a bit of extended/reworked Innocent Sidestep stuck at the Farm content. As always, missing choices, one path etc.

Hopefully I can figure out what bugs me about the puppet headspace soon so I can bat it into shape. Maybe it is just that I am in too melancholy mindset. It might be that simple.

Anyways, apologies for the delay, and enjoy!

*comment 1.1.4

*label innocentend

Tick-tock of the clock next to the bed. Repetitive beat tearing through the silence, a greater silence than you're used to and also a louder one. No restless sea of thoughts and dreams washing against your shields, Los Diablos a distant presence beyond even your reach. Tía Elena a slumbering pond, easy to skirt, reflecting nothing but moonlight. Somewhere, the distant thunderstorm that is Ortega, unreadable, untouchable. Asleep.

You should be too.

The house keeps making sounds. The settling of wood cooling from noonday heat. The distant hum of the air-conditioning unit. The sound of wind against windows. A distant howl of coyotes, far enough away to pose no threat. The chickens are at peace, their hectic cackle a soothing murmur now. If birds dream, they are too shallow for you to dip your feet in. The horses hover close to waking, always ready to run. You skirt their dreams on tip-toes, pausing by the nighttime guardians to sense if there's any cause for alarm. None. The dogs are calm but alert, you make sure not to alert them to your presence. You couldn't handle deep-diving the mind of an excited border collie right now, let alone her two rottweiler friends. They're among the hardest dogs you've met to change the minds of, their instincts run as deep as their need to breathe. You wish you didn't know that as well as you do, memories of running rising to the surface, only to be squashed back down. That doesn't matter. That was the past. This time, they are on your side.

*fake_choice

#They still make me uneasy, though.

No matter how much you feel the dogs' loyalty to this place and the people here, you can't help but feel as an intruder. As if they could turn on you at any moment, realizing what you are.

You let out a breath, trying to dispel those anxieties. You know that's not true, dogs are not intrinsically your enemies. They are trained. And these dogs are trained to protect. Their enemies are coyotes, not Re-Genes.

You are safe.

#Sharp ears. Sharp noses. Your allies in this.

Dogs have senses you don't. If you want to, you can dip into their minds, listen in, search for things that makes them uneasy. They might sleep the hot hours of the day away, but at night they are alert.

Keeping you all safe.

#They make me miss Spoon.

They couldn't be more different from Spoon, but they still make you miss the excitable Greyhound. He would probably love the farm, chasing chickens, wide open spaces. Less so the heat, or the fact that small, feathered animals aren't prey. The instinct to chase is bred too strongly in him, you wouldn't trust him with small animals. You understand why Chen muzzles him when he lets him off the leash. Less chance of an accident.

The dogs here are far more dangerous, but disciplined. Trained to go against their instincts to hunt prey, and protect it instead. Keeping everyone safe.

You can feel them now, doing their slow rounds, alerted by the distant howl of Coyotes. They're alert to the sounds of the surrounding night, but as the horses are still calm, they are too. Would they pick up on human intruders? Professionals? It is possible, but you also know that any professionals worth their salt would take down the dogs before approaching closer. Silencers. And that would be the last thing they ever did, because the death of the dogs would alert the last line of defense.

Said defense is also awake, roaming free with the dogs, leaving her herd behind. No assassin would waste a bullet on her, a trained dog would be a threat, but who would be scared of a little white Nigerian dwarf goat? Nobody, until it was too late.

Snowball is the reason you agreed to stay at the ranch in the first place. How long has it been since you and Ortega rescued her from that medical research facility? Almost a decade? She must be getting old, but there's no hint of pain in her joints or back as you brush her mind with yours. How would aging even work for a boosted goat? What other experiments did the scientists subject her to before she killed them and blew up the lab?

You can feel Snowball pick up on your presence, and you send a ghost-pet across her mind, once more affirming your mutual pact of protection. You've upheld your part, you brought her here, to Elena's ranch and a life of relaxed happiness. In return, she'll eliminate any threat to this place. At the time you were worried about someone targeting Elena because she was the mother of the Marshal, but from what you can pick up from her it's mostly been Coyotes getting exploded.

Hopefully that state of affairs will last.

It's always been unclear exactly how intelligent Snowball is, but you would put her on par with the dogs, and quite possibly more. Now that you have spent time with the Rat-King you've grown more adept at non-human minds, or perhaps it would be better to say you've become less prejudiced. There are so many ways that minds can work, and a bit of humility in interpreting impulses go a long way. You do your best to give her a heads up at the kind of threats that might come your way, quietly in the night, men with rifles and powers. People who would kill her dog-friends, then come for everyone else.

Oh she understands that. And she doesn't like it.

*if motivation = "anger"

You spend a moment warming yourself at the fires of her rage. They haven't faded over the years, and you can feel part of her would almost welcome an attack.

Caution is needed, you urge. If it happens, look innocent. Look afraid. Not a threat. Keep quiet.

*fake_choice

#And then kill them all.

Caution is needed, you urge Snowball. If it happens, look innocent. Look afraid. Not a threat. Keep quiet.

And then kill them all.

You can't afford to take chances. Not in this. It's kill or get killed, there would be no mercy for anybody here, the place would be razed to the ground, leaving nothing but burning buildings and dead animals behind.

Snowball understands. That much is clear. She's a clever goat, you wouldn't have trusted her to stay here otherwise. The amount of destructive potential they packed into that little animal is nothing short of staggering.

#And do what needs to be done.

Caution is needed, you urge. If it happens, look innocent. Look afraid. Not a threat. Keep quiet.

And do what needs to be done.

Snowball understands. That much is clear. She's a clever goat, you wouldn't have trusted her to stay here otherwise. There's no human conscience making her hesitate, in her world it's kill or get hurt. And she's had enough of getting hurt. Enough of watching herdmates singled out and never returning. She won't let anything like that happen to those she cares about.

She'd kill them all and scorch the earth first. And she could do it too, the amount of destructive potential they packed into that little animal is nothing short of staggering.

#And make sure they don't see her coming.

Caution is needed, you urge. If it happens, look innocent. Look afraid. Not a threat. Keep quiet.

And make sure they don't see her coming.

Snowball understands subterfuge. She's a clever goat, she wouldn't have escaped her confinement otherwise. The only one that did. She's had enough of getting hurt. Enough of watching herdmates singled out and never returning. She won't let anything like that happen to those she cares about.

Be patient. Take them out one by one, nobody'd look to the goat for the culprit, there's nothing directly linking her to the explosive results of her powers. You've seen the mess she leaves behind, the amount of destructive potential they packed into that little animal is nothing short of staggering.

Were they trying to unlock Cavalier's power to cause explosions? It would make sense, he was one of the more powerful heroes before he turned villain and blew up the Pentagon, dying in the attempt. Did they splice some DNA into Snowball and her friends, trying to find the correct trigger? Maybe. Maybe it was luck. In either case, they got more than they bargained for. As would anybody coming here, that much is clear.

You reluctantly release Snowball's mind after a mental scratch, landing heavily back in your own fractured form. Back to gravity tugging at your broken bones.

"\$!{swear}." It helps. Saying it out loud. Tasting the frustration, using it to plaster over the cracks where pain runs red-hot through your nerves.

*gosub_scene gosubtext paingate

You run your hands over your face, feeling the healing scabs. You need to stop those thoughts, right now everyone thinks you're \${name} \${surname}, retired vigilante. Not \${villain_name}. You need to push down that part of you for the moment, use your apparent innocence to heal. Ironically, your reveal as a Re-Gene has given everyone an excuse for your behavior. Of course you would seem suspicious. Weird. Distant. Imagine to have carried this secret all your life.

You prefer not to. There are conversations about in the future that you've been putting off by pretending to be hurt and tired. Not that you need to pretend very hard. You need to rest. Allow your bones to knit. Even the best therapeutic casts can only do so much if you don't allow them time to work. The micro-vibrations feel nice, and you find yourself relaxing despite yourself.

Maybe you can sleep?

Just stop. Don't think. Breathe. Focus on the bed. The vibrations. The faint moonlight outside. Count down. Like you were taught.

You fall asleep long before you reach zero.

*page_break Blessed Darkness.

[i]Blessed unconsciousness. Freedom from pain. Freedom from thought.

[i]It's so quiet. You don't hurt anymore. Adrift on a soft bed that smells like something you might be able to pretend could be home.

[i]But with sleep comes dreams, and with dreams comes awareness. And memory. You grit your teeth in your sleep, fighting a losing battle with your own mind and body.

*gosub_scene gosubtext dream2

*fake_choice

#[i]I could kill \${him} now. Easily.

[i]You could kill Ortega now. Easily. Nobody would know. Nobody would blame you. A needle in the wrong place. A necessary sacrifice for your ascent.

[i]No. This is wrong. That was not then. This is now.

[i]This is just a nightmare.

#[i]Why can't I fix this? Put everything together right.

[i]Why can't you fix this. Put everything together right.

*if tech_savvy

[i]You're supposed to be good at repairs, right? Why can't you make sense of the tangle of wires beneath you? Ignore the twitching flesh, focus on the spine. You can do this. Fix this.

*else

[i]You know people. You understand how they work. So why are you so bad at this? Trying to pull together connections lost? Digging through old memories, performing acupuncture on your heart. You can fix this.

[i]Fix you.

[i]Not that it matters. This is just a nightmare, isn't it?

#[i]This is a dream. I need to remember. I need to/[i] [b]wake up.

[i]This is a dream. You know this. And still you're here. And still you're dreaming. Deeper. Your hands sink into Ortega's spine, now metal and wires wrapping around your arms, tangling you to memories and fear. You need to remember.

[i]Remember what?

[i]Remember that this is a dream. Nothing else. It can't touch you.

[i][b]wake up

You jerk awake in your bed, the scream unheard in the quiet room. Nobody here. The morning light casts gentle shadows over the room, mostly blocked by the thick curtains. The door is securely closed, giving your frazzled mind some much needed privacy.

Awake. At last.

You look over at the clock, it's morning thankfully.

No way you can back to sleep after that dream. What are you doing remembering the Void? You've spent the last ten years trying to forget that mess ever happened.

*if voideyes

Even if the truth stared you into the mirror every time you looked. Not that you did so often.

Your reflection was always disturbing to you. Your green eyes did not make it less so.

*if force >= 81

Irrevocably changed. Would you be this powerful without those experiences?

*if subterfuge >= 81

You learned too much that day. Learned to see the world in new ways.

You look down at your hands. Bruised but steady. No shaking. No

weakness. This was just a nightmare, nothing more. At least it

waited until late to sneak up on you, your brain needs time to

recover and sleep is the best way to handle that. You learned that the first time you were here, and... oh. Of course. You came here for the first time after the final battle with the Void. That's why you're dreaming about this. Resonance.

Memories. Healing.

Stretching your bruised mind you revel in the quiet of the surrounding landscape. Empty in a primal way non-telepaths wouldn't understand. Stuck in bed, you can't walk outside to enjoy the near-endless horizon, but nothing can hide the absence of minds. Just one, distant, preoccupied. Tia Elena is feeding the horses. Too early to feed you yet, you need your sleep, she's worried...

The thoughts of concern makes you recoil like a snail meeting salt. You don't need to feel exactly how pathetic you must look, all you have to do is look down at yourself. Day four, and nothing much has changed. Clothes, sure, but casts have not. At least Ortega and the others have left for now, giving you time to recover yourself and forget the embarrassing memories of your first days here. It's easy to do, you were half unconscious with pain, sensations muddled, focus going inward to keep yourself from breaking. Breathe. Bite down on another cry. Don't show weakness. You feel better now, not because you've healed to any great extent, but because you haven't moved around.

You can't. Instead you stretch your mind, as broken and aching as your body. Tia Elena is petting a horse, her thoughts as solid as the ground she stands on. Would Ortega's thoughts feel the same if you could ever read them? Or would they be flighty and skittish like the horse? You can feel the animals around her, relaxed, but ever ready for flight, checking the signals for the others in the small herd to know if it's time to run. No, Ortega wouldn't be a horse, at least not someone running from danger. maybe towards. You shake that thought from your mind, and stretch further, but there's no other humans near enough to reach.

The sensation is something akin to relief. Not that you can relax, you're too aware of your weakness. Would you be able to detect any thought-voids? Maybe, if something alerted you to trouble. The horses are good that way, ever alert for strange smells and sounds. They'd pick up on a threat quicker than you would in this condition. And if they didn't, the dogs probably would. You have no doubt they'd be loud enough to wake you, even from a drugged sleep. You need to cut down on that, they help with the pain but you need to be sharp.

You hope you have time to heal more before something goes wrong, you're in no shape to fight. Not that hope does you any good, but yet you keep reaching for it like a life-preserver. You hope nobody will come for you. You hope Ortega's been able to erase your tracks through the system. So many hopes, will one of them be enough to keep you afloat? Will putting your trust in Ortega? \$!{he} seemed confident enough. But \${he} always does. Seeing \${him} that distraught at the side of your bed in the hospital was new, and you've both done your best not to talk about the mutual cracks in your facade. You don't doubt it is coming, but right now you have enough to deal with from \${his} mother. Who is heading back to the house to cook you breakfast. Grand. That means you'll have less than an hour to pull yourself together in some imitation of humanity.

You reach for a drink of water, the movement making you wince. Almost time for a new dose of painkillers as well, though you're lowering the dose to what you can tolerate. You don't need the numbness, not now. The combination with your concussion reminds you too much of helplessness. At least you've got long sleeves now, Ortega promised to bring back some clothes in your size, but until then you have to make do with \${his} spare ones. The shirts are worn enough to feel like silk,

*if tall

and with enough room for movement that you don't feel claustrophobic.

*else

and large enough that you need to roll up the bottom of the sleeves.

*if ortega_secretcrush

At least they don't smell like \${him}, that would have been additional torture you don't have the bandwidth to deal with right now. Thankfully, Elena uses a different detergent.

*elseif ortega_flirting_new

You almost wish they would smell like \${him}, but Elena uses a different detergent.

*else

They smell like Tia Elena's detergent. Safe. Crisp.

"Good morning. Are you awake yet?" Tia Elena speaks quietly through a crack in the door, allowing you ignore her if you had any hope of going back to sleep.

"I am," you say instead, resigning yourself to her sunny face as she pushes the door open.

"I'm making breakfast," she says, though the smell of coffee whiffing through the open door tells you that much.

*if veg

"They don't have that vegan bacon you liked so much out here, I've told Ortega to bring some when \${he} comes back. But I've got some vegetarian patties in the freezer if you want some?"

*else

"Do you want bacon or not?"

*fake_choice

#"I wouldn't mind some, I need the proteins."

"I wouldn't mind some," you say with a sigh. "I need the proteins." And an appetite. But the nausea will fade and you need to eat.

#"No thanks, I'll stick with porridge again."

"No thanks, I'll stick with porridge again." You still feel nauseous, and the thought of something fried makes your stomach turn.

#"Please, I'm starving."

"Please," you say with a sigh of relief. "I'm starving." You need to eat when you're injured. Thankfully that's never been a problem for you, and even with the faint hint of nausea from your concussion, your stomach is grumbling impatiently.

*if (not(veg)) # "No, unless you've got any vegan bacon?"

"No," you say, shaking your head. "Unless you've got any vegan bacon?"

"Sorry. They don't have that out here, I've told Ortega to bring some when \${he} comes back. But I've got some vegetarian patties in the freezer if you want some?"

"Thanks." You try to ignore your nausea. You need to eat. "Some proteins will be nice."

"I'll be in with it soon." Elena hesitates a moment before continuing. "Do you mind some company when eating? I've only had coffee?"

"Why not?" You suspect you don't have much choice here. She's filled to the brim with questions, and today is apparently the first day she's felt comfortable approaching the painful subjects. It's better to have food to hide behind. Makes it feel less like an interrogation.

"I'll be back with your tray in a moment." Her face lights up in a smile so much like her

*if \${he} = "he"

son

*else

daughter

that you can't help but answer it.

As soon as she's out the room, your face falls back in its usual scowl. You shouldn't let this get to you. You're \${villain_name}, and your broken body is nothing but a temporary inconvenience. Being here feels like hanging by your fingertips, your past the gravity that threatens to pull you down and break you. You can't allow that to happen. You need to remember the stakes.

And yet... the moment she pushes the serving cart through the door, you find yourself letting go, plummeting freely into memories unearthed by the nightmare...

*page_break First Time You Came Here.

[i]That drive was hell too. Pain of a different sort. A desert painted in disconcerting colors sweeping by the window, no less real for being imagined.

[i]"We shouldn't go there. I can't..." you mumble, bundled up in Ortega's car as \${he} drives too fast, too reckless down the bumpy gravel road. "Your mother..."

[i]"She'll deal," Ortega assures you, bandaged fingers clenched white around the steering wheel. You doubt it's safe for \${him} to drive. Neither of you care at this point. "You think this is the first time she's seen me messed up?"

[i]"I'm not talking about you." You press your knuckles into your mouth, feeling the pain as your teeth almost break flesh. Almost. "I'm not safe."

[i]"You said you can't be around people. There's nobody there but her and the animals. If it becomes too much, just tell me, and she'll move into my place for a few weeks while you recover."

[i]"What if I hurt her?" You teeth has left deep indentations in your flesh. A small valley of red surrounded by pale edges. Dry. No blood.

[i]"You're not going to." Ortega sounds so sure, but \${he} doesn't turn to look at you as \${his} car speeds down the road. "Right?"

[i]"I wish I knew." You can't stop the chuckle, it feels odd, like a tongue rattling in a can not knowing what to with itself. "Everything feels wrong now. After..." Void. After killing Void. Killing? Did you? Really?

*fake_choice

#No. She reached too far. Got lost. I lived.

[i]No. You didn't kill the Void. This was their own doing. She tried to destroy you, but didn't anticipate how stubborn you could be. Lost her footing and fell down a crevice. Closest analogy. You don't want to think about it.

[i]Not that the technicalities matter. The world is better now without her in it.

#Yes. I lured her to her doom.

[i]Yes. There's no blood on your hands, but you might as well have held the noose yourself. Luring the Void out into deep waters. Too deep. People always underestimated you. She was no different.

[i]The world is better now that she's dead.

[i]"You did what you had to. We did what we had to." Ortega does look at you then, the briefest of glances, turning back to the road immediately. The look on \${his} face is grim. Did your eyes gleam green just then? You've spotted it in the mirror, it's impossible to imagine that \${he} wouldn't. Weaker. It will hopefully fade soon. "The Cult of the Green Sky is done."

[i]"I know." You do. That's not what scares you.

[i]"I'll be okay," \${he} lies, in the face of your memory of watching \${him} scream, strung up for some sadistic bastard's enjoyment. If neither of you talk about it, it might as well have been a dream. "I just need some quiet. And you do too."

[i]"I know." Los Diablos had crowded you as you returned, leaning in with screaming mouths and minds tearing at undeveloped shields, wanting more, wanting everything. You would have lost yourself had you stayed there. Ortega's suggestion threw you a lifeline you hadn't admitted you needed.

[i]"You'll be okay," \${he} says with the surety of faith.

[i]"That's doubtful." You breathe another laugh, and this time your tongue fits right. "You're assuming I would know what being okay would feel like."

[i]"It's okay to be fu—messed up." \${he} bites back a swear, already preparing for \${his} mother. "Ashfall's not doing any better. Chen and Luis will hold the fort until we return."

[i]You don't answer that, nor the next few sentences. Ortega doesn't need a discussion, \${he} needs an audience to monologue to. And maybe you need \${his} voice, anchoring you securely in your body and head, instead of hovering on the terrible boundaries that the Void opened inside you. If what you did to stop the Nanosurge broke something inside you, the Void dug her fingers in and tore it open. No. That would imply intent. The Void didn't mean to do anything to you. You were inconsequential. A hostage for Ortega's good behavior. A sacrifice for \${his} eventual ascension.

[i]And instead you are the one sitting here, after flinging yourself on the pyre intent to burn. Yourself. The Void. Everything.

[i]Everything burns.

[i]Maybe that's how you need to think about this. About yourself. Damaged. You've seen what Emberfall left of his victims, struggling for life in a hospital ward. Third degree burns can be survivable, as long as the skin grafts work and infection doesn't take root in the meantime. Maybe that's how you need to think about yourself. About your mind.

[i]No skin. No walls. Open to everything. Even the bad stuff. Especially the bad stuff. Ortega was right, getting away from the city was necessary, and not just to give \${him} time to put together a new public face that fits right. You need to build some shields. New ones. Better ones. You put up brick walls after the Nanosurge, but they're in ruins, unable to withstand the seismic disturbance of whatever the Void tapped into. No. Something new. Something better. And in order to do that... you need to be around someone you can shield yourself from. Ortega wouldn't do, \${he} wouldn't tax your mind like that.

[i]\${his} mother though? She would be a good test subject.

[i]You press your hand against your eyes, hard enough to see stars. Green. That was a thought you didn't need. Banish the Farm and all the things it taught you. You like Elena. You've had dinner with her a few times. She's seen your face. You've laughed together. She's not a tool, she's Ortega's mother.

[i]"How's her ranch?" you ask, desperate to ground yourself in familiarity. You haven't been there yet, Elena moved out of Los Diablos permanently after the Nanosurge.

[i]"It's nice. I've only been there a few times myself, and most of those back when my uncle ran it. I think she's got rid of most of the cattle. Glad she kept the horses. She's got a couple of farmhands to help her run it, but she's given them a week off. Guess we'll better get used to mucking stable if we want to earn our stay..."

[i]You smile to yourself as Ortega keeps talking. Animals. Ordinary. Life. You can do this. And if you don't, you promise yourself to tell Ortega that it's not safe. You can trust \${him} to make the right decision. Maybe not the one you want, but the one you need.

*page_break You Trust \${him} With Your Life.

Do you still? Abandoning your memories you weigh the question in your mind. It chafes oddly. A puzzle piece carved with a razor trying to fit a premade hole.

"More coffee?" Tia Elena distracts you as she motions to your cup, and you nod mutely. It's not strong, the scent offers promises that the flavor can't cash, but right now you don't mind. It's warm, and it gives your bruised hands something to hold.

"Sorry. I think I spaced out there." You look down at the remains of your breakfast, eaten while you were lost in thought. You used to trust Ortega. When did that change? Right now it feels impossible to determine.

"It's fine," she says, "concussions makes people lose track at times." You're offered a gush of warmth remembering a young Ortega suffering bed rest after a bad fall off his bike. Fond memories since things turned out fine, but filled with remembered worry that it could have been worse. Would be worse. Like after you died. She looks away with a wince you wouldn't have picked up if you hadn't read her thoughts.

"You can just ask, you know." You don't want more Ortega memories mainlined into your tired mind. Better to offer her a knife for your own jugular.

"I don't know where to start," she admits, still looking out the window. You echo her movement, the curtains are open, revealing sunshine and view of the distant brown hills. "We thought you were dead. I still thought that a week ago." She avoids the fact that Ortega didn't tell her. That's between them. An argument to come, like a thundercloud growing on the distant horizon.

"That's not far from the truth." Your voice is bleak enough that she doesn't turn that anger on you. Doesn't accuse you of nearly ruining her

*if he = "he"

son's

*else

daughter's

life, though you catch an echo of Ortega's grief reflected in her thoughts. You raise your shields, you don't need to know how it feels to watch someone you love nearly destroy himself. "It wasn't my choice to stay away." Not at the start. And then things became too hard.

"Is it true... that people might be looking for you?" Cautious words. Is she afraid to reveal that Ortega has told her some things?

"Yes," you admit with a sigh. "I shouldn't be here. I'm putting you at risk."

"I'm the mother of Charge." She tries to catch your glance. "My husband was transferred to Los Diablos to help with the restructuring. I've had threats against my life before. Besides," and here she smiles, "I still have the cutest bodyguard."

"Have you had any... trouble?" You wouldn't have let Snowball stay here if you weren't sure that she was safe to be around for friends. If you hadn't made sure to tell her that Tia Elena was important and precious.

"Once." There's a look of unease on her face, and you realize she hasn't let Ortega know. "Snowball... dealt with them. I suppose the coyotes took care of the rest. I had to keep the dogs in the barn for a week until the rains had washed things away. I didn't tell the police. It seemed... unwise."

"And hard to explain." You're still impressed that Elena accepted Snowball into her household, even after knowing what the goat was capable of. On the other hand, she did the same with you. "I'm sorry I'm not what you imagined."

"Name." She pauses, trying to find the right words. She leans closer, hands clasped in her lap. "I'm so sorry you felt you couldn't tell us. I'm so sorry we made you feel that unsafe and unwanted."

"You didn't," you argue, but can you really finish that sentence? Not more than other humans? You feel that she wants to see herself as more than that. Understanding. Caring. She wouldn't have told anybody. But... "At least it wasn't just you. It was everyone. And your husband was in the military." The fact that he was dead before you met her didn't mean you could dispel that family connection.

"That he was." She looks down at her hands, an uneasy twinge in her mind. It tastes odd for grief. "I just want you to know you're safe here."

"Thank you," you start, but you can't stop, "but I'm not. Not here. Not anywhere. And it's not your fault. Too many people saw me at the hospital. All it takes is one stray comment. Running away here is..." you rub your eye. "Maybe it's stupid. Maybe it's delaying the inevitable. I just need enough time to heal. Then I'm gone."

"You don't need to hurry." Her gaze goes to your casts. "Broken bones takes time. And you don't have to pretend to be strong. Not here. I've seen worse."

"It's not for you," you say dismissively. "It's for me. I can't afford to..." Crack. Break. Splinter. All metaphors that feel too apt with your broken bones. "Just let me do it my way." It's not like with the Void, you're stronger now. Been through hell and back enough that this is a minor inconvenience. A setback, not an end.

"Fine. I will trust your judgment." She doesn't want to, you can feel that. But she will. "Just tell me... if worst come to worst, what will happen? What should I do?"

"It will be during the night." You're sure of that. Standard procedure. "Probably around 3 or 4 am. I expect the horses to pick up on it first, or maybe the dogs. I assume they bark?"

"More than I wish they did," she admits. "They roam the property, keeping the horses and goats safe. Stella usually picks up the scent, and her barks bring Joe and Pima." You catch her thoughts, and it makes sense. The border collie bringing the two rottweilers for backup. Enough to make the coyotes run. "Sometimes they wake up Snowball too."

"It will probably sound just like that. But the barking will go quiet fast." You don't tell her why, you see from her eyes that she knows. "If you hear that, don't go outside. Go and lay down under your bed and leave the rest to us." Her scent will already be strong on the bed, hiding beneath it means there's no new source of scent in her room. Hopefully enough to for hurried operatives to overlook her presence. She's not important.

"I can't just hide," she says, and there's Ortega staring back at you but in the shape of a petite woman in her sixties.

"Yes you can. I can't worry about you. Please. Leave them to me and Snowball." You try to project confidence, but it's hard to believe your own words. Broken legs. Bruised mind. Filled with painkillers and spite. Will they be prepared for you? How much do they know? You'd feel more secure if you were confident in your ability to possess one of them. But your inability to find your puppet has made you question that part of your talents, will it recover as your brain does? How will you know before you try?

"I have a gun, you know." Her face is set in stone, challenging your judgment. You doubt it is a standard handgun.

"Then keep it under your bed and don't use it until they spot you." You don't add that you doubt it will do any good.

*if \${he} = "he"

"Once Ricardo returns, I will rest easier."

*else

"Julia will come back soon, then you won't be alone."

She does her best to push back her nervousness and you don't mention that if anybody is liable to lead them here it is probably Ortega.

"Don't underestimate me," you joke, gesturing to your body. "Despite my current condition, I'm not exactly helpless. I haven't spent the years idle."

"I can see that." She nods, looking at you with a faint frown. "And I'm going to want answers about that. Eventually." The last is added softly enough to make it feel like less of a threat.

"Later." You put your mug down with a finality that surprises you both. "It's not something I want to talk about."

"You said that once before," she points out. "And in the end you did. And it helped."

"If you say so." You wish you could remember how it had felt, sitting in her kitchen, eviscerating memories for examination in a vain hope to chase out what seeds had been planted inside you. You wish you could remember so many things. Holes, like cheese. But who bored them and what did they contain? "But I doubt I have the answers you need."

"Why do you say that?" She lowers her voice, but you can feel her concern. What she wants to know. Why hide for so long? Why stay away? Why not ask for help?

You wish you knew. At this point you feel uneasy by your lack of answers. There's the superficial ones, of course. Anger. Betrayal. Risk. And yet... You trusted these people once. And you can't now. But they did not sell you out once they realized what you were. What else were you mistaken about? "Have you ever made decisions that felt right when you made them, but later you wonder why you ever thought that?"

"Yes." She looks down, mouth twitching sourly. An uneven edge between her and Ortega. A buried scar, never spoken about. "I have. And I think I can understand why some things would be hard to share. \${ortega_name} can be... difficult to talk to."

"Huh. I thought I was the only one who thought that. Everyone else seems to think \${he}'s easy enough." Easy words and bluster, effortlessly sliding off the teflon coating underneath.

"Only about things that doesn't matter." She pauses, then shakes her head. "No, that's not true. It's more about whether it hurts. Gets under \${his} skin And I know part of that is my fault. Or rather \${his} father's."

"Not a subject \${he} brings up willingly." Good, her thoughts are turning inwards, away from you. To her own guilt. Her own grief. A safer subject, by far. "I don't think they got along."

"An understatement. They were... too alike I suppose. Or maybe not enough." She looks down at her coffee, not meeting your eyes. "And I didn't want to see how badly things were going." Arguments turning physical. Neither of them wanting her to see, and yet the signs were everywhere. "I took Enrique's side. *ortega_namewasactingout.Alot.*" \${ortega_name}

"I can imagine." You don't know what to say, her mind is awash with memories, things she should have said, should have done, but never did. Plausible deniability. Discipline. Divorce was unthinkable, what kind of security would she have had? A failed career as an athlete and a family that would take her in but judge her silently for her actions. And now she is judging herself instead.

"I should have asked. Should have talked to him. Should have stopped him. Maybe if I had, \${ortega_name} wouldn't have left him that early. Maybe \${he} wouldn't have taken such stupid risks. Maybe \${he} wouldn't have crashed. Been turned into..." She gestures vaguely, and you realize for the first time that Elena really doesn't like what has been done to her child. Never did.

"Have you told \${him}?"

"No." She looks up at you, face pulled together in a frown. "It feels like it would be worse somehow. To admit that I suspected. Or at least added things up after the fact. It's better that \${he} think's I'm stupid and blind. Or even that I agreed with what Enrique did. Better that than a coward." She blinks, too fast, trying to keep from tearing up.

"Your choice," you say gently. You don't know what would be best here. How Ortega would react. You're not even sure how you feel about it. Families. You've long since known they're not all what they're cracked up to be, as a telepath you have no illusions there. But in this case you had. Maybe because Ortega feels so impervious. Because Elena always felt like a comforting rock. And now you learn they're both just as messed up as anybody else in this business.

"I know." Elena finishes her coffee. "But moving forward always felt easier than looking back. We didn't always have a close relationship. Maybe it took the accident for me to see what I almost lost. That it had almost been too late. And when Enrique died, reconnecting was easier."

"Sweeping the past under the carpet."

"Yes. I think it was mutual. Neither of us wanted to remember."

"I can understand that." You finish your own coffee, looking down at the empty cup. "Digging into the past can bring things back nobody involved is prepared to deal with."

"Are you talking about yourself now?"

"Does it matter?" Outside a horse shies, and you fall silent, but it was just a hen flapping her wings. No threat.

Too many ghosts are gathering at your door, it feels like your only choice is fight or flight. Pretending nothing is wrong is getting increasingly hard. But will telling the truth arm your ghosts or send them packing?

You wish you knew.

[Running late](#)

[May 2, 2024](#)

Busiest time of the year for me, the VIP puppetstuck content will be up on friday, sunday at the latest. Sorry for the delay, those two weeks of sick earlier in the month screwed my schedule!

[Lock the door and throw away the key](#)

[Apr 28, 2024](#)

Alright, I am busy writing puppetstuck content, so let's have a look at what is happening with some of the other characters during the start of this path. Surely everything is just business as usual....

The beauty of expensive restaurants was the amount of privacy you could afford to buy. Sound-dampened booths for business lunches, an assurance that the staff would neither see nor hear anything. It was an occasional thing for Daniel, he rarely had the need of arrangements like this. He usually met Marek in his office, but the man occasionally liked to be treated as an equal. As someone of importance, rather than the seedy documentation and television producer he was. Daniel didn't mind indulging him, but some meetings were better kept away from his usual haunts.

Haunts. Daniel shook his head. Bad word for a bad week.

Marek had met him outside as always, his best suit barely enough to get through the door. Daniel had dressed conservatively as always, style borrowed from memories of his father rather than his own imagination. Be someone who would go to a place like this. He didn't doubt he'd be let inside in paint-stained jeans and an art-house t-shirt, but he made a point of being someone else today. Impressing Marek, if nothing else.

"First of all, let me thank you for joining me here today." Marek was all smiles as usual, acting as if this was his house, his treat. "And agreeing to pick up the bill," he admitted with a wry smile once the waitress had left with their orders.

"That's not a big thing. You know that. I do it every time." Daniel sipped some water, watching the other man, reading his energy. Jittery as always. Sitting on something. That meant the meeting was about facts rather than funding. Despite himself, he felt a thrill at that. Distraction.

"And I'm grateful," Marek said, folding and refolding the napkin in front of him. A nervous tick. "I feel that's important to say."

"Prefacing what you're going to say next?" Maybe this was about money after all.

"Suspicion, Mr. Sullivan?" Marek gave him a look of shock and horror. "This early in our discussion? I would have thought you knew me better by now."

"I do know you." Daniel cursed inwardly, he was usually better at hiding things. "I've never had anything you might want to use against me."

"Except your wallet," Marek pointed out.

"Except my wallet."

"That hasn't changed." There was a pause as if Marek wanted to make sure Daniel understood. "I'm not sure why you think I wanted to meet, but I assure you there's nothing sordid about it."

"Oh." A blink of relief. No leaks. Just business as usual. Good. But if it was good, why was part of him disappointed? Did he want to talk about it?

"Now you make me think that maybe there is something sordid I should know about," Marek said, picking up on Daniel's ambivalence. "Come on, my boy, have I done you wrong yet? If there's something you want to share, do."

"Maybe later." Daniel kicked himself as the words slipped out. What was he thinking? Talking to Marek of all people? "You've betrayed friends in the past," he continued, trying to talk himself out of it. "I don't think you'd hesitate to betray me."

"And that's where you're wrong. This is about Ricardo, isn't it?"

"Is that your guilt talking?" It wasn't, but it was a welcome change of subject. "You were friends. You sold the footage of his crash."

"I needed to make rent." The admission came with a shrug as the first course was served, a moment of pensive silence and shallow small talk until the server left and he could continue. "I gave his agent the opportunity to buy it first. She was less than receptive."

"He still didn't appreciate it, I bet." Facts pieced together, one by one. Daniel hadn't pried, but sometimes things slipped up.

"My point is. Friends fall out all the time. Business relationships lasts a long time, and you have never been anything but good business for me Mr. Sullivan." The admission sounded honest, or as honest as Marek ever sounded. There was always an undertone of sleaze in his words, tainted by what Daniel knew about him. "I wouldn't ruin a long-term relationship for short-term profits."

"Unless the money was good enough."

"It would have to be a lot to counteract losing you. I like you. We share similar interests. You always pay on time. You've stuck your neck out for me." Marek counted the facts on one hand as if they were a ward against whatever suspicions Daniel held.

"Why did you want to meet me?" Daniel signed, looking down at his food. Was he really troubled enough to consider this? Could Marek really help?

"Ah, business first. Of course. Maybe a personal discussion later, then?" A wink.

"Maybe." A noncommittal look.

"There's been another incident." Marek leaned forward now, lowering his voice.

"An altar?" Daniel swallowed, food suddenly less important than facts.

"Yeah. If that's what we're calling them now."

"It's as good a thing as any." Altar. Shrine. Better words than the other thing that came to mind. A ward. A warning. "Where?"

"Two blocks away from the last one."

"Same configuration?"

"Yes." Marek grimaced, unusually subdued. "The door was sealed, the lock fused shut, chains from the handle to a nearby lamp post. That's why it was spotted so fast."

"But the door opens outwards, right?" Same as the last one then, this wasn't good. Two were a line, three were a pattern.

"Like any other apartment building, yeah. Wait, I have some pictures here." Marek fumbled in his pocket, producing an envelope he slid over to Daniel. It held a series of Polaroid photos.

"The building is deserted I suppose." Daniel leafed them through, one after the other. Similar yet different. The chain made him feel sick. New. It looked new.

"Yes, on the edge of the zone, uninhabited, like the others. There might have been squatters around, but the windows were broken so they could get in and out anyway. Blocking the door does nothing. Look at the eyes."

"I see them." Drawn on the door in what looked like spray paint. Black and green. Overlapping. Broken layers. "Did someone try to hack them out or was the door already damaged when they were made?"

"No, the damage came after. I don't think the eyes and the chain are from the same individual. The spray paint looked old. The chain didn't. Unless they keep coming back, adding to the scene over a few weeks."

"But if they wanted to block the door from being opened, why didn't they just place something heavy in front of it? If it opens outwards." Daniel said the words even though he suspected he knew the answer.

"It does." Marek's mouth twitched in an uneasy smile. "And yet the chains."

"You're thinking it too, aren't you?" It reminded Daniel of a painting. Symbolism. A ritual. A door barred, making sure nothing could enter. Or exit. Repeated enough times over the last weeks that Marek had noticed. The Heartbreak site was ever-changing, but this was outside the normal parameters. This was new. Paying Marek to have people chart those changes might just have paid off.

"Yeah," Marek agreed. "Something has changed. For the first time since it happened. Ugh. I wish I could get hold of Bennet. He doesn't answer his phone."

"Want me to check in on him?" Daniel had already thought about contacting the psychic. The medium. Sensitive. Whatever you'd call him.

"I don't know. Part of me wonders if he knows I'll bring this to him. And that he won't be able to say no. The other part wonders if he's just drunk again."

"It's your call." Daniel didn't want to press. He didn't know the man.

"Let me think about it." Marek shook his head. "Now, what was it that was bothering you so much you were worrying that I had heard about it?"

"It's complicated." He didn't want to talk about it. But the pictures in front of him made him wonder if he had a choice. There was a connection there. He knew it.

"Isn't it always. Work or pleasure?" Marek's voice was light, teasing. It hadn't exactly been a secret that he was in love, though Daniel hadn't shared with who.

"Both, I suppose. But not in the way you think." How was he supposed to begin? Maybe at the deep end. This was Marek. "It's... What do you know about possession?"

"That came out of left field." But no shock, just mild curiosity.

"I suppose." Daniel rubbed his face. "You're the one I know who know the most about... weird things. I've already looked through our archives. There's never been many boosts who controlled people like that, and the ones that did... it was all short-ranged. Telepathic or drugs. Manipulating people in the vicinity. More control than possession. Nothing really fitted."

"I'm going to do something unusual and be the voice of rationality." Marek leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Are you sure it's not just a breakdown? Psychosis? Drug use?"

"I suppose I can't be sure." Couldn't be sure of anything but the feeling in the pit of his stomach that screamed WRONG loud enough to make him nauseous. "It's not like you can test for anything like that. What goes on in someone's head is private."

"Unless you're a telepath." A twitch of a smile.

"Yeah." Did Marek know? Did it matter? "And it's not like there's anybody around that I can ask about that anymore."

"Yeah. That's suspicious too." The missing telepaths had been an option for an episode, but there wasn't enough to go on to make it interesting. And Marek had called it off, the research back in a box until further notice.

"And now Bennet is incommunicado." Daniel sighed. He felt paranoid. Not a good feeling to have.

"He's not a telepath."

"Might be close enough." Daniel wished he had someone to ask. This felt like the beginning of a painting taking shape, but he couldn't see the end results. Just that there was purpose in each brushstroke. "What if this is so much bigger than we thought? What if telepaths are the first ones to feel it? To leave? What if that's why they're gone?"

"Then they would have brought family and friends." Marek shook his head. "I think the answer is both simpler and more sinister. I think someone has a use for them. Or a use for them gone."

"It's just..." he broke off, biting his lip.

"You need to tell me if you want my advice," Marek pointed out. "And from the look of things you do."

"The reason why I asked about possession is that a person who is very close to me has changed." Such a small innocent word. Daniel wasn't sure how else to phrase it. "Changed in ways that... I don't even know how to describe it without sounding like I am the one having a psychotic break." He shook his head. Bit his lip. Gathered his courage and continued. "I've looked it up. There's this delusion where someone is convinced that a loved one has been replaced by a copy. Or a demon. Or..."

"Calm down. Breathe." Marek looked unmoved by Daniel's shaky voice. "You're here talking about those doubts with me. That doesn't sound like you're delusional."

"I feel it, though. How I don't know how else to explain it. She's different. Her smile. Her eyes." Like something had crawled in there to look at him when he turned his back. The worm in the apple. He felt nauseous. "It's like she has to pause for a fraction of a second before coming up with what to say. No emotion there. The pauses at the wrong place. Like a badly briefed actress. Oh Lord, I am sounding delusional. Am I having a breakdown?"

"Don't your job have resources for that?"

"They do. Maybe I should talk to someone. Maybe I would have if it wasn't for..." for the fact that it might ruin his career. That's what it was at the start. But now? It had gone beyond suspicion and into the realm of concrete evidence.

"If you want a contact not connected to your employer, I can help with that."

"Not needed. But thank you." Think rational. Analyze. Daniel could do that. Trust his feelings. "She's been avoiding me. All of us. That's nothing new, but we used to train together. She's called that off now, too. Says she's sprained something. And then I followed her... no, you don't have to say anything." He gave Marek a look; stalking your girlfriend never ended well. "I know what it looks like but that's the thing. I couldn't have. Followed her like that. Not before. She'd know. Immediately. Not now. And she was shopping. She bought... chains." A similar kind to what had been in the picture.

"Oh." Marek looked down at the photos, now back in their envelope.

"Yeah. And Ricardo called her in for a consultation two weeks ago. With one of his cases. The private ones we're not supposed to know about. Anyway, it was in the hospital. I was there for a checkup and spotted them. Followed." He wouldn't have. In the past. But she walked wrong. How could Ricardo not see it? "I don't know the details. There was a commotion, and later my friend went into the bathroom. She came out ten minutes or so later. Nothing strange. She and Ricardo left, and I got ready to follow when I heard a scream. From that bathroom."

"Go on." Marek was all ears now, that look on his face that meant he was taking notes.

"I went in, and... well. Here. I took pictures." Daniel opened up his phone, the latest model. With a camera. A sponsorship. A blatant thumb in the eye of the privacy laws, making electronic photography available to the masses. Not his wisest sponsorship, but he had agreed regardless. He opened up the gallery, handing it to Marek.

"Oh." An appreciative sound as he weighed the phone in his hand, then looked down at the pictures. His face darkened immediately as he held it up, eyeing the small screen with a squint. "Yeah. That's not good."

"You see the eyes, right?" Daniel watched Marek's face as he figured out how to zoom in.

"Hard to miss. Is that blood?"

"Oh the broken mirror? Yes. But the eyes are drawn in lipstick. There were some in soap too, but they didn't show up very good on the pictures." The reflections had made everything harder. "I made sure it was all cleaned up and that the staff would keep quiet. I can't let Ricardo know."

"Does she have any connection to the site?" Marek mutely handed the phone back.

"Yes." Daniel was proud that he didn't twitch.

"And you're not going to tell me about it."

"She had friends that died there. That's enough you need to know right now."

"Shit." Marek shook his head.

"Yeah. Have you heard of other people doing things like this?" Maybe this was a widespread thing. Not an issue with her, but with everyone connected to Heartbreak. Would that be better or worse?

"Outside the Zone? No. But this is Los Diablos. Things like that might be overlooked. Maybe that's how it starts. The degradation. And then they go to the site and..."

"She's not going to jump," Daniel interrupted, voice hard. "She wouldn't. She hates heights."

"I'm not saying she will." Marek held up his hands. "I'm just saying that maybe you're not the one being delusional. Unless it's to the point of faking this whole thing."

"I'm not. Trust me, at this point I wish I was."

"I believe you." Marek rubbed his chin, that familiar look when he decided what to pursue next. Except this was not something that could be aired. "What do you need from me?"

"First, if you had heard of this happening to others. Which I suppose is a no." Daniel ran both hands through his hair, not caring whether he ruined his carefully careless hair or not. "Second, I wanted to talk to Bennet."

"Who doesn't want to talk to us. No wonder you were eager to go look for him. You could have led with this, you know?"

"I wasn't sure if I wanted to tell you everything," Daniel admitted. "But I needed to tell someone. And it was too personal with Ricardo."

"He's impulsive. Always was."

"Did you ever find any clues about where Locus might have disappeared to? I know you decided to scrap the telepath episode, but I know you did some research."

"Facts? No. Clues?" There was a moment of hesitation. "Yes."

"Then tell me. I'll pay you." Daniel put all his authority in the look he gave Marek. At this point he had two options. Either bring Ricardo in and try to explain the fact that his ex-girlfriend might be possessed or find a telepath that had been wanted for questioning since the attack on Lady Argent. Who had also been possessed. There was a connection there; he was sure of it. All he had to do was find it.

[Questions for April!](#)

[Apr 27, 2024](#)

Alright, a little late. Is working on the other two updates, will hopefully get them out this weekend. The puppet path is currently a massive puzzle spread across the floor pieces everywhere, but I'll pull together a coherent snippet to post so you can see where some of it is going. I am having fun with it, just struggling with certain aspects, second guessing myself what I want to reveal early. Timing is always the trick when it comes to these things.

[March QnA!](#)

[Apr 21, 2024](#)

Alrighty, later than normal, but real life be like that. Got over the sickness that's been haunting us, but my brain is still cheese so I might not be as eloquent as normal. Working on it though. And in other news, next demo will be Puppetstuck, I am finished plotting it now. Just need to regain the pretty words to write it proper and the right playlist. Thank you so much for all your support, it really helps when I am feeling a mess.

Does Chen like or connect to Julia or Ricardo more? He desires something deeper with Ricardo, but might he push him away because he knows he can't have it? Since his relationship with Julia is exactly as deep and meaningful as he wants it to be is it easier to be close to her?

I think certainly Chen's relationship with Julia is easier for these reasons. There's less strain there, Chen can relax and be himself in different ways. He'd like to think he is long over Ricardo, but it's still there, bubbling under the surface, making things awkward.

From most to least worrisome how do the Rangers' issues rank in Chen's mind: Ortega's obsessions, Herald's inexperience, Argent's suspiciousness, Sidestep's... everything. How does he rank his own issues?

Chen considers his own issues to be under control. Not an issue. I think that during Retribution, his two biggest issues are Argent and Sidestep. Ortega he feels he can keep under control, and Herald just needs more time.

In universes where Julia never had a queer relationship with Sidestep did that affect why Argent would brush off her flirting?

No. The same reasons as for Ricardo. Argent didn't dare risk it with her nanovores.

When the Rat King does things like keeping Jake and Nocturne asleep are they doing that with their own power, or are they using Sidestep's power?

They are mostly using their own power, it's not great at initiating things, but a good thing for keeping the ball rolling and being lookouts.

Is Sidestep breaking into their house the most danger HG has ever been in?

No. But close. HG's gone sloppy.

Did Deadeye know the youngest sibling?

Nope.

Would anyone other than HG and Ortega have ever been able to recognize who Sidestep actually was?

Yes, and they have.

Will there be a major difference in the confrontation with HG if Sidestep already knows who Ortega suspected they were?

There will be different mentions variants, yeah. That scene will fill out as I write other things.

Were HG's sibling's stats more blue or orange?

A mix. They were still growing. Probably more orange.

How does Jake rank compared to other threats Sidestep has faced?

Competent, not a major danger. At least right now. Hand to hand fighters are always limited against a telepath, though the phasing throws everything off.

Was Argent actually in any danger from Shroud?

I would say no.

Can Sidestep just continue to refer to Lord Ember as Emberfall?

Only if it pisses Lord Ember off.

I'm curious, how many new variables is revelations gonna add?

No idea! A lot. Not that many major ones though, but some hidden will become visible and more important and central.

Also, when do you plan to add an end of the book save for retribution?

That is not up to me, that is up to CoG. I think at this point they add saves when the book is submitted to them for testing/editing, but that might change in the future. I have no say in the matter.

Is a Regene the chip or the body? Could it be possible to take their AI chip out of their Regene body and place it into a new one without the tattoos? Would they survive the process and stay the same person or be "reset?" Would their powers come with them?

The Re-Gene is the body. The AI chip is like a starter engine, it is the catalyst for memories, skills and personality. But the body supplies the powers and growth. Transplanting AI chips would lead to different people. "Experienced memories" are not stored on them, they are stored in the brain. Only the training/core memories are on the chip.

Genetically, would regenes be considered another species of human or something else? If the boost drug weren't involved but everything else remained the same in the creation process, could a human and regene have viable offspring?

Genetically, Re-Genes are 100% human. They could have kids if not for the boost drugs.

If Step were to pull one of those classic "we could rule this city together" move with their RO, which them would be most likely to come around to the idea?

Ahahaha clever ask, but I will not tell you that. You have to take the risk yourself.

Will we learn what Vernon said at Step's/Anathema's funeral? And was he actually right?

Yes we will, and no he wasn't!

In the interest of find out how catastrophic of an ending there could be... is a global extinction event in the cards?

Nope.

Would you say any of the Hero ROs are more ruthless than the villain ROs?

Yes, I would.

Likely-hood of Ortega giving a romanced Step a petname based on spanish?

I mean the player will be the one to pick it, so it will be up to them.

Since we can see Step finding out that Ortega could still want them even if they're a regene, how quick could it be before Step starts feeling an even greater sense of attachment there?

Up to the player! But we'll see how I write it, everything is not easy sailing.

Complicated question, but for Steps who come to be considered HG's family, what would the trio's thoughts be on a Step who dislikes how Nocturne allows a telepath to meddle with her mind? In a lack of respect sort of sense, like "you would have made a good regene?"

None of them would get it. Look, if you have a broken leg you put on a cast. Anything else would be stupid. Nocturne would be like "projecting your own hangups much?"

If Sidestep was in someone else's body and HG tried to thread them, would the thread be in Step's mind or would it remain in the puppets?

Remain in puppet most likely.

Would Chen take the time to teach a fighter Sidestep how to play chess? Esp if they asked/are dating?

If they have the patience for it, sure.

would the Rangers find it unsettling if Sidestep kinda laughed/giggled when in high tense situations out of reflex?

No, that's a pretty normal reaction.

would Dr Mortum appreciate it if puppet/step often came over to their lab just to feed them? home-cooked meals and other things. How do they feel when it stops due to revealing themselves?

That would be very appreciated and cute. And oh wow, would the pain hit when it stopped. Never have leftover pizza felt that sad.

How does Ortega feel about a Step who's romancing/befriending Chen? Especially one with high suspicions.

Sus. Very sus. Ortega would be very protective.

Should Mortum be worried about the Rangers after betraying Sidestep?

Not more than before.

If you tell HG you were Sidestep, does HG jump to the conclusion that Ortega was using Sidestep in some way?

It is a very easy conclusion to jump to, isn't it? It would make sense.

In Mortum's betrayal/kidnapped route, will there be an option to be afraid of Mortum? How would Mortum take it?

Probably, and how Mortum would take it depends on the relationship.

Does Chen enjoy being Sidestep's mattress? Very important questions being asked right here

Yeeeeeah he does.

HG's biggest challenge was the Void cult... if the cult had waged war against them back then, who would win?

The Void. HG relies on subtlety, not open conflict.

The Rangers felt a bit nervous with a void eyes sidestep when they first turned green, then relaxed when it turned out to be just another scar. What would they have done if they started changing? Especially for the worse? How would Nazar have taken it?

Taken measures. Void's powers were already weird. And oh boy, Nazar is spoilers as hell.

Is Dread Reactor capable of emotions? Does it ever get lonely? Does it have preferred pronouns?

Dread Reactor uses it pronouns. I don't think it gets lonely, but it is capable of emotions. Specifically resentment and rage.

What do Skybright and Cavalier think of each other? Does the other get worried about their opponent coming back?

They were always rivals. No love lost there, very much icy stares and cold shoulders. Skybright is worried that Cavalier is not dead.

If Sidestep's mental instability started getting catastrophically worse, would animals be affected? Would Rat King be able to help? Or are they not at that level yet?

Animals would be affected eventually, but not as a first step. The Rat King might be able to help, one might say they have already in some paths.

Can Sidestep take someone's 'mental body/soul' and trap them in a body of an animal?

No.

If Sidestep were to try and imprison Jake's 'soul' in their mind, separating him from his body, would he be able to escape? Would he have survived getting caught in Dr. Mortum's gun?

I don't think Sidestep could do that. He would not have survived for long inside Dr. Mortum's gun, but [spoilers]

When we mindmeld with Argent to talk, it mentions "you're not sure why your subconscious has decided that the place where you faced down the nanovore swarm is the best arena for your talk," is this because our subconscious somehow recognized what Argent is?

Oh yes.

If Shroud consumes the mind of a boosted person, does that have any difference from a non-boosted person (in "taste", in the amount of strength she regains, or perhaps with any side effects)?

Oh yes! It is much better, tastier, more vibrant. True nourishment.

If yes, is there any type of boost that would be dangerous/toxic/harmful to Shroud? As in, she could get hurt while consuming it?

Hmmm. I think eating Void or the Catastrofiend would make her throw up.

If yes, is Shroud aware of such a thing?

Nope.

In another Q&A (I think the one before this) you mentioned that Anathema wouldn't leave much at a crime scene. What does that mean? Why did you word it that way? *panic*

Look, acid is efficient is all I am saying. Sometimes you don't even need a bathtub and bleach. Also, no dead skin cells or accidentally dropped hairs...

Maybe it's due to the conditions of my game. But at the end of Retribution: when an innocent and broken leg sidestep is deciding where to go Ortega seems "relieved". Pretty much not matter what I choose. And this is with multiple sidesteps. Why is that?

Because Sidestep will be somewhere Ortega knows. Not underground. Not "I have friends elsewhere, drop be off and I'll go underground." No matter what, Sidestep is findable and trackable in each of the choices here. Which is the important part.

If you can reveal it, what was going through Ortega's head when a friend sidestep randomly admits to being in love with them? They seem take it pretty well but I'd love to be a fly in their head at that moment.

Maybe I will write that one day, it is an interesting scene and Ortega going wtfwtf while cartwheeling inside their head is always entertaining.

You may not be able to answer this but: is the location of our base more than just fun moments (like the mob crew talking about the store employee) and flavor text or will there be consequences to that choice of base.

Might be for some.... not all.

hii! recent patron here, love your work!! :) bit of a simple question (that you mightve already answered) because i'm still catching up with the extensive amount of lore i missed in my playthroughs: what are the RO's general music tastes, assuming that our music carries over to the fallen hero world?

I am a metalhead at heart! I do not know much about other music styles, thus I have left that entirely to headcanons.

I was thinking on last month's Q&A question about Chen having access to retired military codes and contact with that mystery party to help launch the airstrike. It got me thinking two things:

1) What kind of security clearance did Chen even have since he was former Task Force Arc/Arc 4? There was a question many Q&As ago about what kind of info on regenes is available to a high security clearance, and I wonder if Chen, being an ex-Green Beret and on a super secret task force, had clearance high enough to know about things like Re-genes..

Chen knows many things, and I will not reveal then in a qna. Maybe he will trust Sidestep enough to share in this book.

2) It was answered in another Q&A that Chen has some friends in the military who, through their contacts, helped get him Sidestep's autopsy photos. Are some of these same friends Arc 4?

No, these are different. Placed higher up.

I heard from somewhere that some telepaths often moved out into the countryside due to the city's 'noisiness' amplified with their powers. Is that true? Or is it a convenient excuse to explain the missing telepaths?

It is true, to some extent. Telepaths that had issues with creating strong shields needed to do that to stay sane. Imagine never having silence!

When Ortega talks about a potential pre-Heartbreak Sidestep vs Lady Argent fight they say Sidestep could do a lot more than just keep away from Angie. How well do they think Sidestep would do in that fight, and how right are they about that estimate?

I think Ortega might be underestimating Argent, and overestimating Sidestep. But, on the other hand, remember that Ortega has seen Sidestep fight both the Catastrofiend and the Void, and Sidestep did have a gun in those days. So... who knows?

Between HG, Nocturne, and Jake which of them is most prone to impulse buying?

HG.

If mob boss Sidestep has luxury base and crew knows the base, has Savannah met the crew?

Yeah, I think so. They would be coming and going regularly.

What did HG and Nocturne think if instead of the villain it was the Puppet who arrived to the meeting?

It was a snub, intentional and annoying. Sending staff to a personal meeting was throwing the gauntlet for sure. No respect.

What is HG's, Nocturne's, and Jake's opinion on Hero Trainer?

They don't know it is different from Hunter, they just see someone who likes fighting heroes.

If Sidestep got red-threaded but saw the red thread in Jake's mind, would that possibly offer hints on their own red threads or what HG's powers are?

Clues might add up in the end, I do add tags for these things.

Could high force Sidestep destroy Nocturne's red threads if they knew what they were looking to tear apart?

It would be a monumental task, and she might not survive it intact.

If Sidestep lied to Argent during auction villain reveal that they did not possess her, did Argent actually believe them like Sidestep thinks or did she just opt to remain quiet about it for now?

Spoilers. Not gonna tell you.

If going by mob boss leadership stat, where would HG fall in terms of their leadership stat? And would it differ if they did not have their red threads?

Spoilers! Not giving you their power level, you need to work that out in game.

If Jake were to ingest poison and turn ghost, would it still course through his system?

Hmmm... Yes, but... weird. Would help survive.

How Eden(maybe ace)think of sidestep? What choice we made will change the ways of how puppet think of sidestep?

Oh there is a ton! I have access to all the tags in the game so far to play with... there are no single choice that sets everything.

I see there will be more details of how ratkings react to sidestep in their mind. Will sidestep see they as friends? Or even more as family?

As far as the Rat King is concerned, they are friend, and very close to family. One of Us.

What will other react when they know of how sidestep control ratkings and nanovores? Main Ros and the good doctor, it will be impressive.

I think everyone will be impressed, scared, and in some cases, kinda horny.

Will there a chance sidestep become the good doctor lover without using puppet in book 3?

Yes.

Do you have a general idea of the amount of endings the series will have? I'm sure it changes as you write, just curious if you have a number in mind.

No set number, minimum of three major I know, which has been there since the start. But it will probably grow.

And does it get overwhelming trying to keep track of all the branches in the story? I don't think if read another IF that has anywhere near the amount of paths FH has!

It is overwhelming at times, but that is also the fun part. Once I finally resolves the puppet everything will be so much easier.

Do you have an estimate of how many more in-game years will be covered in the story? So far we're at one, going on two soon with Ortega's 2nd birthday after our comeback (?)

I don't know... there might be a timeskip after Revelations, but I am not sure yet.

What kind of mindscapes would Armadillo, Vera and Sky-Pirate have?

You will have to find out yourself, but all of them will me familiar in some way...

Did Shroud escape first to Los Diablos or San Francisco? And depending on which one, what drove her to go to that city?

San Francisco is the first city she fell in love with.

How did Arde end up Los Diablos? Were they aware of how many boosts were living there and that could help them blend in little bit better?

Chance and a tipoff. The number of boosts there was the reason, easier to blend in in the weirdest of the cities.

Are the re-genes aware of where their tracker is in their body? Considering Arde has 4 arms it would take a while to find it.

I think most of them are.

Hi! I need some aid, what are gates? And has their importance been stated yet? Can they be closed?

Gates are a mystery! What they do is a mystery! But yes, they can be opened and closed.

Also, what are the scars? And how do those operate? Are there scars people haven't discussed yet, or can any of the ROs/other characters get them in the middle of the story?

Scars is how I choose to express in code the various traumas and losses that came with the Heartbreak incident. It is a coding term, "heartbreak scar" and it gives access to different flavor text. I have only used it to keep track of the Heartbreak stuff, so nobody new can get any. Only people who were present did. One might guess that they would be connected with the massive psychic sinkhole that was Heartbreak.

What's running through Chen's head if Sidestep doesn't forgive them after learning he went looking but didn't continue?

Fair. Chen understands, but hope that time will change that.

While on the topic is the autopsy scar noticeable?

Here is the interesting thing. Sidestep has no autopsy scar.

If you're trans, is Ortega still in the dark about this? Or is Sidestep's medical records strictly for them only (considering they technically have no rights)

Ortega is in the dark unless Sidestep tells them.

Does Mortum know how to shoot if not is it possible for Sidestep to teach them?

Dr. Mortum can shoot, but is not very good under fire.

I think I read on here, somewhere, that HG is not really aware of the SD/Re-genes. They seem ready to pull out their own conspiracy board with a Sidestep they connect with and seem hopeful that their sibling is alive. How much would knowing Sidestep is a re-genes affect that desire to bond (if HG figures out/knows what that means), especially with an interested Sidestep? Are they just like "close enough"?

I would say spoilers to that! You will have to find out in game.

In the preview where we are at the ranch, Sidestep notices that Ortega is staring at their tattoos. This may be addressed in the game, but I am curious what Ortega may have been thinking in that moment. Also, for romanced Ortegas who have a more physical relationship with Sidestep, how that might affect future situations (or at least the options we are given).

The tattoos will be a source of fascination for Ortega. They might be the RO who is the most curious about them, wants to interact with them.

If Sidestep ends up having a seizure in Chen's apartment, what was really the first reaction on Chen's part? Worry? Fear? "Aw fuck here we go again"?

Fear. But at that point, he was also pretty out of it.

What would he have done if Sidestep didn't wake up soon after? Hospital? Herald route and start slapping to wake them up?

Phone someone he trusted. This is private.

Is the reason Ortega is "coping" that Sidestep might not actually be a Re-Gene that they don't want Sidestep to be one, or is it just disbelief over such a shocking revelation?

Disbelief and shock. Ortega doesn't handle surprises calmly, they are prone to overreacting in all directions. Rather volatile.

I just got the Ranch ending where Chen is along for the drive and he talks about the scanner in his arm. I think there was a Q&A that said Step's AI chip has potentially already been picked up by a scanning device, was it by Chen's??

Spooolers.

Would a metal detector detect the AI Chip?

No.

Nocturne has no regrets? None? Not even failing to tell Jake the truth of the threads before they became romantically involved? Or any time afterwards she and HG kept lying to him?

Alright. I will amend. Nocturne has ONE regret, and that is all about Jake.

On a similar note, can we threaten to tell Jake ourselves if they don't? And/or possibly actually go through with the threat?

It is a very good source of blackmail, yeah.

If Sidestep or another telepath were to take talodine to suppress their telepathy, what would that feel like for them? Would there be a noticeable absence or empty head feeling?

Notable absence. Slight headache. Nausea. Tiredness. A hit of vertigo.

If you take into account that the stats are just to make the game easier to understand, then is a Sedestep with 80 of any of the telepathy stats in the 3rd or 4th book more powerful than a Sidestep with 80 in the first books?

Maybe. I don't know. It's not set against a scale, it's set against where other Sidesteps are in the story.

In a snippet you wrote previously, Julia drags Anathema to San Francisco, and she ends up in a bar fight. Anathema says it's because Julia is feeling restless after an argument with Sidestep. Anathema implies those two are "bad for each other," as if this happens often (arguing and then making out I am assuming). How often and what types of arguments trigger this restlessness in Ortega? Also, how often did Anathema basically feel like the third wheel to it?

Those times would trigger when Ortega couldn't hash it out with Sidestep immediately through an argument, often because Sidestep left. Or because Ortega knew their feelings were unfair and didn't want to let it out on Sidestep, and picked other targets. Anathema was pretty much always the designated driver/Ortega sitter at that point. Sentinel escalated stuff, and Chen would not have been asked.

Not sure how I want to word this question or what I am trying to connect. What is going with the eye-clawing that people experience concerning HB? It can possibly happen again with a "Broken" Sidestep in the hospital. Any correlation with why HB shares an eye color with Sidestep?

It does not have any correlation with the eye color, that is just a variable. The rest is spoilers.

I keep seeing little tidbits about the Re-gene language. Is there a specific post that details this (off the top of your head at least)? I'm curious about if the Farm employees know about the language, if they can interpret it, and if they do know about it/can interpret it, do they allow it. Also, do re-genes teach it to each other or just sort of pick it up?

The Farm does not know about the Re-Gene language. It is a very subtle and simple language mainly consisting of knocks, touches and gestures. I haven't detailed it in a particular post, it is spread through little bits and pieces in the QnA's. I'll probably do a lore post about Re-Gene culture in the future and fill everything out.

Can you explain the Sidestep Scar Ortega has? Another topic I sometimes see but haven't come across a specific post yet. I know they gained one from the HB event, but how is it actually affecting Ortega? As in, what behaviors specifically or how is it acting as a catalyst to a previous behavior? Is it their hallucinations? Guess I am trying to source out what is regular grieving vs. what is being enhanced. I am assuming Chen also has a HB scar that is influencing him in some way...

It is what people have taken to calling Ortega's trauma after the Heartbreak incident. The "Sidestep shaped hole" in their life. There has been theories that this was caused by Sidestep being strong enough telepathically to connect to Ortega as they tumbled out the window. Maybe boosted by Heartbreak. In either case, it's taken the form of Ortega having occasional hallucinations of Sidestep, especially right after. It might also just be trauma, Chen has his own Heartbreak trauma to carry. There are no exact specifics of this, it is just people taking certain behaviors and actions and prescribing them to this Sidestep scar. I have not detailed anything, but people like to speculate.

In the demo we could choose which imposter is inside the puppet, but how would it work in the full book? Completely randomized or based on our choices?

Based on your choices in Rebirth and Retribution!

Also, will we get more friendship moments with the rangers? (Sidestep's affectionate ribbing is my fav)

Oh yeah, I am having a lot of fun with that.

What will Jake feel for HG since we cut the red string in demo 4.2?

Spoilers.

HG protecting Step in the new demo has made me curious does that protective streak extend beyond Sibling-Step? Like if in the new demo Step had broken Nocturne's or Jake's bones to get payback instead of hurting HG would that have upset them more? And in that same train of thought would Step using Nocturne or Jake as a hostage and threatening to or actually hurting them, have changed how much control over their emotions and composure HG had?

Going after Hollow Ground's loved ones is the worst thing you could do. HG can accept some shit, but go after Nocturne and the gloves are off. They could absolutely be hostage material. That's when HG starts to crack... unless they cheat.

So, I enjoy a hesitating Thiefstep that is looking for life, love, and liberty in all the wrong places. I know in certain routes, you can ask Mia to help you donate some money, quietly, to charity. Is that a one-off, or will we get to do some more Robin Hood-ese things in the future? Also, does anyone ever find out? I imagine its just a small touch for character, but never hurts to ask.

You can absolutely do more Robin Hood stuff in the future, you might wanna have a closer chat with Vera once that becomes available...

Considering the Slasher almost took Blaze's leg... how do they handle pyrokinesis in general? I heard that the loss of lower limbs can increase risk of heat illness. Does the Slasher focus on dismembering their fire boost victims to make them suffer from their own powers? Encourage significant blood loss to mess with thermoregulation?

I think it was mostly to make sure Blaze didn't run away. But that is an interesting thought, I had not thought about that!

In an innocent step crash route, in which step lives with chen while recovering... how does chen feel about that? does he find comfort in the domesticity, or stress about it all? especially if he knows step is the villain?

Chen loves domesticity, but that doesn't mean he won't stress. He's probably one of the calmer ones about the whole thing though. At least his apartment is already adapted for wheelchair use.

How self-aware is Daniel about his dubious romantic taste? Like, did he go "oh no, they're a screwed-up asshole and why does that make them MORE attractive??" or "oh no, they're exactly MY TYPE of screwed-up asshole"?

I think everyone AROUND Daniel is very aware of his dubious romantic tastes, but Daniel himself doesn't see it that way. Not at all. He sees things on an individual basis, every person for their own merits, and the fact that they might share a common denominator is lost on him. He's blissfully unaware.

Will there be an ending where Sidestep rejoins the Rangers as an official team member?

No. I can't say never, but at this point I don't see that happening.

How does the Boost drug affect microorganisms, if any effects occur at all?

As far as I am concerned, it doesn't affect them.

What is the "simplest" organism that could be Boosted?

So far it seems to require a somewhat advanced brain. Mammals and birds, yes. Insects and fish, no. I would say octopus, but that would be an insult to the octopus, because they are pretty damn advanced.

If they weren't involved in a fight, would Argent have been able to see the AI chip in step's brain through the armor? Or would the armor/telepathic boosters (if applicable) make that too difficult to get a read on?

Argent would not be able to discern that, it would be lost in the complex systems.

Is there anyone from the old sidestep days (Pyrocblast, owl, sunstream etc) who would have considered sidestep being returned to the farm post Heartbreak the best course of action?

Spoilers, not gonna tell you who your enemies are for certain.

Will we be able to find out who placed certain items in the auction/where some of the items were sourced from?

I have no plans for it, it's not important to the greater story, at least at this point in time.

Why does HG want to get Tina in a better mood? Are they friends or something?

I would not say friends, but they have overlapping spheres of influence, and Tina is VERY useful as she essentially controls the sea-routes in and out of town.

Which would bother Ortega more—the thought that Sidestep's death was their fault, or the thought that Sidestep's death was outside of their control and they couldn't have done anything?

The first, obviously.

Would an Ortega who knows about what happened actually give a flying fuck if Sidestep murdered Regina or some other asshole from the farm?

All signs point to no...

Can we do some research and pull some telepathic strings to get whoever legally owns the name Kestrel now to sign some documents to legally give it back to a beloved flyboy? He likes the name and he deserves a treat

Who knows? We'll see where Daniel's path takes him.

Would Argent participate in a hot dog eating contest?

No, that's gross.

So I know there are gonna be options for Sidestep dying in horrible ways, but will there be any options for dying in their RO's arms?

It sounds dramatic as hell to write, so who knows?

Are there any universal factors used to determine where a hero or villain is on a "Top 10" chart?

Not any more than for "best books," "fastest racehorse ever," or "most influential under 30." Some base facts, but mostly vibes.

When it's stated that a hero or villain is "The Xth most popular", do you base that off of pure gut feeling or do you have a very brief synopsis as to why that hero/villain is where they're at on the list? (Or a mixture of both?)

Oh no it is just vibes. I really have no idea, and go with what I feel like at the time. These kinds of facts rarely bother me, and I have no notes keeping track of them.

Has anyone attempted microdosing the boost drug? if yes, what were the results of it?

Yes, and it seems to increase the chance of survival, but also the chance of getting less cool powers.

Does anyone in the main cast (rangers, hg trio, the villain ROs) know or suspect the identity of who was behind the nanosurge?

Yes. At least two people know for certain.

Will Step ever be asked by Argent about the chip in their head?

I have that scene written already.

What does Argent think the chip is?

Spoilers, you'll find out.

Will Sidestep's ability to flick small objects be instrumental in taking down 5P?

I don't know, but it's a funny thought for sure! And now it is in my head...

Have Sentinel and Ashfall/Pyroclast talked since breaking association with the LD Rangers?

Yes they have, on many occasions.

Will 5P immediately know if we put his pennies through the penny machine?

I... think so. Probably.

Can step's nanovores eat the pennies?

Absolutely. If they can catch them.

Is the sample we get from Argent going to let us say "We know what you are" to Argent or at least burst her bubble during a reveal at some point in the future?

Oh I can see that being a thing for confrontation/extortion/sounding clever yeah.

Who was the victim that 5P killed on live television, which slapped him with the villain label?

It was a random reporter, I have no more details than that.

Do public schools exist in the fez?

No. But community schools do, which is similar, but for an area.

If sidestep ends up crying while spending the night/having an intimate encounter with their RO, is there any psychic bleedover to other people in the apartment building?

There might very well be, yes.

In the same line of thinking, does a sidestep with a sui tag have particularly dangerous bleedover?

Not at this point, but... well, some Sidesteps are growing very powerful and unhinged so that might change.

Does the regenerator have any effect on mental status? Does someone who uses it stand a risk of losing memories or undergoing personality changes?

No, it is purely physical.

If sidestep had called Ortega after they escaped, would Ortega think it was a hallucination?

Yes. Most likely.

What area(s) does Dr. Finch specialize in? If she knew the full details of the MC's history, then (putting aside the "holy shit" factor) would she feel qualified to treat them, or would she feel like some aspects were outside her area of expertise?

Dr. Finch would feel overwhelmed. She knows her limits. But on the other hand, who would be qualified? She has no names to offer there.

What are the typical demographics of Dr. Finch's clientele? Does the MC stand out as unusual to her, or do they seem similar to most of the people she sees?

Everybody is unusual in their own way. Dr. Finch has her theories, and she has been operating in hero-adjacent circles. That's why Ortega picked her.

Would Argent let Sidestep use her pool if she trusts Sidestep enough to let them into her apartment? Would she go swimming with them?

The pool is off limits. The pool is SECURELY SEALED even from the rest of the apartment. Nobody but Argent goes in the pool.

Will we be able to take over / move into HG's mansion, as HG-aligned or otherwise?

Not sure, I am ambivalent on this. We'll see.

How concrete were Mortum's plans to sell out Step to help puppet?

Not concrete at all.

What did Steel think of Rosie busting Step out of the hospital upon reviewing footage of when we storm the operating room?

Obviously someone hired her, the question is who.

Did Mortum begin flirting with the puppet because their boss was a telepath/psi-sensitive?

No, Mortum just likes being flirty with receptive people, they are, on occasion, very lonely. This is also why they organize things like the villain Halloween party and similar events.

How complex is the modding process? If you want a robot hand, for instance, what is actually added to ensure it works?

You first need a physical connection to the bone structure, the bones need reinforcement with titanium or similar to form a plug. This is the fused part, that can never be removed. It looks a little like a metal peg protruding from the surrounding muscle and skin. Then the flesh needs to heal so a connector can be placed over the stump (they are removable for cleaning) and several neural connectors need to be installed and connected to the nervous system. That is the fiddliest part. If you just want a functional movement appendage, like Ward's claw, all you need is a simple hookup to muscles, but if you want pressure, heat or other sensations you need a lot more advanced neural surgery.

Has anyone ever tried replacing a full section of their brain with a Mod? If so, how successful were they? If not, is it a lack of funding that's stopping people or is it just seen as so dangerous it isn't worth it (or some other reason)? (Do re-genes technically have modded brains?)

I would not say replacing, but I would say attempts have been made on people with traumatic brain injuries, mostly military personnel injured in combat. It is dangerous, has rarely gone well, and it's not for lack of volunteers. Technically, the Re-Genes would count as having modded brains, yeah, but it is a comparatively small mod.

Is the reason that the Re-Genes have a high mortality rate due to the Special Directive using "purer" (or using more of) the boost drug?

(Or is it because the SD presumably uses dozens or hundreds of Re Genes at a time for boosting, creating a proportionally higher mortality rate?)

I mean both of these adds into things, but the main reason is that the SD wants powerful boosts, and there is a correlation between dosage and power. And, while losing an early-growth clone body is expensive, it's not like they are people. It's just a monetary loss.

Can Mod Rejection develop after you've been modded for significant amounts of time (Months or Years later)?

In theory, IF a new mod has been added recently, OR the body has undergone a major viral infection or similar. Something that pushes the immune system over the edge. But most cases show fast.

Is Mod Rejection on a per Mod basis, or is it a universal thing? (If I got a successful eye Mod, could I get an arm Mod that is Rejected?)

(Could that Rejection "spread" to the Eye mod?)(Assuming that it is a per Mod basis, does adding more Mods change the chance of Rejection, increase or decrease?)

It tends to be a question of neural stress and will increase with the number of mods. And, once a mod has pushed it over the edge, older mods often need to be removed as well as the body starts to protest. It is "contagious" in that way. More mods increase the chance of things going wrong, but it is not a direct increase. People who can accept a large neural lode and thus have many mods are more resistant to adding more. In others, just adding a second one can put you over the edge. However, smaller mods (like cochlear implants) are often still accepted even when a limb might be rejected.

Was there anything that stopped Anathema from going for a third Boost?

Yeah, the boost drugs didn't really work most of the time on them. The acid one was a fluke, Anathema doesn't know why it worked that time and not the others. Yes, Anathema has taken it several times.

Was Sidestep Omega level before the gates were put into place?

There is still no definition for what exactly IS an Omega level.

We know Daniel watched the heartbreak incident unfold on tv. Presumably this was the first major incident to hit LD since he moved there. What were his thoughts at the time? Was he afraid? Excited to see his heroes tackle a major incident for the first time? How did it hit him when he realised that things were potentially not going well for the Rangers?

He was excited and horrified at the same time. I think it was a bit like loving volcanoes from a distance, but suddenly having them erupt in your neighborhood and seeing the human cost involved. If asked, he would say this is when he grew up and realized the risks involved. And why you needed people to take them anyway.

How did Herald feel when he realized he saw his favorite hero supposedly die on live television?

Terrible.

Was HB at or approaching Omega level?

Approaching way too fast...

Sentinel advised Daniel prior to his ranger psych screening to “find a version of the truth you’re comfortable sharing” about his boosting and why he did it. The events we can learn from Danny so far about his boosting, and about Josh in the epilogue, are they closer to the truth of the events, or closer to the version of the truth he’s comfortable sharing?

The truth he is comfortable sharing.

Who actually interviewed Daniel for the Rangers position? Is Chen actively involved in the recruitment process or is it all handled by a recruitment team?

It's a government team, I think Daniel was interviewed by several people, in several stages. The current Marshal gets involved towards the end, to see if there is compatibility, or if the candidate should maybe be sent to another team.

Did the Rangers lift that recording from the Kinetik suit of Daniel and Sentinel’s private conversation as part of vetting? Or was that transcript lifted by another party who would refer to him as a “prospect”? (Just double checking since it’s not labelled as a Mitchell file)

Oh that was lifted from the suit! Good guess. Someone in the company got very well paid for leaking that. It was indeed part of the Ranger's research effort.

Are any of the cast good at gardening? Who is the best at taking care of plants vs the worst?

I honestly think the only one who had any experience in that is Ortega, and not much. Never really got into that as a kid, despite regular rural visits. Daniel likes houseplants though, as does Argent.

do you get to see the player savefile metrics or do you have to go by steam/cog achievements and polls/reading reddit/other places to see what people get?

I see nothing! Steam achievements and people talking are my only metrics. Indeed, a fair bit of the achievements are there for me to see how often certain paths/points are reached.

Has the perpetrator who trashed Ortega's apartment ever thought that they were hot at some point in time?

I mean statistically, yes.

Did you like the One Piece live action show?

I loved it! One of the few live action remakes that I like, though I never read the manga or watched the anime, so take that into consideration.

The Haunted lore post mentions Marek having several decades worth of research at their offices. Presumably west coast mysteries has not been running that long. How long has Marek been actively researching weird shit happening around LD/on the west coast? And why did he start?

Marek is a pack-rat. He hoards data, researches everything that catches his interest, especially things he can make money of. You never know when something is going to come in handy. He's been doing back since back when he was friends with Ortega, this is nothing new.

Does the shadow on the Haunted tape that Marek suspects might be a boost have anything to do with the missing telepaths?

Hmmm. Good question. I would say... not directly.

How do Bennet's powers work? Is it just places he picks up residual events etc from, or can it work with objects? People?

I would say mild psychometry and general readings of the vibes of a place. I haven't detailed it, just what is needed for the story.

If they had to pick a "normal" career/ profession/ life calling, like, say, if they were in a setting without heroes and villains— what would the ROs all be doing instead? Would any of them choose that over their current path if they got the opportunity?

I really have no idea, but let's see what happens if I just type: Ortega: Either sports or action movie star. Chen: Engineer. Argent: IT technician/hacker. Daniel: Businessman with artist dreams on the side. Mortum: Scientist. Duh. Skyrider: Paramedic. Vera: Grassroots organizer. But no, none would choose that, because they still have that opportunity and has not taken it.

In Dr. Mortum's opinion, what's the stupidest thing they've ever seen an IRB object to, whether in their research or someone else's?

Look. You should NOT EVER try to mess with antimatter. No matter how cool it sounds. It is NOT worth it. That's a Darwin award waiting to happen...

What's your process for getting game balance right—making sure that checks are the intended difficulty level, that different character types/armor specs/PTSD symptoms all get their chance to shine, and so forth? Do you have a systematic approach, or is it more "eyeball it and adjust based on playtesting"?

I go by vibes and playtesting. And by that, I mean I try to be fair when writing things, give everything some options, but I do not track things like number of tests made and so on. A lot of the time it's not the number of times, but the coolness/usefulness of those situations that people notice. I rely heavily on

playtesters to tell me when I have shortchanged some builds.

Do Re-Genes AI chips make them more vulnerable to electricity powers than would be the norm?

No, their hearts would stop before the chips were hurt.

What kinds of boosts are chosen to be cuckoos? Is it just variations on telepathy, or are other boost types considered favorably?

Telepathy, sharp senses, and other information gathering boosts. In general they tend to be less useful for combat (someone with invisibility would be shunted there). The combat team always has first pick, the cuckoos are the useful rejects.

Does a version of the dark web exist in fhr? Is it comparable to our own?

It exists, and I have never been on the dark web so I can't compare.

Is there anyone in the Green Sky Cult who has consumed more Void blood than Sidestep has?

Oh yes.

Did any tabloids/journalists manage to catch Sidestep and Argent acting close / kissing at the beginning of their date in book 2, before they went to her apartment?

No.

Has Argent ever messed with newspapers that put up headlines she didn't like?

Oh she has complained, officially and loudly, and in person. She can be a Karen when she wants to be, but lets things go most of the time. She's less charitable when other people gets tarred than when she ends up in bad headlines.

Has Ortega?

I mean... it's Ortega.

Did Vernon or by extension Mia know Sidestep's civilian identity from back in the day? Did Vernon know Sidestep might've been a cuckoo?

Vernon did. Mia does not. Vernon had no idea Sidestep was a cuckoo.

What was Vernon's most popular piece before he "retired"?

No idea. Probably some form of political corruption revelation, he liked tearing down the powerful.

I gotta know what did the headlines say about Argent kissing Step's helmet? (Both if Step is kill/nokill)

I am very bad at headlines! I never got the hang of that kind of writing, so I leave that up to headcanons.

What were the hopes of the fanclub when Argent kissed Sidestep?

Look, there are ship wars in the fanclub too, and Argent is one of the more popular ships.

Is there a preference among the fanclub for who should swap sides?

People would vote Argent.

Would Ortega have put the picture on the fridge if Sidestep hadn't resurfaced?

Oh yes. They are a little shit at times.

Would Steel tell anyone else besides Blaze about the villain helping him save civilians?

Daniel and Ortega would be the most likely ones.

Which of the ranger's going rogue would be the most damaging to their reputation? Why?

Steel or Herald. One is the Marshal, the other is the symbol of heroic justice.

Would it be possible for someone with epilepsy to develop telepathy? Would a telepath who developed epilepsy later lose all or some of their powers?

I don't think those two are compatible, no. A telepath would lose their powers.

Would hollow ground ever accidentally call sidestep by their baby siblings name?

Eventually, that might happen.

While Ortega wouldn't share the sui talk they had with Step unless it was an emergency, who else might've noticed the evidence of self-harm sui!Steps could have? Or might they have been too distracted at the time to notice?

Most were too distracted at the time. There will be discussions later.

Will Mortum be able to cotton onto the fact that Step was in fact puppet during their attempts to track down puppet without Step intervening and telling them?

Spoilers.

if argent sectioned off a bit of nanos and separated them from the horde to make a lil puppet does she still have rudimentary control over it or is that a sentient rogue mass of nanos now

Depends on the distance.

Did HG ever meet (or encounter at least) Ace while they were still Ace?

I don't think so.

Is the reason why Julia doesn't open up to a F!Sidestep about her abuse because she doesn't make the mental connection to her abuse, because she views F!Sidestep as less of a threat/more patronizing, or because she views the relationship differently?

Because the situation didn't trigger it in the same way. Gender did matter there. She will open up later, girl to girl.

Would the defected Rangers work with HG? What would it take for a defected Ortega to work with HG?

I know exactly what it would take, and I am not telling you.

Does Argent ever mess with people by subtly shifting her facial features over the course of a conversation?

Ahahaha no, she's not that much of a troll.

Are 5P's pennies any more durable than a normal penny?

Not in a physical sense.

How long is it gonna take Jake and Nocturne to find HG in the pantry? Who's gonna find them first?

I don't know yet, whichever is funniest.

So: HG can apparently make themselves not feel pain! Would there be any medical drawback to using that as their all-purpose painkiller of choice (as opposed to just in critical moments where they can't let pain impede them), or did they pretty much just win the superpower lottery for pain management?

Pain has many uses, and it is a good signal that something is wrong. But yes, HG could be a very good therapist for so many things, yeah. Any long term effects are unknown, but like with long term adrenaline overload, it might mess up the body's normal responses.

What do HG's powers "count" as touching themselves? Do they have to put a hand on another part of their body, or would any skin-to-skin contact (kneeling while bare-legged, making a fist, closing an eye) do the trick? (Or is the deciding factor whether the audience can see it?)

I mean let's be fair, the deciding factor for me is making sure the audience can see it, and thus add up clues that something is going on. But I think HG's main interface is their hands, not limited by it, but by training, focus and habit.

What did Sidestep look like to the Void as Sidestep was killing them?

Beautiful.

What does everyone like to eat for breakfast?

Ortega's breakfast is pretty much coffee and nothing, or a full brunch. No half measures. Argent needs meat, cooked is secondary. Just a big foundation of protein to quiet down her friends. Daniel likes bread, pancakes and carbs. Chen likes congee or maybe porridge. Mortum doesn't mind leftovers and coffee.

Boosts are said to be unable to have children as a result of the drug, but there's text in Retribution suggesting that Re-Genes are sterilized. Are ReGenes sterilized despite being boosted and thus already unlikely to be able to have children?

Yeah, while boosts generally are unable to have children, they are not unable to get pregnant. Just that miscarriages and fetal abnormalities means child survival is near impossible. And that can be risky to the mother, so sterilizing Re-Genes ensures that no operational time is lost to things like that.

Who's more likely to muster up the courage to pass a comment at Argent for flirting with the villain and dating Step, Herald or Ortega? Would Chen be likely to pull Argent aside for a chat about it the way he does for with Step for Herald or is Step all grown up?

I think Herald would be first, followed by Ortega. Chen wouldn't get involved unless him and Sidesteps are very close and he has no idea that Sidestep is the villain.

Has Ortega infiltrated the villain fanclub if they have enough sus that Sidestep is the villain? Do any other members of the cast join the fanclub for espionage purposes?

Nope.

Has Sky-Raider ever accidentally flown into one of Vera's pigeons?

Possibly.

How come there's only one way you can break Herald's knee even with a strength mod/exoskeleton suit, but the mod always guarantees the ortega_hurt variable? Just something I thought was interesting, given the ways you can total Danny in the gala fight. Is it because the fight was over fairly quickly and there wasn't as much time to do more damage as opposed to the more prolonged fight with ortega, or a difference in fighting styles between the two?

More prolonged fight with Ortega, and Ortega's very risky fighting style. Doesn't go well without an armor, Danny has more ways of limiting damage.

Additionally, why is it that only going out of your way to way to kill people during the gala means fatalities, but the middle ground of #Whatever happens, happens doesn't result in any deaths?

Because people have a sense of self-preservation and ran for it.

further to this - the #I want maximum damage choice for galaboom doesn't result in fatalities either - i'm genuinely just curious why it's not equivalent to the #I want to see blood choice that sets kill to true + what your thought process was for coding stats here (although it's pushing 6 years since rebirth was published, so I'll acknowledge the fact you might not remember what past malin's logic was XD)

I always saw maximum damage as meaning to the building. The blood designates it as making sure people also gets killed. I wanted killing people to be an active choice, not an oversight. This was mainly because I wanted to lessen the risk that people accidentally killed, especially at the end of the book as this.

If Chen doesn't bring up that he went looking for you at the HQ in chapter 14, why does he wait until the apartment hangout after the crash if you've hung out with him prior like when you ask to walk spoon, or at the post-auction bar meetup?

Because I didn't think of connecting even more tangled coding paths in other scenes, but I needed it said in the apartment hangout so I added it there too.

How often does Ortega and/or Chen visit Sidestep's/Anathema's graves? What stats increase/decrease the frequency of these visits?

I have no idea! I think it depends on how busy they are.

What does the Sidestep and Anathema graves look like? Are they giant statues? (Are they even separate?)

I don't know yet!

It's been mentioned that the first real-life "superheroes" and "supervillains" were Vietnam veterans. Are there any we know or have heard of?

I haven't come up with any.

Does the "psychic wound" on the HB site change in response to Sidestep's scar?

Oh.... Hmmm.... I would say no.

How would Ortega react to learning about their Sidestep scar?

I mean Ortega knew they were messed up.

What would I have to boost and how many times do I need to boost it in order to make a proper building-sized kaiju?

If you're unlucky, it would be once.

What were Elyise's powers, if any? Was she a boost?

She was a boost, I never decided on her powers.

Does Mortum know Ortega has epilepsy? If not, what did they think the little flashing light that Sidestep insisted be added to their armor was for?

Mortum knows now, they can add up the dots.

How many of Charge's cars have been destroyed at least partially due to Dr. Mortum? Could that number change by the end of the series?

I would say less than a handful, but more than one. And yes, it can grow.

Has the discovery of the Boost drug and its ubiquitous usage stifled research into other scifi methods of creating super soldiers (like gene/chemical therapy for Halo's Spartans or Captain America's super soldier serum)?

I would definitely say so.

How did Ben and Mortum meet? How did Ben pay for his armor?

Oh Ben stole the base of his armor, Mortum just modded it. Ben pays those parts off by doing jobs for Mortum when needed, just like when rescuing the puppet or Sidestep. I think they probably met at one of the villain parties.

questions about the latest lore post "lover's triptych":

did charge know who they were racing with? do they know now? will they still invite the good doctor for a dinner?

was the race a one time thing or did it happen more or less regularly? how many charge's cars did end up in the ocean after these races with dr mortum?

who is the person over forty with a successful career but nobody to share it with sky-raider thought about? is it chen?

Charge does not know Dr. Mortum's identity. But the dinner invitation would still stand if they knew. They have raced on occasions, often in connection with car shows and the like, often using borrowed cars. As for the last one, you'll see. It might be.

Can Mortum's car change colors or is it always bright orange?

It can change colors.

Does extraterrestrial life exist on the FHRverse?

Somewhere out there yes.

Did the Void still need to eat/sleep/other biological processes or were they like Anathema and no longer needed that?

They still were human in that regard.

Does Ortega have a custom car guy (gn), or a secret friend who's very good with mechanic work?

Ortega has that, yeah. Owl's husband.

Would natural occurring technopathy like Argent's be possible in a pre-industrial/pre-digital era? Or has humanity's capacity for weird shit TM grown alongside their level of advancement?

The latter. Though, also consider that if you never fall into the water you have no idea you might be able to breathe water.

Does Sky-Raider have any sort of accent/affection either in or out of his villain persona?

I don't know yet, I don't think so.

Has BeeGee (Benjamin) ever been to Margaritaville?

Possibly.

Of the current rangers, who is most likely to organize an April Fool's Prank? Are there any known villains who like causing mischief (or violence) on April Fool's Day?

I mean there are always villains who liked doing things like that, but I don't think any of the Rangers do.

How's Chen's HB scar doing after steelsnap/triggering the shaken relationship tag?

We'll see, we'll see...

Did OG Step ever got reveled as the villan?

Not until the very end.

How long has Sky Raider been active?

Hmm... maybe eight to ten years or so?

Will it be possible to have a good relationship with Sky Raider while having a bad one with Mortum? Is that going to cause problems for our best bro Ben?

Yes you can, and he'll deal. He's the mellow one.

Will there be poly dates in book 3?

If I find them fun to write.

How dirty are 5p's pennies? Are they grimy like one of the nasty pennies you find in the street or does he polish/clean them given the chance

They're nice.

How do sidestep's powers affect infants?

Same as adults, but it is a lot weirder and harder.

Based on vibes, what percentage of shirts that Sky Raider owns are Hawaiian shirts?

About a fifth.

Wait, is Hawaii still around? Did it get hit by any tsunamis caused by the Big One?(Google says the islands aren't near any faults so aftershocks probably didn't hit it)

They got hit by waves, yes, which did a lot of damage. But they are still there, a lot more independent now.

How do Vera, Arde, and Ben feel about telepathy/telepaths?

Vera thinks herself immune, Arde is wary, and Ben haven't really thought about it. Like he'd put it, "can't go around worrying about people with x-ray vision peeking through your pants either. That's their problem, not mine."

Did Arde accompany Vera to her meeting with villain!Step?

No, it was just a scouting meeting, and Vera was confident with her ability to get away if needed.

What was the Waffle House Index rating of the Big One(assuming there were Waffle Houses in the area, turns out there's no Waffle Houses on the west coast states)? I'd assume it would be a total Red level disaster, but I also want to know if there was a single Waffle House holding the West Coast together with its limited menu options.

Total Red Level disaster. It was BAD.

Will the timeline for Revelations include more information in the same way Retribution was relative to Rebirth's timeline?

Yeah, I keep updating it.

How often does Charge break into and enter apartments? Since they're presumably fine with breaking into the puppets.

I mean that's on a professional basis, so it's hard to estimate. Maybe once a month?

Has anyone(maybe the Void cult) tried to conduct an ecoterrorism attack by polluting water sources with the Boost drug?

Yes. But it is spoilers as to who and when.

What are HG, Nocturne and Jakes favorite colors?

Nocturne likes gold, but also bright primary colors in general. HG likes reds, rusts and browns. Warm colors. Jake's only reply is "huh? Uh... blue maybe?"

Would any of the ROs (rangers And villains) know what Project Stripes is? and which of them if so?

I would say Chen has a clue, but not the details or scope.

How did the Void get boosted anyhow?

Injected boost drugs.

What were the Void like as a person before they got boosted?

Kinda creepy. Intense. Big smile.

Does anyone remember them from before boosting and what do they themselves think of their past self?

Yes. And they think that they should have ended it right then and there.

Since Daniel and Josh took the boost drug the same year the Nanosurge happened, was this before or after the events of it?

Before.

Is there a chance Sidestep and Herald could've attended the same events while Sidestep was at the Farm, since they've canonically been deployed to Boston? Has Sidestep been to Brookline?

Possibly, I leave that to headcanon. It's certainly not impossible.

is the AI chip connected to the pain gate? are they one and the same?

No, they are separate.

Do ReGene tats ever incorporate structural color?

I would say no, not in general. But i think theoretically it should be possible.

Does the Gorbachev Pizza Hut commerical exist in this time line?

No.

With the exception of Daniel how would you rate the other Ranger's art skills?

I honestly don't think they have any.

Are any animals more likely to survive the boost drugs than humans?

I would say any animals with good immune systems, so let's be fair, don't feed it to naked mole rats unless you want a real problem on your hands.

Is Vera's mind slippery/familiar in a similar way as Argent's?

Hmmm. Yes and no.

does HG ever see an end for himself as the mob boss? do they ever think about life after business, retiring and living their life peacefully with a nice replacement lined up or do they see themselves never retiring?

You don't retire as a mob boss. You die.

additionally, do HG, Jake, or Nocturne ever think about adopting or is it not really their thing? Especially with HG being so family oriented

I honestly think it has come up. But also, work.

Is Mia modded/boosted in any way?

No, I don't think so.

What's Chen referring to in the Truths short story when he says he overreacted, but that he was right and had nothing to apologize for? Was it when he was outed by his sister? Or something during his army days?

When he was outed by his sister.

Not sure if you answered this one, but do hollow ground's red threads work on people using numbers? Does numbers have any effect on already placed threads?

I have not answered that, and it is currently unknown!

Would Argent be willing to kill Sidestep if the regenerator was fixed, but seemed to only be intact enough for one person's worth of healing? Does this change based on her respect for Sidestep or if Sidestep is a killer? Does it change based on romance?

I honestly don't know. And that's very disturbing to me, because that means she might consider it.

How would she react if Sidestep was adamant in getting to use it? How would she react if Sidestep was willing to step aside and let her use it?

We will see. Things like this should be revealed in game, not through questions.

Seeing as Sidestep is a recluse, has Ortega ever been asked to endorse Sidestep Merch?

No.

Would they have accepted, if only to give the money (or buy stuff for Sidestep with it) to Sidestep later?

They wouldn't have.

If Ortega had received a phone call from Step following their second breakout, just to let them know Step was alive but couldn't meet, how would Ortega have taken it? Would they have torn across the countryside to try and find them or think they were a ghost?

Would think it another hallucination most likely. They would look, but not find anything.

Is the machinery that enhances Sidesteps telepathy upgrade cutting edge? Or is there tech that Dr. Mortum couldn't get their hands on out there? Is someone out there trying to build something like cerebro from x-men? (For those who don't know Cerebro is this machine in x-men that allows telepaths to sense others on a global level)

It is cutting edge, Mortum made it. Few works with telepathic tech like that..

What would happen if you put 2 people in the regenerator at once?

Hm... If they could fit, I think technically that should work fine.

Has Sidestep willingly and intentionally taken Talodine or other telepathic suppressor drugs?

Yes, once or twice.

Who's the current British Monarch?

The Eternal Queen.

Are there any prominent boosted politicians? (Foreign or domestic—leaders/dictators/rulers?)

Not that people know of.

Are any of the domestic Enhanced popular overseas? Any foreign Enhanced that are popular domestically?

I haven't thought about that, but I expect there is some overlap. Just like there is with movie stars.

.... has HG ever said the word "fishies" as an adult?

I don't think so. Unless very drunk.

Is a friendly Mortum hiding a crush on the puppet?

No. They're not Ortega.

If HG had been more receptive to Sidestep sending in the puppet, what would have happened once the puppet had left the meeting? What would Ortega's reaction have been to the whole thing?

Alternative world, I have no idea!

Chen mentions the original Mortum's villain suit had tentacles when reviewing the footage of Sky-Raider's more heavy duty versions to his suit while he abducts/rescues the Puppet. Is it fair to say Mortum's suit tentacles take inspiration from Doc Ock? And are they prehensile in the same way the ITSV iteration's (Liz Octavius) are, given that you've cited Spider-Man as inspiration for a few things in Fallen Hero, like the Spider-Gwen's costume and Sidestep suit, or Prowler inspo for the speed mod?

I would say that doc Ock was the original inspiration, yeah. But Mortum's suit tentacles were much more delicate, more cuttlefish than kraken.

Actually, any influence from SPoP Entrapta's prehensile hair too?

No, but I love Entrapta and I can see it as a subconscious inspiration.

Who is more of a conspiracy theorist than Ortega?

Marek. But he's more cool about it. Doesn't get emotionally invested.

Which Ranger would you be most willing to have as a coworker?

And would the answer be different if they were your boss or employee rather than your peer?

Daniel as coworker, Chen as boss.

Does Regene language include honorifics in the relational sense when talking to someone, or about someone similar to other languages for example like Cantonese and Japanese? If so, is this similar to or would use the signs/words for 'teammate', 'heartmate', 'batchmate' etc.?

No honorifics. Though one could see the signs you mentioned above as such.

Do the laser dolphins look any different from regular dolphins? Or is it by the time you realize it's a laser dolphin it's too late?

Yes, their faces are quite changed and warped. But from a distance, they look and move the same.

How did Sidestep used to get around in their vigilante era days? Did they have a grappling hook?

A grappling gun sounds really cool. But it's mostly headcanon, I can see Sidestep having a motorcycle.

Chen can meet Rosie in a guilty ending breakout - does a Rosie that's on friendly terms with her boss remind him of Themmy?

Nope.

Did Step know how long they were at the Farm the second time or did they only find out how much time had passed after they escaped?

After they escaped.

If Argent bit Sidestep post auction, do the nanovores think Herald or Sidestep tastes better?

Herald.

Would one ranger breaking out a guilty step another ranger has nemesis status with have the potential to cause a rift?

Oh yeah.

some of the early rangers (los diablos at least) were sort of drawn into being a ranger right after their boost/modding (chen and ortega). Argent and herald were both independent heroes for a while before becoming rangers. Is it becoming more common over time to "debut" as a hero before you join the rangers/superhero groups, or were chen and ortega the actual outliers?

Chen and Ortega were more outliers I think. Not uncommon for mods, but certainly not the norm.

Ortega investigated Chen's would-be murderer with Argent and has a long history with Chen. We see Ortega use Herald as an aerial lookout during the hospital breakout but does Ortega work with Herald in a capacity beyond that? Or would Ortega rather keep our boy Danny out of harm's way because he doesn't have the experience? If this is the case, is this causing a feedback loop of keeping Herald from getting experience that would make Ortega more comfortable trusting Herald in risky situations?

Very astutely analyzed. And Herald is very aware of it. Luckily he's working with other people.

Is part of the reason Herald getting training from Step to get a green light from Step that will convince the other Ranger's that he's ready?

I wouldn't say so, but might be a nice effect.

if ricardo and julia were twins and grew up together what would their relationship be like?

INTENSE RIVALRY.

Is there still major nautical activities like cargo or cruises operating out of the west coast now that most cities are recovering? Or is the ocean still too messed up to traverse?

There are no major nautical activities on the ocean. Any larger ship is at risk being destroyed, between the laser dolphins, dread reactor and other things... the ocean is only home to small crafts and smugglers now.

Is there anything you have to consciously avoid doing in your writing? Like that one word/phrase you overuse, things you always want to try even though they never work, chronically over/underestimating how much space [X] will take up, etc...?

SO MANY THINGS. I think the first one I was aware of was my complete overuse of "after all." There were more. There's always more in each book, but they are easy to find with a search once proofreaders points them out. Also, everything bloats. But that's not just me, that's IF writing in general.

Is there any chance we'll be able to tell Danny that we tried to undermine his confidence in training but failed? (I know the game itself can't tell whether that happened, but having the option to say it did sounds fun.)

I don't think so.

What's the most powerful Mod the US currently has developed, regardless of whether or not it's installed on someone?

I don't know! Or... well... Hmmm...not the most powerful probably, but pretty powerful. But that's spoilers.

We can express a desire to take Mortum clubbing. But has Mortum ever wanted to take the puppet street racing?

Ooooh that's a thought. Maybe.

Has HG ever been near the Heartbreak site?

Don't think so.

Does Argent have a shelf for really cheesy knock-off Ranger films/series?

Of course!

Which of the other crew members do you imagine Rosie gets along best with? What about Bo?

Rosie and Ward are cool. Bo and Nehal are strangely nice to each other despite their rivalry.

When will we be able to hire the second henchman(Bo/Rosie)?

No idea.

Did the puppet's gender affect any of the crew members' initial impressions of them?

Gender always does.

What were Argent's impressions of Steel and Charge when she first joined the Rangers? How have those opinions changed in her time working with them?

Stuckup and loose cannon. She still kind of stands by them, but she now sees more layers.

If not too spoilery, who was Dr Vedard?

Haven't detailed him, it's a name mentioned, nothing more right now. Might be more in the future, but that would be spoilers.

Has Sidestep ever channeled Regina's persona when they want to intimidate/frighten people as their villainous one, given they tend to emulate or borrow the mannerisms of villains they've encountered (especially Catfiend as a terrifying armor villain)?

I'll leave that up to headcanons.

Did the other party in the crash witness sidestep's tattoos?

No.

When Sidestep goes into Ortega's private office, is Hollow Ground's picture one of the images they've removed from their conspiracy board?

Yeep.

Do the Rangers or HG trio do holiday group photos?

I think they do.

Would getting captured by the Farm and/or the resultant torture open the gates? Or has the Farm learned enough to not trigger them?

Oh the Farm has NO IDEA of the Gates...

Which one of the Rangers would last longest in Farm custody either mentally or physically?

Anathema.

Re: Chen's 'reason' for distrusting Sidestep in the old days being that they were suspicious in a plant/ double agent kind of way: was that actually his beef with them pre-HB, or did that opinion form after he learned they were a Regene?

Oh that was from the start.

Also on that subject: Was the info about Step being a Regene fed to him by someone who knew that that specific fact would get him to back off the issue? And if so (although I'm probably pushing my luck here), could him actually backing off have anything to do with following orders on the matter, or generally... Regenes being something he's more aware of than he lets on and less qualified to ask questions about than he'd like?

Spoilers!

Does Sunstream have a civilian name?

Yeah, but I don't know it!

In the old days, did Steel ever use any of his military contacts (like how he got the autopsy photos) to try and get Sidestep's background?

He certainly did some gentle digging but found nothing.

Did Sidestep's skinsuit and mask (the one that they got from Ortega, not their homemade one) let them tan underneath the suit or were they just super pale from wearing it all the time?

Depends on the skin tone, but pale as a ghost.

Does HIPAA exist?

EDIT: With more information now I would say that it depends on the hospital. There is a general idea that health information should be anonymous, but in practice, most hospitals have you sign waivers for research, and many insurance policies through companies requires you to let the company have access to those data as well.

Will we hear about some more additions to Chen's list in Revelations and Revolution?

Maybe! I don't know yet.

Did Chen ever try to convince Ortega about his suspicion that Sidestep might be a spy, or did he keep that to himself?

He kept that to himself. No proof. Just keep an eye open.

How bad is Ortega during horror movies? Was Argent blowing it out of proportion or is Ortega a total scaredy-cat?

Argent is exaggerating a little, but... she has some points.

Speaking of movies—how do Dove and Sky-Raider rate on the "able to watch movies about their areas of expertise" scale? Do they enjoy them despite (or because of) the inaccuracies, or does it distract them too much?

Oh I think they can enjoy them, but Sky-Raider is probably SO annoying about pointing out all the military shit done wrong.

Are there any hero/villain documentaries or commentaries that are super popular? What about them does the public love so much? Are there any iconic quotes from specific heroes/villains that the internet has memed on?

I imagine there is. It is a big part of life, so of course there would be documentaries and commentaries. Like movie stars and sport stars, coupled with secret agents. That's just cool. I have no idea about quotes though. I don't really think of things that are not in game, and right now my brain is tired and recovering. Sorry.

Does Dove ever wear a mask/helmet? Or does she usually just rely on her pigeon form for disguise?

She wears a mask occasionally, and a helmet when needed. But she's not paranoid about her secret identity.

Can non-telepaths feel dampeners at all? Do dampeners make an actual audible sound?

No and no. I can imagine someone with very good senses might pick up a whine or similar, but that's mod or boost territory.

Post-apartment, if Ortega and sidestep enter a relationship after being "just friends/friend with secret crush" relationship, do the rest of the rangers know that they're together? Does Ortega tell them that they're with sidestep the day after, or is everyone unaware until (or even through) post-crash, especially with a guilty reveal? Sorry if this is hard to understand I'll try wording it better

I don't know the exact timetable of things, but Ortega is not the type to hide it. At all. Even if it was a guilty reveal.

During the pre heartbreak days was sidestep ever targeted by Ortega's rivals as a way to get the marshals attention?

I can imagine that, it rarely ended well for them.

when did sidestep become regina's 'prize project'? was sidestep that valuable to the farm before the heartbreak incident, or only only afterwards?

Only afterwards.

Does chen actually take tech-savvy Step's advice to turn down the dynamic feedback on his new arm? Or does he decide he has to get used to it as is and just plough through?

Chen followed Sidestep's advice, no use being prideful.

Who did OG Step went to HG as?

In the book, Sidestep went as the puppt.

[Updated Discord Link](#)

[Apr 8, 2024](#)

It was brought to my attention that the old discord link has expired again:

<https://discord.gg/QVztnhUsFK>

[Open Demo for Path 4.2](#)

[Apr 7, 2024](#)

Well, we are here now, and it is time for the open demo for Fallen Hero: Revelations, path 4.2.

I've gone over the closed one, fixed bugs, adjusted the character creator, and corrected some spelling and grammar. Enjoy! This is open now, so feel free to share with friends.

This demo follows path 4.2, with a Sidestep who is still in their own body, with a puppet stuck in the hospital. They are free and healthy, not revealed and with no broken legs. Living their best life, in fact. And out to pay Hollow Ground back for what they did...

It is 87 700 words long with code, 70 000 without code. An average playthrough is 19 000 words.

<https://dashingdon.com/go/16053>

[Mug o' fun and other merch!](#)

[Apr 7, 2024](#)

Sitting here cleaning up the demo for public release later today, but I just thought I'd plug this wonderful Fallen Hero mug made and sold by Eydika with my permission. It just made me chuckle, and I pressed the buy button immediately. Also, Eydika would like it known that the idea originally was Anjie's.

She also has a lovely Julia Ortega print in her shop!

<https://society6.com/eydika/designs>

And, while I am at it, there are some other wonderful Fallen hero prints/shirts sold by Ardellian/Jinzali! I've got several of them hanging on my wall...

<https://society6.com/jinzali>

Go check them out!

And remember, I am not against people selling merchandise of this game, just check in with me first so I also can buy it! I'm greedy like that.

[Late questions ooops! Ask them here!](#)

[Mar 31, 2024](#)

In the hectic preparation for easter I forgot to put on the questions post! Oooops. Well, better late than never, it is still March for a little while longer.

[Lover's Triptych](#)

[Mar 30, 2024](#)

Easter is upon us, so running slightly later than normal, apologies!

This month's lore post features Dr. Mortum and Sky-Raider, for the story, Dr. Mortum and the puppet are both women. Easier with pronouns that way.

2018, Los Diablos.

Some might call it a hangar, but Ben always called it his garage. It sounded more reasonable than lair or secret base. That was for villains with bigger egos; when he was out of the Sky-Raider armor, there really was no need for that. It felt good being normal, just a dude in oily coveralls and a bandanna keeping his hair out of his face. Doing maintenance. Felt good being independent like that, at least for the systems he understood. Some he didn't, and for those, he needed expert help. Even though that help was currently pacing back and forth, the heels making little clicky sound on the concrete like a cat too relaxed to sneak. It was alright, though; he didn't need help with this.

"I can't believe the nerve of that man." Dr. Mortum paused, gesturing to an absent audience, and Ben briefly popped his head up from the engine hatch to pay attention to the woman.

"I can." As soon as he had said the words, he realized they were the wrong ones; Dr. Mortum's face committed deeper to the frown she had already been wearing.

"You're not helping." She crossed her arms, her smart suit elegantly cut and very out of place in the garage. Her car was parked near the entrance, currently in its vibrant orange shade. Matching her mood.

"I'm listening, though." He resigned himself to do that. He just needed to wrap this up first. "Would you hand me the piston ring compressor?"

"Here." She stretched up to offer him the tool in question. "Do you want a hand?"

"Belle, Belle, you're dressed up in your best; this is a dirty business." He wiped his oily hand on his coveralls to prove his point. "Please, you can keep ranting while I work."

"I'm not ranting, Benjamin." Her voice was ice and scotch, strong enough to burn his ears.

"Uhuh," he mumbled noncommittally.

"I could have beaten him. I should have." She was pacing again, her anger not named at him but at her nemesis. "I had the better car. I am the better driver."

"Sounds like the car show went well." He had never cared for the stuff. Too many people showing off their own self-importance.

"Don't get cute with me."

"Fine." He paused, looking directly at her. "You say you could have won, and I believe you. So why didn't you? Did he cheat?"

"He didn't cheat," she growled, putting all her disdain in that single word. "I decided to lose because otherwise he would demand a rematch. Or ask me out to dinner, though he did that anyway so I suppose I should just have rubbed his face in the gravel like he deserved."

"Sounds like you played it smart. Ain't that always what you tell me to do? Fly under the radar. Be sensible." He scratched his stomach, watching her seethe. It was rare enough to be amusing since it wasn't aimed at him.

"But you never listen," she didn't bother to hide her exasperation.

"Sure, but I'm a dumbass." He chuckled, making a gesture to sweep back his hair in a flamboyant move before he realized his hands were oily and aborted. "And I think you're better at taking your own advice. You're already one up on him; you know who he is, and he has no idea."

"You're right. I couldn't even use the full capabilities of my car because that would raise more questions. Stay within specs, custom built though they might be. It makes sense. God knows what's in that machine of his. The sound the engine made..." Her words veered close enough to flattery for her to shut up.

"You want me to mess him up?" Ben wiped his hands on a clean rag, though most of the grime remained.

"Please." Her look was hard but more from worry than disdain. "There's not enough surprises in your armor that I'd trust you to fight Charge."

"Ouch." He scratched his cheek, probably leaving a black smear behind. "Is it me you're not trusting? This thing is half your handiwork after all. Doubt you would have done a bad job with it."

"Charge won't come alone, and this armor wasn't made to fight the Rangers." Her voice softened. "You know that, I adjusted it according to your specs. And the new guy is a flier."

"First, you know full well I'm not going to fight the Rangers. Not in a million years. Second, there are more ways to mess with a man than fighting him. I could just steal his fancy car and dump it in the ocean."

"That is a thought." She rubbed her chin, mulling over the thought.

"Just give the word, lil' lady." He sketched her a salute, glad to see the look of fond annoyance on her face from the nickname. That never failed to cheer her up.

"I'll let you know once I've calmed down. I'm not making any decisions while I'm still being emotional." She let out a breath, straightening her back.

"You could be a little more emotional, I think. No harm done there."

"Last time I did, you had to help me dump a body."

"And I would do it again." He climbed down from the armor, walking over to her. "Listen to me, Belle. I don't know what standards you think you have to hold yourself to, but you don't need to."

"But I do, mon ami." She looked up at him, then gestured to the garage with a sigh. "You might be happy with the whole ex-soldier current pirate beach layabout setup you have here, but I'm a professional."

"Ouch." He placed his hand on his chest as if he had been shot. The theatrics made her smile but didn't distract from her rant.

"I'm a black woman in a field dominated by men. I need to be in control; otherwise, I'm hysterical. I need to be rational, not emotional. I need to work harder, be better, and I need to do it all while looking impeccable."

"Which you do." Opting for flattery was never wrong.

"Thank you." She crossed her arms again, defensive. "What I am trying to say is that I know what I got myself into. People see me like I want to be seen. It's hard work, but it's better than the alternative."

"For what it's worth, I think you're beautiful."

"I've seen the people you date, but I choose to take it as a compliment."

"And I choose not to take that as an insult, Miss Quality Standards." He laughed because at least she was relaxing enough to tease back. "You should lower them and live a little."

"I have too much work to do to spend time on frivolous dating. Let alone the serious kind." The admission was more tired than bitter, the legacy of decisions repeated over the years.

"I've heard that before, and it doesn't lead to a happy life even if you get a great career. You don't want to end up alone past forty with nothing but a successful career and nobody to share it with." Ben didn't name any names. Dr. Mortum didn't know about his former associate, and that was the way he liked it.

"You're sweet. And not following your own advice." She patted his shoulder awkwardly.

"Working on it. And I'm not aiming for the stars, just for comfort. I should be dead, now I'm just out here living my dream."

"As a pirate."

"Exactly."

"Merde. You do have a point." She admitted that as reluctantly as she admitted defeat in anything. "I should be enjoying myself. Do you have a spare set of coveralls?"

"None that will fit you, but I suppose that won't stop you?" Ben gestured towards the changing room. He had clean ones there, a couple of sizes too big, but it wasn't like this was a fashion showroom.

"No, I can always roll up the sleeves. I've never liked the way the chest tentacles deploys. Let's see if we can't make the process smoother. If you are going to throw Charge's Lamborghini into the ocean we don't want any hiccups."

"Yes, ma'am." He started whistling to himself as he headed over to pick her out some clothes. Maybe he'll get that adjustment free of charge. So to speak.

Sometimes, he cracked himself up.

2020, Los Diablos.

The Air-Raider armor was laid out on the diagnostics table, face down. Dr. Mortum had the back open, downloading data from the telemetry module. She was dressed for work, but there was a ruffled dishevelment to her that made Ben pause. Darker shadows under the eyes, hidden only by the reflections of her glasses. Despite that, she was smiling. Intriguing.

"I was thinking of adjusting the fins slightly," he started, patting one of the leg fins. "Is there a way we could reduce their surface? The armor handles well in the air, but it's damn awkward in cramped areas. Nearly got stuck last time."

"You're not supposed to use it in confined areas." Dr. Mortum didn't even look up. She kept her eyes on the laptop screen.

"I know, but I needed to get the container out. The tentacles didn't have enough reach... are you alright?" She was humming to herself. That alone was weird enough that he had to know.

"Me?" She did look up then, slightly confused, like a chicken interrupted in her pecking. "Oh. Yes, I am."

"You're humming, Belle. Your date went well then?" Fortune favors the bold. Isn't that what everybody says?

"Well, with complications. Did you hear about the museum?" She put the laptop down, letting it run diagnostics without her oversight as she looked down at him. The armor was big, and she was sitting on top of it.

"I read the headlines this morning." And watched the news. Bit of downtown chaos and a new villain. "Some nutter blew it up. Was that the armor you've been working on?" It felt like a Dr. Mortum design.

"It performed admirably, didn't it?" She smiled again, this time filled with more pride than secrets. "I just wished they hadn't attacked the very party I was in. With my date." The sigh was heavy and frustrated, but not even that mood lasted.

"You couldn't know. And from the sound, you both were alright?"

"Mostly. She wasn't badly hurt. Just fell and hit her head. The hospital cleared her... but it didn't exactly endear me to her boss. The attack took us both by surprise."

"What a bastard move."

"D'accord."

"I'm just curious about something." He looked up at her, putting on his best confused expression. "See, I keep hearing bad news all around, but all I'm seeing is a smile. Did someone get lucky last night?"

"Don't be crude."

"So you did." They were both smiling now. "I thought you said those days were behind you?"

"She's different." The admission came with a helpless shrug. "I hadn't planned to get that close. I suppose it might have been adrenaline affecting my judgment. Both of ours."

"I doubt it. You've been smiling about her for weeks. Weren't you worried that once the armor was delivered, she'd piss off and never see you again? Sounds like you were wrong about that." Ben was trying his damndest not to sound smug. He was genuinely happy for her.

"I was. But in my defense, that was a valid concern. We're both professionals, it's hard to determine what is business sense and what is real emotions."

"Sounds like emotions now, if you ask me."

"Unfortunately so." Dr. Mortum paused, frowned, then admitted, "At least for my part. I'm not sure about her."

"If this was before the armor was paid and delivered for, I'd agree with you, but now? Sounds like she might have been wanting to do this for a while but didn't do it before because it might be seen as manipulative and mercenary." They both knew how things played out in this business.

"She is hiding something from me, though." The frown had stayed. "Something big."

"She's working for a villain. That tends to come with baggage. We ain't all as open as I am." He patted his chest proudly. Best way to make people not look deeper. Be an open book.

"I suppose that's true. And I have my own secrets." She looked down at the laptop, disconnecting it from the diagnostics ports.

"Don't overthink it." He offered her a hand down like a gentleman. "Have a bit of fun. That won't kill you."

"We do have fun," she admitted. "She's going to get me in so much trouble. I hope I can keep up."

"You're not that old. And you can keep up as long as you loosen up."

"I'm not even sure if I can at this point."

"Just stop worrying. You've slept with her. That's the biggest hurdle, right? And she didn't freak out or whatever you've been worrying about." They both knew what, but that wasn't really a thing you brought up if you didn't want to sound like an asshole.

"I haven't told her." Dr. Mortum walked away, putting the laptop back in her briefcase. Assiduously not meeting his eyes. "And I'm not sure if she noticed."

"Does it matter who you used to be?" He knew it did for some people. They were bigger assholes than he was. "I bet you haven't even told her your real name yet."

"I should never have told you," she sighed.

"In your defense, you were very, very drunk. And I am charming and trustworthy." And harmless. For a villain. He had cultivated that vibe for years.

"Ben..." She gave him an exasperated look.

"Shush, let me have this one."

"I'll tell her eventually. Once I find the right moment. Maybe it will end in a week or two anyway. It's not like we both don't work a lot." She removed her thin latex gloves, preserving her manicure from the dirt.

"Just try to let her in a little bit." He held up two fingers, maybe an inch apart. He was an optimist.

"Not sure I can let her in much deeper." The smile was sharp and teasing enough that it took him by surprise. The laugh was half from delight.

"Ms. Abelard, is that a dirty joke?" He did his best to look shocked, and only slightly offended.

"Oh, shut up, Garret. Now tell me what's wrong with ce maudit aileron."

He was still smiling as he gestured towards the leg of the armor. This was going to be a good day.

Now, Los Diablos.

Ben hadn't expected a visit. The Sky-Raider armor had been serviced not two weeks ago and was working perfectly. He wasn't an overly cautious man, but something in Dr. Mortum's face on the door cameras made him get his gun before he quickly opened it and let her in. No trace of any shadows; perhaps the crisis hanging over her wasn't something he could chase off with guns. Frowning, he gently helped her down the stairs, trying to judge her mood and failing.

"Belle. Are you alright?" he asked instead.

"No. I'm not." The admission came easy, no attempt to hide the defeated voice.

"Come here, have a seat." He ushered her over to his break area and made sure to check the chair for oil stains before he offered it to her. "Hell, I'll get you a whiskey. It looks like you need it." He had a bottle here somewhere.

"I'm driving," she gestured dismissively.

"Not tonight, you're not. Besides, if you are going home, don't you brag your car can essentially drive itself?" He held up the bottle for her approval.

"Fine. Poison me." The words were filled with resignation, but he poured her a stiff drink all the same, then a second one as she knocked it back immediately.

"So." He wasn't sure where to start, but he had to start somewhere. "Is this a lover's spat? Or do I need to dump another body?" He could. The ocean was big, and the things that lived there were hungry.

"They'll live." She looked down at the glass as if unsure if that made her happy or not. "I patched them up."

"Alright." So there was a shooting. He had suspected there might have been something like that. Why? "I thought things were going well?"

"I... I don't know where to start. Or if I want to." She took a sip of whiskey, grimacing. Ben knew it was a good brand, so it must be memories.

"Look, you don't need to talk if you don't want to." He hated saying that; he was curious and wanted to know how bad this was. "Just tell me you'll be alright."

"I won't." That answer came too quick for his liking. "For a while, at least. But I'll live."

"Damn right." He filled up the glass, and she kept sipping it like tea. "Is this about your little girlfriend?"

"In a way. Things went... bad." The word was heavy enough to hold a myriad of disasters, but still no clue as to which one it was.

"Alright. Bad. We can handle bad. Who do I need to kill?" He was trying not to do too much of that these days, but old habits died hard, and passion was a better reason than duty.

"Nobody. It's..." She broke off, shaking her head. "I need to think."

"Just tell me if you are in danger."

"No." A moment's consideration. "No. I'm not."

"Good." He didn't like the pause, but it seemed like a genuine assessment. "Then there's time to figure out how you feel. Just felt I needed to ask, considering there were guns involved, y'know? You're usually not someone who shoots people on a whim."

"It was a reflex. I was startled. No," she admitted, "I was angry, I suppose. I didn't mean to hit. Didn't think I could have. They're..." She frowned and broke off, biting her lip.

"Alive, from the sound?" He wasn't sure what exactly had happened, but he knew he wasn't getting the whole story. Just tidbits.

"Yes. Just a shoulder wound. Like I said, I patched it up." The whiskey had calmed her down. She spoke slower now, with determination.

"You're pale as a sheet, though."

"That's funny." She didn't look amused.

"It's a figure of speech," he groaned. "Damnit, Mirlene, don't mark words with me right now. You're freaking me out."

"You don't need to worry," she said, which just made him worry more. "I just don't have answers yet. I am safe. This is about... my girlfriend." A strange twitch to her face. "But I don't want to talk about it."

"You've been weird for a few weeks now. Does this have anything to do with that San Francisco shit you mentioned?" She had asked him for contacts, and he had handed them off without a thought. Nothing big. Just research.

"Yes. But you should forget about that." Her voice was hard, insisting on secrecy.

"Done," he lied. "Not that you told me any details anyway. Just let me know if I need to expect one of Lord Ember's assassins to come by and drop your ass."

"No. It's not..." She shook her head. "It's got nothing to do with that. This is personal."

"Okay. Personal. No assassins. Just an accidental shooting. And heartbreak." She looked like she was about to cry; he wasn't sure how either of them would handle that.

"Hah." Less a laugh than a grunt. "Yes. You might say that."

"Just do me a favor, okay? Stay here tonight. We'll get drunk and watch the game, and I won't pry, okay?"

"Your football is still a crime against sport."

"I know. And I'll let you complain about it as much as you want."

"Can we order takeout?" She sounded so tired there, almost lost.

"Of course. And we won't talk work."

"Good." Dr. Mortum emptied the glass, a shiver going through her body. "You're a good friend, Ben."

"And you'll get through this. I'm sure it will all make sense in the morning. And if not..." he poured her another drink. "The hangover will distract you from thinking too much about it."

[Fallen Hero: Revelations DEMO 4.2](#)

[Mar 24, 2024](#)

Well, we are finally at the point now when the next demo is up! It will be a closed Patreon preview for 2 weeks, and released publicly on April 7.

This demo follows path 4.2, with a Sidestep who is still in their own body, with a puppet stuck in the hospital. They are free and healthy, not revealed and with no broken legs. Living their best life, in fact. And out to pay Hollow Ground back for what they did...

It is 87 700 words long with code, 70 000 without code. An average playthrough is 19 000 words.

As always, there is no grammar or spellchecking to speak of yet, and there are lots of variables and modifiers that are not there. This is a path that will be filled out more later, as it is an event that can happen later in the book for other, more challenged Sidesteps.

Enjoy! And don't spread the link around, everyone else will get it eventually...

<https://dashingdon.com/play/malinryden/ffrjniquweunfu42/mygame/>

[QnA for February!](#)

[Mar 12, 2024](#)

Been a busy month, been working full time with an editing job, and working on the next demo. Glad my brain is working better again! (Also whoever is uploading Patreon content online, please stop. It is a shitty thing to do and I am judging you.

For a friend that was wondering... since there was a response for my beard question last time, for Julia, will we be able to braid her hair or Julia braid our sidestep's hair if we are romanced to her?

It sounds like a cute scene! I'll do my best to try to include it.

If Regina's plan for Sidestep had succeeded and Ortega had found out about, how bad would the fallout be?

Bad. But pretty much about that whole bit would be very bad because Ortega is not a forgiving person.

Third time rewording this question cause I'm bad with words. In Rebirth: sidestep is (mostly) mission focused. Understandable because of how time sensitive the upcoming gala was. In retribution sidestep has a lot more opportunities with the people they can connect to. So my question is, is revelations going to be a more mission focused type of story like rebirth or less time sensitive like retribution?

I would say that it depends a bit on where you ended up after Rebirth. The first half (resolving the puppet) might vary between a very mission focused story and a more chill one depending on whether you are the one trapped in the puppet, or a free, whole Sidestep content on letting the puppet heal in the hospital. The second half will be more mission focused, but with lots of interaction. There will be some freedom in the middle.

Second question. Do you think that those of us with East Asian descent sidesteps could do our names like Chen? Like with the surname first and the given name second.

I could have that as a choice at the start, whether you want to show the surname first or last? It's not a hard thing to code! I just need to remember to do it...

Do Re-Genes get sense memories? Like, if they smell a certain brand of coffee would they suddenly recall a memory "they" had associated with it?

It varies. Sense memories for the things that THEY have experienced? Oh yes, definitely! Sense memories for the implanted memories? Most of the time no. They can happen, for very deeply connected/strong memories, but that is the exception. The body did not experience it at the same time as the memory happened, so they don't get the same pathways reinforced.

When Sidestep bites their cheek invading HG's mind, did any of that blood happen to fall on the table? If so, did HG notice?

No blood. Sidestep swallowed. The capture scene had some blood splattering tho, and if you lose the fight...

Would HG be more more likely to believe Sidestep is their sibling if they're a psycho murderer or a goody two shoes who saves civilians?

Don't think that would matter.

I asked before if HG would let bygones be if they and their's were hurt if it was just about business. Would HG give more leeway to a Sidestep that they have convinced themselves truly is their sibling back from the dead?

HG would give more leeway to Sidestep in that case, yes. Otherwise HG can be vindictive, though also trusts the other two to take their own revenge.

Does it even matter to HG whether their sibling was kidnapped and turned into a weapon or cloned and turned into a weapon, or are those effectively the same thing to them?

We're gonna get into that in game.

Are there any rivals/peers that HG thinks are particularly dangerous to them and their goals? Or who would be especially useful to have on their side.

A few yeah, but I won't get into that, because that is a plotpoint in the game.

Does 'shaken' confirm to Chen that Sidestep is a Re-Gene?

Pretty much yeah.

would the imposter take care of the rat king if sidestep is too injured to or hiding out with the rangers??

Oh yes.

how would ortega react if sidestep told them that five rat brains in a tube are their best friend??

Weirdly enough I don't think Ortega would be surprised, that does sound like Sidestep.

Hollow Ground: They could have key people under their influence, and their powers aren't inhibited by dampeners. Even if they were somehow put behind bars, a single touch and one word could see them free again. Will No-Kill Sidesteps have to grapple with the fact that arresting HG is hugely impractical? If we team up with Ortega, are they prepared to kill HG? Or am I over thinking things?

I don't think you're overthinking things, HG is very dangerous like that. Ortega would absolutely kill HG if they thought the other choice was letting them go free, but Ortega wants to take them down and bring them to light, not just erase them.

Since the Scars Sidestep can have seem to mostly be based on real-life psychology, what do you think a megalomania Scar would look like for Sidestep?

Some would say a high arrogant Sidestep might be going in that direction... at least eventually.

If the villain becomes famous enough... do we sort of start to bring capes back into fashion if we wear one?

Ahahaha I don't know. Maybe?

When picked up, Sidestep can try to be dominating towards the Rat King but they don't really seem to mind. Why, and why does the Rat King like Sidestep so much?

Because they feel seen and understood! And eventually, liked!

I think I remember there being something about how The Farm tried to mind-wipe Step during a prior Q&A. Do you think this will be a flashback scene in one the next two books?

We will absolutely get into that.

Did anyone in the Farm help Step escape either time?

Depends on the definition...

When first meeting Sidestep face to face, did Argent see their AI-chip? What did she think it was?

Yes, and we will get into that!

Is it possible that someone know Sidestep was a regene back in the old days, but didn't say anything?

Possibly, but it doesn't really matter.

How do you think a Sidestep x Anathema couple would have been back in the day? What would the Rangers have thought of it?

I have no idea! I have only seen them as friends, so my brain doesn't go there.

Can we dance with Ortega at her birthday party? In villain armour?

Dance yes, villain armor, we'll see!

Is it more likely than not that threaded steps will break free from HG's influence, or will it be hard/rare to achieve?

I will say that would depend on how much HG's and Sidestep's plans diverge.

For threaded Steps that do break free... can we go absolutely feral on HG? How enraged can we get? And how much of a mess can we make of them?

We'll see! We're gonna have some pretty gruesome scenes.

Similarly, after breaking the threads could Step end up reflecting on the way they use their telepathy on others?

Self-reflection? Well, I suppose some time must be the first, but I wouldn't bet on it.

At the end of Retribution, for most of the Rangers they don't seem to react super differently to a killing Step and an agent-kill Step. Will there be more of a distinction going forward, or does the difference truly not matter to them?

You have to separate an instinctual immediate reaction mixed with shock, from what a person might think and feel once they might have time to digest facts, listen to reasons, and consider options. You have only seen the initial reaction of anyone, with the exception of Argent in some paths. So yeah, things will change.

Im kind of curious about the SD's ability to cover things up, so I have a bit of a hypothetical; If a high-ruthlessness villain step who didn't have any qualms about killing was publically defeated by, say the rangers, or some other hero and was revealed to be a regene. how difficult would it be for them to cover up the fact that effectively not only are there human-passing regenes but that also one of them effectively went rogue and on this massive killing spree?

It would be very hard to cover up, because it would be news, and probably been published before the full implications would have been known. And if too many people know, then it would be hard to shut down anything.

I've read here before that gender impacts Ricardo and Julia's personalities and makes them appear as slightly different characters. Does that lead to any perception differences of Sidestep? For example, Ricardo perceiving M!Sidestep as being more 'okay' than F!Sidestep, while Julia would have machismo tinting her gaze less and as such see more? Or do the gender impacts on the characters stay generally self-contained.

I don't think it affects the view of Sidestep, but it might color things. Gender affects things. I haven't thought about the details though.

Will a genderquestioning Sidestep be able to officially come out in book 3?

Think so.

Are the different types of imposters actually different people, or are they the same person (Ace?) but at different stages of completion/decay? Maybe like a incomplete puzzle type of situation?

You will see in the book!

How Herald feel when male sidestep (who is top and enjoying the power to control) has sex with them? I really want to know what make him beg !

I think it would have taken a while for him to get used to it, it is a thrill though. Maybe nice to give up control for a little, and just be selfish for a moment.

Steel sex is two people who being treat as tool when they can comfort each other by body touching. In the future will it be more intense?

I don't know! A lot of these scenes are explored as I write them. I don't have a blueprint of what each character likes in my head, I need to see what happens in the scene as I type it down. So I don't know what might happen in the future. I do know that Chen definitely can be more rough and tumble too.

For all Ros, what they are thinking when sidestep is top.

I think it varies depending on the vibe and the situation, but I do think the one who would put up the most challenge would be Ortega. Because that would be fun.

Will Sidestep be able to have a game ending where they hide their villain identity, scrap it and have a good ending with the Rangers/Ortega? I don't really think it would be an option, but when I play as regretful/unwilling villain Sidestep, scrapping the villain persona without revealing my identity has always been on my mind.

Yeah, I don't see that being an issue! There is no forced reveal.

If Sidestep has a good enough relationship with Ortega, could Sidestep completely get rid of their plans as a villain and ask for Ortega for help about the Farm?

Hmmm ask Ortega for help, yes. But some of those plans still needs to be dealt with.

Can i ask you to group 16 named characters into 4 groups of 4?

Nope!

The way we make Ortega and Steel have a rift in their friendship (if Steel has a high suspicion and Ortega does not/we convince them we arent after we get in the crash) can we do the same but the other way around? I have high suspiciousness with Ortega but none with Steel

If Ortega ever gets to the point to push the issue and try to get Chen on his side, that might happen. Alas, Ortega tends to bottle things up more.

How is HG potentially feeling about going against a mob boss Sidestep who broke their nose/hurt Nocturne and has shown themself to be capable of leading up front and not shy away from danger/threats?

Inconvenient. Might have to call in some experts.

How would you define chaotic? Liked reading your answer on lawful alignment!

Someone who feels constrained by people's expectations, and prefers to break them before they get tied down. Someone who doesn't see the purpose of laws, even when they are there to protect people from doing stupid shit. A bit libertarian. Probably a VERY hard person to be friends with unless you are in the same situation. A bit punk. A bit anarchist. Doesn't think much about consequences, or are okay with bad ones. Doesn't rely on society, and it's support. Probably doesn't work very well outside of small friend groups. Probably loses friends quickly. Private property is optional. Owns little, loses or gives it away. Few ties, ties needs laws to work. Can be very selfless and caring or very selfish and cruel. Ineffectual to get shit done, but might want to get shit done, which is a problem.

It's so important to me: can we make Chen laugh? Like with shitty jokes n stuff

It would take shitty jokes, yeah.

Since it's possible for Ace/Puppet to be attracted to people independent of Sidestep, is it possible for Mortum and the puppet to get together at all (or at least be friends), if Sidestep that discovers that they're not attracted to Mortum when outside of Ace's body despite having romanced the doctor? (Or if Step was using Mortum?) Someone else mentioned that they shipped their Puppet/Mortum and not Step/Mortum, which really got me wondering about this, but I understand if it's spoilers.

I can see how this would work, yeah.

Would Argent prefer if she wasn't nemeses with Lord Ember? Even if it's only to avoid fighting him/him focusing on her as a threat?

No, she likes hating her enemies thank you very much. They are all bastards.

How would she take a Sidestep who would go out of their way to deflect that attention off of her and onto themselves? Essentially becoming LE's new nemesis to take the heat off of her?

Oh that would be a competition situation!

Will Ortega tell Chen (if you break the thread) (or just the rangers) about Sidestep being HG'S sibling? Especially if they have high suspicions and think they're working together?

More truth will stat coming out now, but I need to write it to see what people are willing to share. Chen will have to tell Ortega first about the thread...

Will Sidesteps that remained innocent at the end of Revelations be able to later confess to being the villain?

Yep.

Would a stomach full of nutritious food before taking the boost drug help survive it in any way? Considering it was conceived as a diet pill.

Hmmm I would say it would be irrelevant. The absorption might be slightly slower.

When talking about Tia Elena in Ortega's home while having dinner, saying "I'm glad you didn't [tell her]." raises Ortega's clue but only if he's Ricardo. Most of the other gender differences (like M!Step hitting Julia vs. Ricardo during Regene reveal) make sense to me, but I'm interested in hearing more about this choice if possible. Why is it that Ricardo finds it suspicious but Julia doesn't? Is it about their relationship with Elena? Or does it have more to do with their gender?

I would say that Julia has a slightly tenser relationship with her mother, due to her being a woman. Ricardo on the other hand was a lot more open with her historically.

Will the asexual Sidestep have any time to talk about being asexual with partners in a poly relationship?

I'll try to fit that in!!

How well would the cast + Dr. Mortum + HG trio get along with a clone of themselves?

I don't know! But I do know that two Ortega's would be a menace to society...

Did it take a while for Danny to come to terms or come out with his bisexuality (like Ortega) or is M!Step just an exception? (Though it seems like he can see Ricardo as attractive in the poly route, so maybe not?) It never seemed like he had issues with romancing M!Step besides being inexperienced with men. Was it hard for him to ask M!Step out at all?

Danny is bisexual, he just has a lot more experience with women, and that is easier and expected. So it would have taken some time to come to terms with, especially thinking about himself that way. Not saying that it was bad, just new and slightly weird. It took courage to ask M!Step out, yeah, he was putting his heart on the line there and was prepared to be laughed at.

You've said before that everyone except Daniel would have a great first impression of Regina. How exactly would they react if they learned about all the horrible things she'd done to Sidestep? Would she be banned from Rangers HQ? Would anyone outright try to attack/threaten her? How would things change with a romanced RO?

Oh if they learned about Regina they would take turns curbstomp her.

Back at the 'which armour sets do the ROs find the most attractive,' what appeal does the functional armour have for Herald and Steel?

It is practical and not ostentatious, there's a beauty to something made for function, not form.

Silly question: during the scene where you follow Chen into the dressing room, and he slams the door in your face. Why? Why does he do that? Cause it's funny? What would've happen if it DID hit Sidestep? No malice, just really curious about the inner workings of this man

Frustration and impatience. He fully expected Sidestep to avoid it (it's in their name), but if it had hit, he'd be thoroughly mortified and embarrassed, he would not have meant for that to happen.

Do Herald's powers let him safely catch a falling person out of the air? Or would he need to gradually slow them to a stop to avoid hurting them?

It would depend on his skill level. At this current point in the game he would need to gradually slow them to some extent.

Has there ever been a boost that could speak with the dead?

Not to anybody's knowledge.

If Sentinel had been the one to see the photos of sidestep post heartbreak, would he have handled the situation differently than Chen? If yes, what would be different?

I would say yes. And it probably would not have ended well for the farm, or for Sentinel. Or for Sidestep for that matter, who was believed to be dead by both.

Do you think Boosting a deer with chronic wasting disease would create a zombie plague?

Nah, they'd probably just die. Though it is an interesting thought. Deer, like horses, are not exactly hardy animals.

Has Herald ever considered getting Modded?

No. It kinda scares him a bit actually. He's seen Ortega and Chen and what they have to deal with.

In a scenario where Ortega would get to see any timeline/alternate path their life could have taken, what would they choose to see first?

Ortega would have zapped that television and chosen not to watch any of them. They are not prone to wallow in that kind of nostalgia, and what-if scenarios. Better to move on and stop wasting time thinking about alternate paths. The one exception to this is Sidestep, for reasons, but they wouldn't watch anything related to that because it would hurt.

If sidestep put up the hand w the nanovores for a high five which ROs would high five them (they're not like actively using them)

All of them. If they had self-reservation they wouldn't be in this story.

Why does Sidestep have a talent for flicking small objects at Ortega?

How did they learn to accurately flick a bottle cap or toothpick?

Spend enough time alone in a room (cell) with nothing but a small ball to amuse you and you become REALLY good at throwing stuff, hitting stuff, and bouncing it off surfaces. If there was no ball (for punishment reasons) small stolen objects like erasers, bottle caps, toothpicks or pebbles would do instead.

Nice and self-soothing.

Can we also flick objects at Ortega's head as the villain?

Not in armor you can't, it doesn't have the manual dexterity for that. Throwing, yes, flicking, no.

Is step less powerful now than they were at their escape because of the gates getting established in their mind?

Yes.

If Sidestep ends up threaded, would Hollow Ground be able to tell if they open or close gates?

Not unless HG was specifically made aware of them beforehand, then they could be monitored to some extent, though to use their powers like that, Hollow Ground HG preferably needs skin contact.

Does Jackrabbit have a preferred weapon of choice?

Shotgun.

Is Ortega immune to Nocturne's vision blocking?

No.

what's the top 3 sidestep's haters? Is FP on it?

I will say that depends on the Sidestep. Five Pennies is not on it.

Apart from Regina/Farm and HG in some paths, Is anyone that we don't know of including sidestep in their evil big plans?

Would Five Pennies' powers work on Sidestep?

Sidestep is not immune.

Can i put five pennies pennies through one of those commemorative penny presses? would they still work and would that piss him off

They would work, but oh boy, it would piss him off.

How did 5 Pennies come across the 5 pennies he uses?

He's had them for a very long time.

How old is Five Pennies?

Not sure, in his mid to late thirties I think.

Was Iris involved in getting the Catastrofiend into the auction?

She's a greeter and hostess, she has nothing to do with what goes on sale

And umm... does Iris have the power to scuttle around on all fours and spin her head like an owl? (Hides behind reinforced locked door)

Ahaha no. I can assure you that is not a thing she can do.

Will Sidestep be able to change rival focus with new members of the cast? Like members of the HG trio, Dove, or Skyraider?

Yes, there will be new rivalries to pick early in book four! A lot has happened, so new emotions and annoyances would have come into play.

Iris mentions a key exhibit at the hero museum. Did the museum consider, or even advertise, any of their exhibits to be "key" or the centrepiece of the museum for the grand opening?

Nope. There was probably some famous things which were used in the ads but no single thing.

Iris's meddling aside, how were the hero and villain exhibits planned? How much was the inclusion/portrayal/relative prominence of particular figures influenced by political concerns or major donors' wishes? If I asked a random sample of experts in LD history what they thought of the museum, what responses might I get?

Honestly, most had never got a look at it yet! Remember, changes are it got blown up. If it didn't, then I think that people agreed that it was an alright museum, clearly geared towards tourists and prone to government interference and exaggerations.

Does something have to be organic for the effects of five pennies pennies to work? Could they affect argent, given the layer of nanos, or do they require skin contact? Could they damage or influence nanos?

I will plead the fifth and spoilers on that one.

Being nice to Iris at the auction raises your fan club score. If Iris is a fan, is 5p a sidestep geek too?

Five Pennies didn't care about Sidestep.

If Step read Ace's mind while they were having a precog vision, would Step see the vision as well?

Oh hell, that would be one bad feedback loop, think static scream on the radio, but they would be able to pick up some.

Will we have the chance to interact with other survivors of the Heartbreak incident (who aren't Rangers)?

Not sure yet.

Does Sentinel also have plot armor in B3?

Not sure yet.

Is Iris the big bad evil guy?

Nope. What makes you think there is one?

Was Iris near the HB incident when it happened?

Nope.

What is discordant architecture?

It's a term I have personally used for a many years, but there's no definite definition of what it is. As best I can describe it, it is in some ways similar to hostile architecture.

Hostile architecture is using design and architecture to discourage human or animal interaction and behavior. Like removing benches at waiting areas, or separating them with screwed on handles just to make sure they can't be used to sleep on by the homeless. Lining protected concrete areas near underpasses and the like with spikes, to make sure no rough sleepers will assemble. The anti-bird spikes on walls to try to prevent birds shit on buildings and the sidewalk. The ultrasound they play outside corner stores to stop teenagers to loiter there. In short, the increasingly hostile space the city is becoming to the people who are forced to live in it rather than just pass through in their cars between expensive meeting locations/store. The loss of public spaces, public bathrooms, locked parks and places to exist for free.

I might also add the more... accidentally hostile architecture, like the skyscraper at 20 Fenchurch Street in London which melts cars with reflections, and the design of brutalist neighborhoods which inadvertently encouraged antisocial behavior and violence and had to be torn down as a result. Too bad I can't remember what the book about that was called right now. I would also toss in McMansions and their lack of architectural cohesion, the current boom of shoddy mixed-material buildings made to fall apart in a year or two, and tofu-dreg projects existing for investing and not for living.

But, all that is real world and physical, a degradation of the city as a place for people. If we go more weird, which is where I like to go, we enter the world of liminal spaces. The Denver airport, the way some ruined buildings draws you to your doom, and the infrasound of rumbling highways and gas-pipes buried underground. The ways that architecture can make you feel ill at ease, the uncanny valley for houses. The stairs slightly wrong. The windows too close together. Odd angles that might hide things you can't see.

Discordant Architecture is hostile architecture for the mind and soul.

Did sidestep have blueprints to the museum prior to the attack? if so were they the original ones or the ones altered by iris?

Sidestep did steal the blueprints. They would be the ones altered by Iros.

Aside from the way it was built was there any other reason that specific site was chosen to become the museum?

It was in a not-yet reclaimed and renovated neighborhood, and Mayor Alvarez want the city cleaned up to bring in some good tourism.

So you've answered in the past about muppet versions of the rangers... have there ever been muppet versions of villains? or other rangers associates/vigilantes aside from sidestep?

I mean I can imagine that must be the case! One of the villains would probably be Psychopathor. I can 100% see him as a muppet.

What's something each RO would not be caught dead wearing? (General answers (like "a dress") and hyperspecific ones (like "this one fanartist's 'improved redesign' of their villain costume") equally welcome.)

Oh boy. I really have no idea. I don't see any of them as being completely against stuff? Well, hmm. I do think Chen would avoid feminine stuff, because that would make him very self-conscious about his body. Not color necessarily, but more the cuts and flimsy materials. Ricardo in contrast wouldn't pick a dress to wear for everyday life, but would absolutely wear a dress to a party as a dare and rock it. Probably like it a bit, people would be looking at him, and he does have nice legs. I would say Vera would never wear a uniform, but she has, repeatedly, to sneak into places. Work is work. I also would say Argent wouldn't be caught dead wearing crocks, but then I realize that a pair of pastel pink ones kitted out with cute accessories might be acceptable with a pair of cute dungarees.

I was having a conversation last night about the differences between fallen hero heroes and DC hero's and one was I've never heard of fallen hero heroes or villains zipping though the city on grappling hooks or running across the rooftops like they do in DC or marvel. So how do the heroes and villains of this world get around?

I mean, the rooftops are generally a lot further between in Los Diablos, New York is pretty cramped and tall in comparison. Earthquakes, you know? I think it's mostly cars, bikes and powers.

Do you think there will ever be more scenes where sidestep can fire a missile launcher?

Yes. I like blowing things up.

So apart from the HB site and the museum is their any more Eldritch Loci within Los Diablos?

Oh such a loaded term... I won't say I agree with it, but if we do the general vibe of it I would say yes.

Does HG actually prefer their coffee black, or do they just think it would hurt their image to ask the villain invading their house for milk/sugar?

Ahahahahah oh boy. I can see it going either way there, let's keep this a secret for now.

What kind of coffee machine and coffee does HG have? Are they like... into the Art of Coffee(tm)? Do they use a shitty \$20 drip machine cause they're secretly cheap?

The Art of Coffee (tm) all the way. Probably a lot of it impulse bought.

What coffee do Jake and Nocturne prefer? Does Hg judge their choices?

Jake doesn't really like coffee. Nocturne wants her strong and spicy, she likes mixing in some cardamom with the grounds and then adding milk and sugar. HG doesn't judge.

Do HG and Ortega own the same robe.....

It would be funny, but no.

Could HG's power make people who are receptive, hallucinate memories?

Easily.

How is HG gonna explain this (what they think their lil sibling is broke into their home in the middle of the night blablabla) to Nocturne and Jake

Oh that will NOT be easy. Might write it some time for fun.

When was the last time HG cried? Did they cry after their lil reunion with Sidestep if some sibling feelings were involved?

Hmm. I don't think HG is a crier. They feel more like someone disassociating and staring into empty space for a while.

Now that we're officially trespassing can we claim our room in HG's villa

Nope!

Would HG get along with the rats? Could they communicate at all? Could HG thread the rats by sticking a finger in their housing?

HG could not thread the rats, no touching the brains! I think HG could communicate them with the rat king the same way as Psychopathor did. They are both psi-sensitive, and thus the girls can initiate an exchange of information with them, but there is no feedback or mutualness as it is with Sidestep.

Not as a canon route of course, we have more than enough of those, but as far as headcanon goes— would Armadillo be open to ~ romance ~ (with Step or otherwise)?

No. I don't think so.

If Five Pennies' pennies get destroyed, how many souls get released?

Do souls exist at all?

What color is HGs robe?

I would say they have a variety, this one was probably a soft, creamy grey.

Could Hollow Ground solve a rubik's cube without help?

Yeah, but it would take a while.

Have there been experiments with trying to lessen the dosage for the boost drug? Like split it between 2 people to try and up the survival rate?

Oh yes. The survival rate does increase with lower dosage, but not at the same pace as the powers induce are lowered. So you might get a 10% higher chance of survival, but 50% less power.

If psychic/telepathic residue can become a sort of consciousness attached to a place ala the HB site, what kinds of ways can it manifest? Are there any recorded histories of these spaces, or are they kind of viewed as "liminal" spaces as we do in our lives?

Yeah, spaces like that are known. Most call them haunted, weird, spooky, liminal, or other things like that. Not all pick up on it, but to those that do it is creepy as hell. There's probably groups looking into this, just like people looking into hauntings and keeping track of places where that happens in real life.

Is there a threshold for how much of the boost drug you can ingest before it takes effect? Like if you consume 4 grams your fine but the 5th one will start the boost lottery? And if so, what happens when the amount ingested remains below the threshold?

There is probably a minimum dose when nothing much happens and the body just clears the drug, but what that is depends very much on the individual. In animal research (it's unethical on humans) it has been shown that most animals on low dosages never show any boosting, though many suffer kidney and liver damage, or premature death which might be seen as a failed boosting attempt, though with less obvious causes of death than normally would be the case. If the dose is low but enough, the actual boost will generally be a minor one, though not always.

How does HG feel about smoking? Do they, or does/did anyone close to them, smoke? Do they not care, dislike it, not mind as long as it's not where they have to breathe it...? (Does their opinion change if you're doing it with their sibling's face?)

Smoking is pretty much as common as it was in our world in the 80's. I think Nocturne smokes a lot, Jake smokes some, and HG doesn't smoke tobacco, but other things needed to relax.

I got to wondering who Chen radioed during HB, using an old and presumably retired authorisation (Arc 4) from a fairly secret task force - not using Ranger authorisation codes - to call in an airstrike on technically not-US soil within minutes. I know there's a base nearby to LD, but I'm squinting at the old authorisation codes on top of the quick response.

Was there a prior plan in place not unlike the nanosurge? Or is there a presence from task force arc near LD? For any other reasons..?

Ehehe oh there are indeed emergency plans in case the shit hits the fan that includes the military. Chen knows... things.

Prior to the official discovery and therefore regulation of the hero drug, how common were the chemicals involved in synthesizing it?

I have no idea! I don't think common at all, this was a new weird thing, not mixing old stuff and getting lucky.

Is there any way Five Pennies can "replace" one of his coins if it's lost?

Who knows? I do, but I am not telling you.

What does it feel like to be an organism contained in Mortum's fun gun?

Not good. Not good at all. The lucky lose consciousness immediately, others go mad.

Would Anathema have degraded in Mortum's gun the way the Catastrofiend did?

Hmmmm. Hmmmmm. Edge case. I'd say maybe, not in the exact same way though.

Does the Mortum gun operate like a Pokeball (i.e. one captured person at a time)

Yes.

Between the catastrofiend's first appearance on the villain scene and its lengthy disappearance when it got gun-napped, were there any prolonged periods of inactivity? Was its transformation from human into...I'll just gesture to all of it...gradual or were there any sudden major changes in physicality? Like when did it get the blade arms?

Oh yes there were prolonged periods of inactivity. Some was probably due to mod-work rehab, others due to living high on ill-gotten gains.

What does Cornelius Vaughn aka Zombie General get on the telepathy scale?

He's nudging Omega level too.

Can a single Boosted individual manifest two or more powers?

Yes. Some of them might be related, others might look completely different.

Who's the oldest known Boost?

I have no idea! Might be in their seventies by now?

Is Bonnie Belle inspired by One Piece's Monkey D. Luffy?

Nope, I never really had any knowledge of One Piece before the Netflix stuff. It's more from old stuff, like Bugs Bunny and Plastic Man.

So in a bit of lore it looks like a specific brand/manufacturer of boost drug is mentioned. What are the most well known manufacturers? Are any considered to be better/more likely to result in powers instead of death than others?

At this point, it's more like any other illicit drug, you have NO IDEA what you are actually getting. There are no official manufacturers, any names are more street-names than anything else. For a while "Philippine-Green" was popular and had a good reputation, but then everybody started to imitate the distinctive green look and the reputation tanked as a result. The boost drug is often mixed with other, cheaper drugs to dilute it. This has given rise to the rumor that the boost drug isn't that lethal at all, it just doesn't always work. In those cases, it was probably other chemicals the user injected or ate instead. Some say that the greater survival rate of boosts in out-of-laboratory settings is due to these other drug impurities meaning a lower initial boost level, as well as other drugs like opioids helping suppress lethal reactions of the user. Yet others claim that it's those drugs that kills people, and the government is just trying to keep the boost drugs from the street to keep the people down.

...Does the farm source boost drugs from any specific manufacturer?

They make it themselves.

Did the Void have any plans beyond recruiting Ortega and dominating the west coast? Were they going for world conquering or making a move against "the things in the deep"?

The Void was a cult leader, they wanted to grow the Green Sky into a regional power.

If a Sidestep without aphantasia were to possess a body whose original "soul" had aphantasia, would Sidestep not be able to visual mental images? Would a Sidestep with aphantasia possessing a body without aphantasia spontaneously be able to have mental images?

Sidestep would have the same level of imagination as they would normally have, the host body would not affect that.

Will Ortega get to meet the Henchmen in revelations?

Oh yes.

How long has it been since Armadillo was decanted?

Not sure. They are probably slightly younger than Sidestep but not much.

Could the core be considered a mod?

At this point, yeah.

How viscous is the solution Re-Genes are decanted from? Do they get gooped? Slimed? Just wet?

I would say slimed is the right consistency. Wet but slightly stickier and slicker. It is water soluble, so a gentle wash with soapy water is an early step.

2 questions about the threat step says is coming:

Do they come from the same realm that Ljungstrand believes consciousness to originate?

Are they the original or a copy?

Nope and not relevant.

Did Sentinel have anything to do with the rain that suddenly catches Sidestep off guard in the first HQ visit in Retri? The "you rarely watch the skies" line got me curious.

Oh that line is indeed there for that reason, though Sentinel is innocent when it comes to the rain. I just wanted to establish that Sidestep rarely looks up.

How will Sentinel's motivations of being in LD change if the rangers know that sidestep is a regene?

Spoilers.

Will we be getting the old ranger's reactions to being a regene? Like Sentinel and Pyroclast?

Sounds likely.

Regina refers to Sidestep as her prize project. Excluding the factors of regene survivability, financial costs, and time, will she be able to confidently replicate the same "experiment" to cut her losses and create a new "sidestep (aka prize project)" again?

At this point, she's shit out of luck when it comes to that.

Did Sidestep fulfill Regina's hypothesis, or did they make an unexpected detour that led to an even more desired outcome - kind of like how the mouldy petri dish led to the discovery of penicillin?

Sidestep is the mouldy petri dish!

Which does Regina believe influences development more - nature or nurture?

Nurture.

What does Regina do in her free time?

Ahahaha free time? Such a funny concept.

A fair number of regenes seem to have escaped. Is this in any part due to the failing core?

I'd say partly, yes.

Are there five pennies for Five Pennies, in the same way that there are five rats for the rat king?

Yes.

How old is old enough for HG to start calling someone old person?

I would say 50-60 probably.

Ward's modded arm with the claw, is it just the hand, half arm or full arm that's replaced?

I always saw it as the full arm, with shoulder prosthetics like Chen has. The claw can be detached, but the shoulder remains. And yes, Ward could have a normal arm, but chooses not to.

Romantically speaking, I know Chen will step aside if he notices something between Step and Danny. Could we perhaps persuade him to reconsider in the future?

I honestly don't know. If Sidestep has broken up with Danny, maybe. I need to see how people react, I didn't know Chen would do that until I wrote him.

There's a lot of architecture featuring geometric shapes with hard angles. Are there any with "smoother" shapes, e.g. spherical/ buildings with rounded parts?

No, I see Los Diablos as angular.

What are your opinions on the Las Vegas SPHERE?

Discordant architecture if I ever saw it! That shit is nightmare fuel.

Via the 1.2 demo, After they left Step to sleep, what was Pelayo and Ward's conversation like on their way back home after learning their Boss was a Re-gene?

Maybe I will write it one day!

Are we ever going to see Step to Villain Persona Plushies as fan merch? There's no way they don't exist...

I mean they probably do exist! Maybe we'll get to see some fan-merch in book three, the fanclub will come more into play.

Not that Sidestep would ever want to, but if they ever needed to or tried to..... Would their blood work akin to Void's for boosting Ortega someone?

Nope.

The quality of the Boost dose seems to increase the likelihood of survival, but does quantity increase the fatality rate? Does it increase the strength of powers granted if one survives?

Quantity increases chance of death, but also greatly increases the strength of power. The two are connected.

Was Chen's suspicion of sidestep more immediate or gradual? What were his first impressions of step, suspicion or not? And his attitude towards vigilantes that aid the rangers in general?

I'd say it was more immediate, at least if we count that as within the first three meetings or so. Chen is mistrustful against vigilantes in general, he's seen too many that was in it just to get to beat people up with a clear conscience.

In Hood's flashback, we saw that Boosting can be done via injection or by imbibing it. Could it be administered as an aerosol?

It breaks down real fast in the presence of oxygen though (pills are coated). A nasal spray miiiiight work.

What colors do you associate with Heartbreak, the Nanosurge, the Void and the Catfiend?

Heartbreak: Deep red. Nanosurge: Greyish purple. Void: Tornado green. The Catastrofiend: Mustard yellow.

any chance for puppetstuck mcs to change their appearance? if these are changes that end up a little closer to the og body, do you think they might be commented on 🙄🙄

Oh yes, that is in the original book! (and actually the scene that made me stop writing it due to brain distress)

we know that ace (and presumably other boosts) can undergo a traumatic boost response when shroud eats them. does shroud get the benefits of said TBR in her consumption, or does she get the benefits of the original power level? does shroud benefit from eating more powerful boosts, or do all boosts give her the equal amount of energy?

Boosts has a variable energy, but it is less dependent on the power level of the boost than of the type of boost. Physical boosts like strength, regeneration and the like are a lot more filling and juicy.

In playthroughs where Ortega thinks the MC is in hiding from Hollow Ground, where do they think a wealthy MC is getting that money from? Do they think the MC is still able to leverage their former insider knowledge/connections somehow, that HG has managed to get their hooks back in them, that maybe they were wrong about the MC's mysterious "enemies" being code for their big bad sibling...?

It is a combination of "hmmm have they reconciled?" "maybe the enemies were someone else all along, like enemies of HG?" and "looks like someone has stopped hiding, that can't be good." It will vary, Ortega is looking into it.

For the "It's been a long journey" transition crowd - or those with Steps whose gender-affirming experiences diverge from the written canon in book 2 - would it be possible to get something like an option menu toggle for surgery and hormone flags in the future?

Possibly, depends on the timeskips I think.

Did Void blood have any effect on animals?

I would say... probably not. Maybe.

How did the void discover their blood had these interesting properties?

The cult existed before Void, and some would say The New Flesh has returned to their roots. Partaking of boosted blood and flesh as a sacrament been going on for a while.

Is whether we'll be able to ally with the puppet ever locked at the end of book 2?

No locks.

The heartbreak experiment had nine of white walls. What difference would it make if it has the usual four walls, or more than nine (e.g. twelve walls)?

Wrong vibes.

I think you commented once Nocturne and Jake would have different relationship bars/systems/whatever orange thingy that goes up and down. Have you thought about the different status? Like, deadly enemies/ siblings-in-law/friendly rivalry?

Not yet! That happens as I write.

Retribution lets you opt out of some puppetstuck endings regardless of PCV by ditching the puppet's body early, but not vice versa with your own body. Is that purely a player convenience feature, or are there in-universe reasons the MC can pull it off in that direction but not the other way around?

The puppet body is a puppet body, you can't just abandon your own to certain doom and discovery that way. Sidestep wouldn't do that.

Which ROs would be best/worst at teaching what they do to a layperson? Which would like/dislike it most?

Hahaha no idea! Truly not something I think about.

What are Mortum's hot takes on what's wrong with academia, aside from the obvious things any jaded ex-academic can tell you?

The lack of focus on base research, it might not pay off in the short run, but it is needed if you want to go somewhere new. Can't just focus on what can be monetized and that the investors think sounds neat.

Has 5 Pennies ever had any involvement with Void or the cult? Has 5p ever come into contact with Void in any way?

I would say probably not.

What does HG and Nocturne think about five pennies

They don't.

How does Hollow Ground feel, personally, about their public image? Do they enjoy the way they're seen, only care insofar as it serves their purposes, feel privately uncomfortable with aspects of it...?

HG has spent a lot of time trying to curate their public persona of mystery and legend. They're pretty happy with it.

How did Five Pennies discover he holds powers over these specific 5 pennies?

Since he was boosted.

How good is everyone's sandwich making skills?

I think Argent and Daniel are good, Ortega and Vera is medium, everyone else is basic. Mortum is... not good.

Will Step get opportunities to give/get hugs from Armadillo?

OOoh I am not sure hugs sit well with Sidestep. We will see if we get that character development.

Was Mortum involved in any groups or clubs during school?

No.

Who, if any, of the ROs or characters would be most likely to play rugby?

Ortega. Sky-Raider.

When Armadillo escaped the farm, did anybody help them? Or they crawled their way through the desert just like sidestep

Spoilers.

What's the hardest compromise Armadillo has had to make between security and quality of life? Would they change their lifestyle much if they no longer had to hide, or would they stick with more or less the setup they have?

I feel that they might stick with it. This is someone who has grown up within very strict confines, I think the vastness of the world scares them.

Imagine Sidestep making HG indisposed instead of thirsty. What would have happened had they ambushed HG in the bathroom

More dignity lost. More things to unsee for Sidestep.

What was the time Armadillo has been the most terrified?

The first day after the escape when the adrenaline dropped.

When was the last time Mortum took care of some like they're doing now with a broken legs sidestep? How do they feel about it? (in the cases in which they actually care about sidestep and they know the truth about the puppet) Are they kinda fucked up happy they're gonna spend more time with them and meet the real "them"?

I think this is the first time in a LONG time, normally Dr. Halabi handles that. But yeah, kinda fucked up happy might be an apt description for certain scenarios.

What are Hollow Ground's top Things I Wish I'd Known Before Becoming A Mob Boss?

I honestly think they were pretty well informed beforehand. I can't think of anything right now.

Will we ever get an opportunity to heroically save Spoon?

Dunno if I wanna endanger Spoon.

Did nonbinary HG ever consider just presenting themselves as cis in professional contexts? (...For that matter, did female HG ever weigh the pros and cons of passing as male?)

Nah, they like being who they are, what else is the use of power?

Okay how much can we actually get Nocturne to like us. Like. Can u give us an example

I don't know yet! You need to interact more together before I can judge that.

How does your average member of HG's organization think HG and Nocturne met?

I don't think they ponder about that too much, how many go around wondering how your boss and their significant other met? Why care?

Would HG consider breaking into our house (with guards and shit) out of pettiness after this? Or is that stopping too low for someone so snob like them and they would send someone else instead and film it

Oh I am not going to tell you that!

When Vera was a kid, what did she want to be when she grew up? Have her feelings significantly changed since then?

I think she wanted to race pigeons professionally at one point, then being a fireman, and also possibly a teacher. And yeah, things change, you take a look at the real world and realize that it cares little for dreams. Only for putting food on the table.

Has HG ever been part of an aquascaping contest?

No, I didn't even know they had contests for that. I don't think HG is the competing type.

I know it's been a while since rebirth but considering steel's immediate reaction to sidestep being alive was telling them to stay away from the rangers—why did he tell them that? did he think about that later in terms of step's relationship in retribution (avoiding, hanging out, etc). Does he feel guilty about it, or did he just not expect them to listen to him in the first place?

If Chen has become closer to Sidestep, he does feel guilty about it. But his initial reaction was that there was something suspicious about it, and that whatever the reason was, it would hurt Ortega and the Rangers. A spy? A threat? He knew what he saw, Sidestep shouldn't be alive. It is only after considering what it might mean that he starts to come around.

Adding onto the above question, will there be an opportunity to call Chen's remorse bullshit (true or otherwise) considering his first reaction was to tell Step to stay away?

Giving Sidestep opportunities to start arguments and push away people? Sounds likely.

For Steps that manage to build fanclubs, will we get to buy/get our hands on some of the merch? Will any of it be "official" through major retailers or is it mostly on an individual seller basis?

Oh there is no IP protection for villains... as for the rest, I am not sure.

Were 5P's pennies originally normal pennies, but "altered" during 5P's boosting process to become special?

Close enough.

Some Sidesteps are true leadership material. Since Sidestep has the habit of influencing everyone they meet, would it be potentially possible for Sidestep to influence HG to have more leadership?

Oh yes.

Is Arde gonna be Vera's wingman (gn) if she tries to pursue Sidestep? (Or Sidestep's wingman if she's hard to seduce, who knows)

Oh Arde is so lost to all that, I'm not sure they'd get how to wingman...

will there be opportunities... to give our cape to ROs beside Argent... either in B3 or rebirth update?

Dunno!

Did Sentinel develop any strong opinions towards Sidestep post final Void confrontation? Were there any concerns about them after it, especially if their physical eye changes were permanent and in the wake of their sort of power shift?

I think there was a degree of tension at the start, but Sidestep is so genuinely prickly themselves that Sentinel quickly brushed that off. He was more worried about Ashfall...

What was the feeling HG got if arrogance <30 when step dived into their mind?

I won't get into that. What HG experiences is spoilers.

Even though HG is a touch based telepath, they are still a telepath, and they've proven to have some kind of control in a telepathic intrusion, since they were able to save sidestep. How does this work for them?

Like everything telepathic it is a question of will and visualization.

Is HG educated in anything? Apart from the arts of being a kingpin and a wonderful and dotting big sibling, of course

No formal academia. Nocturne is the one with the education.

Has Regina ever cared about the kingpins of the west coast? Could it potentially be a matter of interest to her ?

Only very tangentially. It's not been very relevant to her business yet.

If each of the ROs and HG's polycule had to pick a cause/charity to make a donation to, what would they pick?

Jake would send money back to his family, HG might gift some to the Aquarium to get Tina in a better mood, Nocturne would probably pick whatever would be most politically advantageous for the moment.

Has iris ever been an "anchor" to a "kite"?

Now that is one of the most leading questions I have seen here yet, good job. No answer though ;)

Has there ever been a shapeshifting boost with mods? If so, how did that work out?

That is NOT a good or feasible combination.

What's the pettiest recurring argument/disagreement between Vera and Arde?

Hmmm I think Arde genuinely doesn't get why Vera takes the risks that she does when she could settle down and have a good life.

Did Anathema stop shedding dead skin cells / stray hairs after becoming invincible? Did their nails stop growing as well?

Hm.... I would say nails stopped growing. Hairs wouldn't fall out/break. Dead skin cells... probably not. Anathema wouldn't leave much on a crime scene.

How's Ortega's sidestep scar doing after a faker ending? Any changes, better some ways worse in others?

Ahahaha. Ouch. I would say it varies.

If the rangers+mortum were fantasy creatures, what would they be?

No idea! Danny wants to be an elf though.

In the past you mentioned Ortega has drunkenly kissed every member of the Rangers; what was each of their reactions during/after and what differences were there between Julia v Ricardo?

Okay that sounds like a fic I need to write eventually. Like... four kisses and a slap.

How would Nocturne and Jake have reacted if (demo snippet spoilers) they woke up while step was visiting HG in their home?

No idea because it did not happen.

Does the HG trio have movie nights together? Who choses the movie and who complains? Who get asleep the first?

I do know that HG falls asleep first. Nocturne probably picks the movie, and everyone is wise enough not to complain.

Nocturne, Jake and HG were sleeping tangled when Sidestep arrived. Who was being sandwiched?

HG tends to be the middle of the sandwich, though it can vary.

What would each RO say is the best and worst thing about their job?

Oh boy. No idea. I think that would vary depending on the day.

How would Mayor Alvarez's constituents (the ones with actual voting power) rate her compared to her predecessor? How would the disenfranchised populace?

So far I think it is a cautious thumbs up from most. She's worked hard on trying not to step on too many toes. However, whenever have someone in power been liked by those who have none?

Can Sidestep wrap themselves like a burrito affectionately around HG's mind? // more telepathic interactions

Look, morays are not the most cuddly, that's all I'm saying.

What's the first thing Ortega would want/do if step could access their mind

See if they could beam thoughts back.

Can we extend that question to the rest of the RO's?

No idea there! Whenever someone says all the RO's on a question, my brain tends to blank because it is a long list. If you really want an answer, pick a person. Less chance of my brain getting bored and overwhelmed by sitting and pitting down yet another long list of stuff I had not come up with before but needs to come up with now. I don't have all the things about people written down somewhere to copy and paste, I rely on my brain being inspired by the question and providing me with an instinctive answer. An overly broad question short-circuits that, and I don't come up with anything.

how would you paint the LD political scene? is there a lot of community activism, and how satisfied is the general populace with the current system? is there anything in particular that the general public really wants to see a change in?

I would say there is a LOT of community activism, certainly more than in the US today. It's a legacy of the lack of government control and support, people have to take care of each other. I don't think anybody likes the current system, but nobody can agree on what should replace it.

What headcanons have your crew developed about their boss's face, assuming you haven't revealed it? Do they have different assumptions about the age/ethnicity/gender/distinctive scars/etc. of the person under the mask? (...is there a betting pool on that too?)

Hmmm... there might be a betting pool about that. Absolutely! And lots of assumptions. It will vary depending on the Sidestep of course. And this is NOT something they would admit to Sidestep's face.

Does the big threat that Sidestep is concerned about change based on factors like HB choices, villain career or future book 3 flash back choices?

Not really, just some flavors at most.

Alright, since someone isn't brave enough to ask, I'll bite the bullet: How many did you sacrifice to the dark gods to make sure the auction scene worked through the spaghetti code?

Oh that was a big bunch of playtesters! I provided them with special action shortcuts to bring them there directly, and then let them loose. Some were absolutely invaluable (Frost, you're the greatest). I will never write complicated code that way again, apparently my brain has limit to its RAM.

Does the farm vaccinate regenes? If yes, are there any they don't receive?

Oh yes! For everything that would be reasonable, so some get more than others.

Is genetic manipulation common, either cosmetically or practically?

Not really. It is still too hard to pinpoint exactly what does what in combination with each other. With the exception of eliminating/treating certain well-known genetic mutations, this is still in its infancy.

Generally speaking, what happens to the DNA of a boost (beyond being "unstable")? (Is cancer more common within Boosts?)

It varies depending on the boost. But yes, cancer is more common.

Does a piece of 5P "exist" in the five pennies, hence allowing his consciousness to "manifest" in an otherwise ordinary object - much like how lingering psychic "scars" cling to (and sometimes manifest as visions/hallucinations/whispers in) the heartbreak site?

Spoilers! Not going to explain the details of a power that you have yet to fight!

Did Iris have a hand in designing or building the void cult's compound?

No.

Is Iris invited to Ortega's birthday party? If not, will she invite herself?

She is not, and that is above her paygrade.

Does Mortum have a favourite brand for their equipment? Like Dewalt or Metabo for their drills? Or are they more into custom tools?

Mortum strikes me as a custom job nerd.

There's been talk of tensions between Los Diablos's and San Francisco's main criminal empires. Are those two the biggest players in the field right now, or are there West Coast crime lords with a similar/greater amount of influence who just aren't involved in HG and Lord Ember's current slapfight?

I would say they are the biggest players. Seattle is kept under a tight leash, and is the most "law abiding" and Portland is very fractured in comparison.

How often do these sorts of conflicts cross city-state lines? If my local crime startup makes it big, will I need to worry about competition from neighboring cities too?

In general, most things stay within the city.

On the subject of "no two FH characters agree on what genre the story is": what genres do Sky-Raider, Vera, and Armadillo think they're living in?

Sky-Rider is an action movie, like the Fast and the Furious. Vera is a political heist movie with flavors of modern Robin Hood, and Armadillo.... hmmm. Not sure there.

What color are Iris's irises?

I haven't decided on her looks in detail yet, so not sure.

You've mentioned that the non-Ortega Rangers weren't originally planned as romance options. Was most of their individual content in Retribution also not originally planned (training Herald, teaming up with Argent as the villain, getting Chen to open up about what he knows, etc.), or was the possibility of romance the main addition?

I will say that the core of the story was always intended (training Herald, Villain and Argent competition for the regenerator, Steel sharing his suspicions/what he learned) but the content got expanded and deepened because of the romance. Funnily enough, the biggest addition that came from the romance was Spoon, because I needed an in to get Chen to open up.

Can Argent's bones or organs be damaged through her shell? Or does she need to be shanked in her sleep?

They can, she is not invulnerable.

Are nanovores shielded against microwaves?

To an extent, yes.

I swear this isn't a wild guess - is our telepathic tracker's code T36 then?

Ahahaha I will tell you the truth. I have not sat down and determined the telepathic code. It's not important, the result is.

How would teenage Mortum have felt about the prospect of a career in/adjacent to villainy?

Eh, pretty close to working for the military.

How much does local media coverage of FEZ heroes/villains differ from national media coverage? Are LD's most (in)famous figures also the ones a New Yorker is most likely to hear about, or do the main US states see a different picture?

Oh it is very different. The coverage in east coast media is a lot more critical. They probably hear more about the villains back there than the heroes and vigilantes.

What tasks does Dr. Mortum procrastinate on most, and what do they do instead of doing those things?

Mortum goes for a drive. I would not say it is a specific type of task, often the procrastination comes from not being sure about something, and they deal with it by driving fast and long distances. They trust their intuition and subconscious, and if they procrastinate, something must be wrong somewhere. The trick is figuring out what.

Would precognition help Step be a better cook in puppet's body?

Depends on the level!

Out of the ROs, who could keep a worm alive for the longest?

I do not understand this question.

And then could we have a tier list for how long each of them could take care of said worm?

Are worms hard to take care of? But seriously, most earthworms are not native to north america, and are hurting the forests a lot. So don't let them out.

and who would love wormstep the most? 🤔

Wormstep? Oh this is a discord thing! Sorry, I am ignorant of where this is going and why! Personally though, worms is one of the few animals that really gives me the creeps, even when I had to learn all their latin names in school. Ugh.

More importantly: if the MC asked each RO these questions directly, who would stare blankly vs. not miss a beat before launching into a heartfelt speech vs. rack their brain for boosts with worm-transformation powers?

They would probably be as confused as I am, with the possible exception of Argent. Don't ask me why, she just strikes me as someone who would know.

And what about HG? 🤔

Also confused about worm related shenanigans.

Does catastrofiend have merch and if so, what's the general vibe/design?

Oh the grimace I made. No, the Catastrofiend does not have merch. No. Hmm. Okay, people do make t-shirts probably. With a very black metal/horror feel to them.

How does Mortum know the puppet is not psi-sensitive or a telepath?

Gooooooooood question. Not gonna answer it.

In book 2 the branching was done very well where the different jobs went on the same missions with slight changes. How difficult was it planning missions all jobs would be involved in? And how will this be handled in future books? What will happen if you come up with a cool mission where it only makes sense for one of the jobs to take part?

Ough. This is the hard part. It takes SO MUCH time to write and plan for the amount of words it. I often have to go back and change, rewrite and scrap stuff entirely. I can't have a cool mission for only one profession. Seriously. If you ever think that it looks like the book is not moving forward, chances are I am sitting and fighting with something like this, trying to make it flow and open enough for other paths to connect later.

[Time for your questions of the month!](#)

[Feb 25, 2024](#)

Working hard on next demo, but until it is done, please share you questions of the month!

[4.2 - Friendly Ghosts](#)

[Feb 20, 2024](#)

Well, I am working on path 4.2, which is in truly in a patchwork shape right now. But there is enough finished on this particular path where you decide to pay a quiet little visit to Hollow Ground (no fear, there are many less quiet or friendly options too). As always, not finished, no stats, more options to be coming. Just thought you might enjoy having a little chat with the kingpin himself. About 8800 words.

Wonderful, wonderful. It's going to be one of those nights when everything just clicks into shape for you. Like a fight flowing your way, with you one step ahead of the opposition. With the alarms out and the dampeners out of the way, you can feel the house surrounding you with quiet. No guards in here, unless you count the bodyguard, Jake Manalo you think it was. Asleep on the job though, which isn't very professional of him, and worse, in bed with the boss's girlfriend which is even less professional. You need to pause to make sure you got that right, but his thoughts and Nocturnes are closely enough entwined you don't think you're wrong about that. And, even more interesting, from what you can tell they are in the master bedroom. As is Hollow Ground.

Huh. Interesting. Looks like the bodyguard has a cushier job than reputation would have it.

It feels like it would be rude to wake everyone up, there's no need for that when you're here for a private chat. Would be better to have that between four eyes, and let the others sleep. You don't even need to put them to sleep, all you need to do is to make sure they won't wake up. You put the Rat-King on that duty,

making sure they will alert you if there's any sign of stirring from the other two. Hollow Ground you can handle yourself.

Very, very carefully you brush your fingers over the sleeping mind of the Kingpin of Los Diablos, making sure not to make direct contact. You can feel the the dangerous tangle of thoughts there, whatever goes on in that mind has power, a ticking bomb with all the wires unmarked. It would be unwise to rouse it before you know what it can do. All you want is a chat, but to do that you need `$(hghim)` to wake up and... ah, yes. There. Dry mouth. Sleeping with an open mouth. Thirst. The second most common reason to wake up in the middle of the night, but you really don't want to ambush someone on the toilet. That seems rude somehow.

Instead you gently tug the sensation of thirst to the surface, waiting patiently for a minute or two for it to take hold. As you thought, that's all it takes for Hollow Ground to untangle `$(hghim)`self from the covers (and the other bodies?) and head towards the kitchen. Where...

`*fake_choice`

`#...I'm seated at the kitchen table, waiting for $(hghim).`

Everything has gone smoothly to this point, and you don't want to alarm Hollow Ground more than necessary. There might have been alarms you missed, or other defensive systems. Might as well do your best to put `$(hghim)` at ease. Sitting down usually helps. The chairs are good quality, unlikely to break under the

`*if suit_armor`

considerable

weight of your armor. You pull one out and sits down, resting your hands in front of you on the table, as if you were waiting for the cards to be dealt. An apt analogy.

As expected, the hapless Kingpin of Los Diablos doesn't suspect a thing as `$(hghe) @({hgsv shuffles|shuffle})` through the door, silk dressing gown carelessly thrown over `$(hghis)` shoulders leaving little to the imagination. It's at that moment you realize that you were very lucky that Hollow Ground bothered to get dressed at all before going to the kitchen, otherwise this would have been far more embarrassing for both of you. As it is, you still dim your HUD as `$(hghis)` hand `@({hgsv fumbles|fumble})` for the light switch, flicking on the lights. `!({hghe) @({hgsv mutters|mutter})` a curse and `@({hgsv rubs|rub}) $(hghis)` eyes, as you do your best to look away until `$(hghe)` realizes `$(hghe) @({hgsv has|have})` company.

"What the...?" Hollow Ground blinks like an owl woken up in the middle of the day, trying to make sense of what `$(hghe)@({hgsv 's|` are} looking at.

`*if suit_mysterious`

Even in the light, it takes `$(hghis)` eyes a moment to focus on you, at this point you are very good at remaining unnoticed even in plain sight.

`*elseif suit_functional`

`!({hghis)` brows furrow as `$(hghe) @({hgsv tries|try})` to make sense of what `$(hghe) @({hgsv is|are})` seeing. You can't blame `$(hghim)` for being confused, so you try a little wave to see if that puts `$(hghim)` at ease.

`*else`

`!({hghis)` body `@({hgsv reacts|react})` before `$(hghis)` mind `@({hgsv does|do})`. A step back, a gasp of surprise tinged with fear, the instinctive reaction of finding someone like you standing stock-still in `$(hghis)` kitchen in the middle of the night. You know exactly what kind of reaction your armor was created to provoke. Hollow Ground performs it admirably.

"Don't be alarmed," you offer, though you suppose words do little at this point. "You know who I am, I suppose?"

`"$!({villain_name})."`

`*if ((infamy >= 75) or (suit_terrifying))`

You can see the panic in `$(hghis)` eyes as `$(hghe)` instinctively steps back to flee. Interesting. No reflex to attack, is the Kingpin of Los Diablos a coward? It sure looks that way, you can smell the fear even through your air scrubbers.

`*else`

You can hear the confusion in `$(hghis)` voice though `$(hghe) @({hgsv is|are})` hiding it well.

"What are you doing here?" `!({hghe) @({hgsv takes|take})` a step back and `@({hgsv pulls|pull})` the robe closed around `$(hghim)`

"Have a seat," you say instead, indicating the chair in front of you. "That way we can have talk more comfortably."

`#...I'm standing beside the door, ready to close it behind $(hghim).`

Even though you want to have a talk, it wouldn't be the worst idea to drive home exactly how close Hollow Ground came to death. You doubt $\{hghe\}$ will spot you in the darkness, and with the door closed behind the two of you, there's less chance of $\{hghim\}$ bolting.

As expected, the hapless Kingpin of Los Diablos doesn't suspect a thing as $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ shuffles through the door, silk dressing gown carelessly thrown over $\{hghis\}$ shoulders. It's at that moment you realize that you were very lucky that Hollow Ground bothered to get dressed at all before going to the kitchen, otherwise this would have been far more embarrassing for both of you. $\{hghis\}$ hand $\{hgsv\}$ fumbles for the light switch, nearly touching you as $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ flicks on the lights. $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ mutters a curse and $\{hgsv\}$ rubs $\{hghis\}$ eyes. Your HUD adapts instantly, and you smile as you keep still and silent until $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ steps fully inside. Then you close the door behind $\{hghim\}$.

"What the...?" Hollow Ground turns around at the noise, still blinking like an owl woken up in the middle of the day.

*if suit_mysterious

Even in the light, it takes $\{hghis\}$ eyes a moment to focus on you, at this point you are very good at remaining unnoticed even in plain sight.

*elseif suit_functional

$\{hghis\}$ brows furrow as $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ tries to make sense of what $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ is seeing. You can't blame $\{hghim\}$ for being confused, you suppose.

*else

$\{hghis\}$ body $\{hgsv\}$ reacts before $\{hghis\}$ mind $\{hgsv\}$ does. A step back, a gasp of surprise tinged with fear, the instinctive reaction of finding someone like you standing stock-still in $\{hghis\}$ kitchen in the middle of the night. You know exactly what kind of reaction your armor was created to provoke. Hollow Ground performs it admirably.

"You are lucky I don't want you dead," you say, pleased with the way your vocal distorters make $\{hghim\}$ take a step back and pull the robe closed around $\{hghim\}$ as if the thin fabric could protect $\{hghim\}$ if you wanted to hurt $\{hghim\}$.

" $\{villain_name\}$."

*if (((infamy >= 70) or (massacre)) or (suit_terrifying))

You can see the panic in $\{hghis\}$ eyes as $\{hghe\}$ instinctively steps back to flee. Interesting. No reflex to attack, is the Kingpin of Los Diablos a coward? It sure looks that way, you can smell the fear even through your air scrubbers. Tasty.

*else

You can taste the fear in $\{hghis\}$ voice though $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ is hiding it well. It's only the fact that $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ is still alive that $\{hgsv\}$ keeps $\{hghim\}$ from running. You must want $\{hghim\}$ alive.

"Don't run," you warn, taking a step forward, echoed by Hollow Ground taking a step back at the same time. "Sit down." Simple orders, easy to obey even for a sleep addled

*if (((infamy >= 70) or (massacre)) or (suit_terrifying))

and terrified

mind.

*set hgscared true

#...I've started making some coffee.

If you know anything, it is that people who are only half awake are susceptible to weirdness. Is it a dream? Is it reality? Who can tell? Having $\{villain_name\}$ making coffee in $\{hghis\}$ kitchen will likely make Hollow Ground at least pause to wonder if $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ is dreaming before trying to sound the alarm.

*if vice = "coffee"

Besides, this is a brand of coffee you haven't tried before, might as well see if it's worth the price.

You've left the lights off, the nightvision in your HUD makes it easy to navigate the kitchen regardless. The gentle sounds of the coffee machine doesn't seem to alarm Hollow Ground as $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ shuffles through the door, a silk dressing gown carelessly thrown over $\{hghis\}$ shoulders. It's at that moment you realize that you were very lucky that Hollow Ground bothered to get dressed at all before going to the kitchen, otherwise this would have been far more embarrassing for both of you. $\{hghis\}$ hand $\{hgsv\}$ fumbles for the light switch, flicking on the lights. $\{hghe\}$ $\{hgsv\}$ mutters a curse and $\{hgsv\}$ rubs $\{hghis\}$ eyes in response to the sudden light. Your HUD adapts instantly, and you smile as you keep still and silent, leaning against the kitchen counter.

"What the...?" Hollow Ground finally realizes that something is wrong, that the smell of coffee is hiding an intruder lurking in plain sight.

*if suit_mysterious

Even then, it takes \${hghis} eyes a moment to focus on you, at this point you are very good at remaining unnoticed even when people are looking directly at you.

*elseif suit_functional

!\${hghis} brows furrow as \${hghe} @ {hgsv tries|try} to make sense of what \${hghe} @ {hgsv is|are} seeing. You can't blame \${hghim} for being confused, you suppose.

*else

!\${hghis} body @ {hgsv reacts|react} before \${hghis} mind @ {hgsv does|do}. A step back, a gasp of surprise tinged with fear, the instinctive reaction of finding someone like you standing in \${hghis} kitchen in the middle of the night. You know exactly what kind of reaction your armor was created to provoke. Hollow Ground performs it admirably.

"You look like you need some coffee," you offer generously. "I thought I'd get some started early."

"\${villain_name}."

*if ((infamy >= 75) or (suit_terrifying))

You can see the panic in \${hghis} eyes as \${hghe} instinctively steps back to flee. Interesting. No reflex to attack, is the Kingpin of Los Diablos a coward? It sure looks that way, you can smell the fear even through your air scrubbers.

*else

You can hear the confusion in \${hghis} voice though \${hghe} @ {hgsv is|are} hiding it well.

"What are you doing here?" !\${hghe} @ {hgsv takes|take} a step back and @ {hgsv pulls|pull} the robe closed around \${hghim}

"Making coffee," you repeat, slowly, as if talking to a child. "You shold probably take a seat "

*set hgcoffee true

Hollow Ground hesitates, but then reluctantly pulls out a chair at the kitchen table and sits down. !\${hghis} eyes doesn't leave yours, though \${hghe} @ {hgsv rubs|rub} one hand nervously.

*if hgknown_telepath

"If you're planning to influence my mind, you're not going to be able to do that."

*if not(known_telepath)

Interesting. Looks like Hollow Ground knows more than most about your powers.

*else

"If this is intended to intimidate me, it's not working."

"You were the one that wanted a meeting," you point out,

*if hgcoffee

pouring a mug for \${hghim} now that the coffee is finished. "Milk or sugar?"

"Black," \${hghe} @ {hgsv sighs|sigh}. "It sounds like I want to be awake for this."

"Of course." You place the mug in front of \${hghim}, sitting down as well. The table is not much protection between you, but it seems to make \${hghim} feel better. Or perhaps that's the coffee in \${hghis} hands.

*if vice = "coffee"

You wish you could join \${hghim}, but that would mean taking your helmet off.

*elseif hgscared

still leaning against the door. "Be careful what you wish for."

*else

leaning back in your chair. The table is not much protection between you, but it seems to make \${hghim} feel better.

"A meeting. Of course." Hollow Ground pulls at the lapels of \${hghis} robe, doing \${hghis} best to straighten it out. But there is no hiding

*if gender = "woman"

the sleep-ruffled \${hgcolor} hair or the lack of makeup.

*elseif gender = "man"

the bags under the \${eyes} eyes.

*else

the sleep-ruffled \${hgcolor} hair and the bags under the \${eyes} eyes.

*fake_choice

##"I prefer it when I pick the setting," I say coldly.

"I prefer it when I pick the setting." You keep your voice reasonable but cold. Hollow Hround tried to order you around, and was not above going after your puppet when \${hghe} failed. It's time that \${hghe} learned who was in control here.

"And that you have." Hollow Ground looks out over the still lawn, no sign of alarm, no sign of guards, though the poolhouse blocks the view to the gates. "How much of a mess did you make on the way in?"

"Not more than needed. Believe it or not, I am here to talk."

##"You tried to have my assistant killed," I say sharply

"You tried to have my assistant killed," you say, your vocal distorters turning the sentence into a threat. "You should be glad I'm not here to burn this place down around you."

"I am." Hollow Ground looks out over the still lawn, no sign of alarm, no sign of guards, though the poolhouse blocks the view to the gates. "How much of a mess did you make on the way in?"

"Not as much as I wanted to. Whether I make more on the way out depends on you." You let the last word rest in silence for a few moments, before you continue. "Despite my instincts, I am here to talk."

##"And in person, like you wanted to," I say amiably.

"And in person too, like you wanted to." You smile under your helmet, though you doubt your vocal distorters managed to pick that up.

"I guess expecting you to adhere to business hours was hoping for too much." Hollow Ground looks out over the still lawn, no sign of alarm, no sign of guards, though the poolhouse blocks the view to the gates. "How much of a mess did you make on the way in?"

"Not more than needed. I'm just here to talk."

*if thief

"I suppose I should have expected this. You have a reputation for getting into places you shouldn't be."

*if ((puppetauction) or (sneakyauction))

!\${hghe} @\${hgsv has|have} the look of someone about to refurbish \${hghis} whole security system.

*else

!\${hghe} @\${hgsv glares|glare} at you, and you suppose you can't really blame \${hghim}. You've made a habit of trespassing on \${hghis} turf by now.

"I'm flattered," you smirk. "And you should. Secrets can only protect someone until they are found out."

*else

"I must admit I hadn't expected you to simply show up in my kitchen." !\${hghe} @\${hgsv has|have} the look of someone about to refurbish \${hghis} whole security system.

*if (((galaboom) or (mayhem)) or ((hgbomb) or (blazeblaze)))

"You have a more... explosive reputation."

"What can I say, I'm playing nice." You lower your helmet in mock-humility, before you resume staring \${hghim} down. "Something you should be thankful for. Secrets only protects people until they are found out."

*else

"Congratulations. Few people manage to surprise me."

"What can I say, I'm not most people." Or even people, which makes you smile to yourself under your helmet. "You should be more careful by the way, secrets only protect people until they are found out."

"Noted." Hollow Ground looks disturbed at that, which is no wonder. How long have \${hghe} been coasting on being nothing but a rumor? You keep waiting for the mental impression to hit you as well, that's usually when you know what really bothers people. But instead, \${hghe} @{{hgsv remains|remain}} blank, in control.

*if hgrep >= 55

"I wanted to meet you because I was impressed by what you had accomplished so far, and yet you manage to exceed my expectations."

*else

"It is obvious that I underestimated your abilities. A humbling lesson."

"Flattery, flattery." It is fascinating to watch \${hghim} act as if \${hghe} was in control, as if \${hghe} @{{hgsv was|were}} as dressed up as \${hghe} had been at the club.

*if hgknown_telepath

You can't read \${hghis} mind, at least not without exerting actual force to do it. There might be time for that later, but right now \${hghis} face is telling you enough.

*else

!\${hghis} thoughts are calm, no fear for \${hghis} life,

*if hgscared

the fright you gave \${hghim} earlier seems to have passed.

*elseif hgcoffee

sipping \${hghis} coffee.

*else

if you wanted \${hghim} dead \${hghe} would already be so.

"But turnabout is fair play, don't you think? You wanted me without my armor, and instead here we have you. In the flesh."

*if suit_terrifying

The way you say those words do make \${hghim} twitch uneasily.

"I would have preferred more than a dressing gown," \${hghe} @{{hgsv admits|admit}}, gesturing to \${hghim}self. "Though I won't let that bother me, I've made more important deals wearing less." The smile is sharp, shark-like and cocky.

And familiar.

You noticed when you met \${hghe} in your puppet, but everything tends to get filtered and skewed though \${phis} eyes. There's something so unnerving about Hollow Ground's appearance, especially now that there's nothing to distract from \${hghis} true face. It reminds you of how you look in the mornings when you try to avoid looking at yourself in the mirror. Not identical, but an echo of an echo, a smile reflected with enough familiarity to make you think.

Is this a coincidence?

*fake_choice

#Ignore it. I'll keep my distance.

There are enough weird things in your life to investigate small things like this. You're here for a reason, focus on that and don't allow yourself to get distracted.

*goto whyhere

#It's weird alright, makes me itchy.

You do look like Hollow Ground, and that is weird enough to make your palms itch. Not only the superficial differences of skin, hair and eyes, but the more subtle things. The way \${hghis} smile creases, the cheekbones, the nose... too many pieces of a similar puzzle.

#Could this be genetic? You don't know what material the Farm used.

Could this be something more than your imagination? You don't know what the Farm used when they brewed you up. What genetic material that went in the mixer. Could they have used some of Hollow Ground's? \${hghe}'s a boost, so it can't have been much in that case, that much you know. The boost drug makes things unstable and prone to breakdown, otherwise the Farm could have cloned an endless army of super soldiers with no effort. But a little bit? A little spice? Is that possible?

The bigger question is what you're going to do about it. If you choose to reveal your face, would Hollow Ground have the same reaction as you do? Would \${hghe} be intrigued? If you seek to ally \${hghim} more closely that won't hurt. Revealing your face would be a sign of trust as well. Showing your own vulnerability as you have shown \${hghim} \${hghis}.

There's no cameras in here. Nothing to record you. Everyone else is still sleeping. What should you do?

*fake_choice

#I keep the helmet on, it's not worth the risk to pry.

If there is something more to your superficial likeness, that can be examined later, under safer circumstances. You're here for a reason, focus on that and don't allow yourself to get distracted.

*goto whyhere

#I will remove the helmet, and see what \${hghis} reaction will be.

You can learn a lot from how people react, maybe this is a reckless decision but so was deciding to break in to this place. Revealing your face might be worth it in the long run, if nothing else it might make \${hghim} relax \${hghis} guard.

"Well," you reply, your thoughts having run quick enough that the delay is almost imperceptible. "If you are that relaxed in a less formal dressing, I might as well respond in kind."

*if hgscared

You leave your post by the door, walking over to sit down at the table as well. \${hghe} doesn't move as you do, but you can see \${hghim} tense up. Finally, you

*else

You

reach up to your helmet, releasing the locks. The sharp click sounds loud in the silence of the kitchen, and your voice goes from distorted to natural as you continue.

*if hgcoffee

"That coffee is smelling too good not to have myself a cup."

*elseif hgscared

"I think I've made my point by now."

*else

"Things are easier meeting face to face."

You put down your helmet on the table, placing your hand on top of it as you watch Hollow Ground's eyes widen, nearly imperceptibly.

"I have to admit, I did not expect that," \${hghe} @hgsv says[say], a not of respect at your reckless act. "If you have no issues with showing me your face, why send an intermediary in the first place?"

*set hgreveal true

*fake_choice

#"I do not like to be ordered around." I stress the 'not'.

"I do [b]not[b] like to be ordered around," you say, your voice nearly as harsh as if it had been filtered through your distorters. "You'd do well to remember that."

"I will." The way Hollow Ground speaks those words makes it feel half threat and half promise. Right now it doesn't matter. All empty words, the ball is in your court this time. "And neither do I."

"Which is why I didn't bother inviting you on my turf," you offer with a thin smile. "I came to you. In your house. Mighty generous if you ask me."

"Proving a point, if you ask me." `!{hghe} @{hgsv sounds|sound}` less than impressed at your generosity. `!{hghe} @{hgsv keeps|keep}` watching your face, frowning faintly.

"I am glad we understand each other." Not much you can glean from Hollow Ground's mind than a hint of... cautious interest? Perhaps. "Don't take it personally, it might turn out we have more in common than you think."

`#`"I don't like crowds. Here I know there's nobody else watching."

"I don't like crowds. Here I know there's nobody else watching." You gesture to the room, adding "I took the liberty of shutting down the security system of course."

"I don't have cameras in the house," Hollow Ground says with an air of disgust. "You're not the only one with an aversion to being watched."

"I see." Good to know about the lack of cameras, you didn't take the time to investigate exactly what the systems were when you shit them down. It makes sense, Hollow Ground have worked hard on keeping `{hghe}` existence a secret, and recordings are easy to leak. Better to have good security outside and leave the inside as private as you can. That also means that even if the system would start up for some reason, your secret would still be safe. Time to get down to business. "It turns out that disliking cameras is not the only thing we share."

`#`"I wasn't sure it wouldn't be a trap. Here I'm in control."

"I wasn't sure it wouldn't be a trap," you admit. "You can imagine how it would look from my end. Venturing into the lion's den without my armor, facing who knows what goons and villains. Here I am in control."

"And yet you still came to me. On my turf. One might argue this would be even more of the lion's den." Hollow Ground keeps watching you, you can nearly hear the wheels of his mind turn, trying to work out why you are here. What you are up to.

"On my terms, though. Taking a few precautions. I've got no plans to make the mistake most new villains make and underestimate the competition."

"And so you decided to break into my house in the middle of the night." `!{hghe} @{hgsv sounds|sound}` almost impressed. "Some would call that a mistake."

"Others would call it an opportunity. It might turn out that we have more in common than you think."

"Like what?"

`*set nicechat true`

`*goto reasons`

`*label reasons`

It is a good question. There are a number of things you want to talk about with Hollow Ground, the question is where do you start.

`*if ((motivation = "revenge") or (motivation = "justice"))`

Like it or not, `{hghe}` could be useful to your plans down the line. You've got powerful enemies, it might be smart making powerful friends.

`*elseif motivation = "fate"`

The fact that `{hghe} @{hgsv reminds|remind}` you of yourself feels like a sign. It can't be coincidence that you're here. That you've met. It can't.

`*elseif motivation = "life"`

You've been working on reclaiming your life. `!{hghe}` could be a great help there, or an equally great hindrance.

`*else`

There are so many things about `{hghim}` that rub you the wrong way. The smugness. The way `{hghe} @{hgsv expects|expect}` everyone to bow to `{hghim}`. Makes you want to punch `{hghim}`. But you also need to be smart.

`*if anarchist`

There are just too many unknowns here. How much does Hollow Ground truly control? @{{hgs v} Is|Are} {{hghe}} nothing but a crime boss who doesn't care much who is in charge as long as they leave {{hghis}} business alone? Or @{{hgs v} does|do} {{hghe}} have a bigger agenda? Is Mayor Alvarez an ally, a tool, a victim or completely incidental to {{hghim}}? Do Hollow Ground need to be taken out of the picture, or could {{hghe}} become an ally if {{hghe}} knew the truth?

[b]@{{hgs v} Does|Do}[/b] {{hghe}} know the truth?

You wish you knew. You wish you could read {{hghis}} mind to find out. No certainty. Only questions. It might be worth playing nice long enough to gather more information, or it might be better to make it clear that Hollow Ground should stay out of your business and go your separate ways. Maybe even make an example right here and now.

*elseif boss

Hollow Ground can be an opportunity. You wouldn't be here talking if you weren't already wondering how to turn this to your advantage. Building an organization from the ground up takes time and effort, if you have the chance to use a previously existing network that would speed things up. You have no intention playing second fiddle to Hollow Ground forever, but working with {{hghim}} for now? The things you could learn, not everyone can be this well shielded against telepathy.

It might be worth playing nice long enough to learn the opposition. Maybe even take it over. On the other hand, you might want to put your foot down and make it clear that Hollow Ground should stay out of your business. Maybe even make an example right here and now.

*elseif prepare_them

Hollow Ground was not on your radar when you started your crusade. Villains were less important than the heroes, how could you trust any of them even if they might be useful? But sitting here, in {{hghis}} fancy kitchen, with {{hghis}} lovers sleeping peacefully a few rooms away you start to wonder. {{!{{hghe}}} @{{hgs v} has|have}} as much to loose as anybody once the shit hits the fan. Maybe you don't need people with the will to do the right thing, maybe the fear of losing everything {{hghe}} @{{hgs v} has|have}} gained might be as powerful a motivator.

Could {{hghe}} be an asset? Possibly.

On the other hand, {{hghe}} @{{hgs v} is|are}} used to sticking to the shadows, {{hghe}} might just figure out that nothing would change for {{hghis}} organization. Might even think {{hghe}}'d prosper. You know too little about {{hghim}} to know how {{hghe}}'d react to the truth. It might be worth getting close to find out. On the other hand, you might want to put your foot down and make sure Hollow Grounds know you're a free agent and stick to your original plans. Maybe even make an example right here and now to make sure you're understood.

*elseif hunter

Hollow Ground is not a threat to you. An inconvenience, yes, just like any other sprawling organization with fingers in too many pies. But a threat? No. You broke into {{hghis}} house without breaking a sweat, if you wanted {{hghim}} dead {{hghe}} would have been. The question is what else could {{hghe}} be?

An opportunity?

It might be nice to have an ally in the criminal underground. You doubt your plans would be anything Hollow Ground would object to. Maybe even pay you for some of the people on your long list of possible targets. Could get two birds with one stone. On the other hand, that would make you less independent. You would risk being seen as one of {{hghis}}. That thought make you wonder if maybe you're not better served making an example right here, to make sure you drive the point home.

*else

You could already have robbed Hollow Ground blind, but all that would have given you would be money and bragging rights. Hmmm. When you put it that way, maybe you should have done just that. What a score, too bad most people wouldn't even know who you stole from. Just another random rich asshole.

Would it be smart to to play nice? To maybe have an ally? Or at least not an enemy? Or perhaps you should put your foot down and drive home the point that you are an independent operator? Maybe even making an example right here?

*if hghelp

And then there is Ortega. You did promise to help {{him}} investigate Hollow Ground. Right now you know {{hghis}} face and where {{hghe}} lives. You could technically carry {{hghim}} off into the night, if you had any actual proof of anything. In order to get that, you'd have to play nice for now. That way you would have ample time to decide which horse to back in that race.

If any.

You ponder the {{gender}} in front of you. The way {{hghe}}@{{hgs v} 's| are}} waiting for a reply. Nervous. Pretending to be in control. Looking at you as if {{hghe}} @{{hgs v} is|are}} trying to solve a riddle. Who are you? Really? You can almost hear those words though {{hghis}} mouth is pressed together in a thin, tense, line.

*goto talkchoice

*label talkchoice

*fake_choice

#I will do my best to be friendly with \${hghim}. For now.

*if hgmind

You can't let what just happened affect you, whatever delusions Hollow Ground has will remain \${hghis} own. That being said, you're probably best served by staying friendly for now.

*else

No matter what you decide to do in the future, you're convinced that you're best served by being friendly for now.

You've got enough enemies already, there's little to be served by adding another one to your list.

*goto friendlyhgtalk

#I will tell \${hghim} never to mess with me or mine again.

*if hgmind

You can't let what just happened affect you, if

*else

If

there is one thing you have learned, that is that if people think they can push you around, they will do so. Hollow Ground have already tried to do so once, you need to make sure \${hghe} never @hgsv tries|try something like that again. Ever.

*goto threatenhgtalk

*if (thief) #I will rob this place, that will show \${hghim}.

*if hgmind

You can't let what just happened affect you,

Hollow Ground needs to be taught a lesson. If you want to break in somewhere and steal something, there is nothing \${hghe} can do to stop you.

*goto kitchenrobstart

*if (not(thief)) #I will make an example why I should not be crossed.

*if hgmind

You can't let what just happened affect you,

Hollow Ground needs to be taught a lesson. \${hghe} @hgsv thinks|think \${hghe}@hgsv 's| are in control here. Nothing could be more wrong. It's time for payback.

*goto paybackhg

*if (not(hgmind)) #I will risk trying to break \${hghis} mind-shields to learn more.

Hollow Ground's mind feels strange, at least the surface layers you can't help but brush against. Shielded, yes. You can't read any deeper thoughts, and what reactions leak through are as much projected through \${hghis} face as anything else. Is it training? Drugs? Some weird mental condition? Powers? Too many unknowns. Curiosity might kick the cat's ass, but you need to know.

*goto hgminddive

*label hgminddive

"Do you really need to ask what we have in common?" you say, your words more distraction than truth as you try to judge your point of entry. "It's on the tip of your tongue as well, I'm willing to bet."

Hollow Ground's mind leap into action at your words, as if \${hghe} already had suspected what you were going to say. Your resemblance, to strange and striking to be pure chance. At least it seems that \${hghe} @hgsv is|are convinced that is the case.

Interesting. That might be a way in.

*set hgmind true

*if ((subterfuge >= 80) or (arrogance >= 70))

You gently brush your fingers over \${hghis} mind, urging that curiosity to the surface. The reflective pond goes strangely clear, as you tempt \${hghim} with answers, giving you an opening to slip inside.

A smooth entry, a perfect dive leaving no ripples in this frozen moment.

*page_break Contact!

There are dangers everywhere around you, but you don't let them catch you unawares. It's a beautiful mindscape, a coral reef filled with life and color, hidden dangers lurking in crevasses, the ever-present sea anemones trailing their tendrils everywhere. A less talented telepath would be tangled and risk triggering a memory, but you're a master of your craft.

Familiarity can be a useful shield. You can brush against thoughts and memories, picking up details. There's already enough of a rapport you can use for groundwork. Similarities, not just in looks but in...demeanor?

Very carefully, you reach into one of the darker crevasses, a crack going deep, as if an earthquake cracked the mind down to the core. There are things there, old memories, slippery and cold and out of the sun.

[i]"Put your hand in that crack,"

*line_break

[i]"and you won't get it back...."

Singing? A memory?

[i]The aquarium is as tall as you are, filled with all the brightness of the tropical sea. Fish glitter past like confetti, too small to pick out, but together they're strong. Your breath is misting the glass, but you're entranced, it's the best day of your life, you didn't think...

Wait. Your life?

[i]A reflection in the glass, your face but far younger than you've ever been, eyes meeting yours and

*if trans

[i]it's wrong,

*if not(trans)

[i]too young,

[i]too innocent, the smile, the chubby cheeks, and there's a hand on your head, a fond ruffle and a whisper in your ear.

[i]"...that's a moray."

A memory. Of course. It stinks of Hollow Ground. A fond memory? Intense enough to form \${hghis} mindscape? Looks like it.

You yank your hand out just before the moray strikes, two sets of teeth missing your fingers, and you bare your teeth in an echoing growl. It's dangerous this deep, you can feel yourself sinking into memories of your own, [i]of different tanks, not filled with saltwater but amniotic fluid, trapped, the faces glaring at you covered with surgical masks, tapping the glass, and you twitch, echoes amplified and you can't get out and do you even know what's out? Do you know anything?

*page_break \${swear}!

[i]Too loud. Everything echoes, their thoughts so loud, and none of them concerned with you. You. There is no you. Just a body. A potential. Nobody bothers to name the fish in the tank. If you did, you'd have to grieve when they started floating belly up.

Lies. You named them.

[i]You named yourself.

Floating belly up. How did you lose yourself in here? You went too deep, you need to breathe, but everything you touch gives way, climbing kelp and looking for the sun.

[i]~I got you.~

[i]Dragged back, pulled out, pushed behind. Protected. The ghost of a memory.

"Fuck." Hollow Ground coughs, clinging to the table as if it was the only thing keeping $\{hghim\}$ upright. You're back in the room with blood in your mouth and salt on your cheeks. "What the hell was that?"

*set hg_friendship %+ 20

*set hgknown_telepath true

*set protected true

*set force %+ 10

*if gate >= 1

*set gate - 1

*else

*set scar - 20

*else

You gently brush your fingers over the surface of $\{hghis\}$ mind, bringing feelings to life. Not just curiosity, but regret? Pain? Probing deeper, you reach into the dark and something snaps at your fingers, coiled and thick like a cable, caustic yellow not gentle red.

Pain, real this time. Your hand hurts, but then something grabs it, pulling you inside.

*page_break Deeper.

[i]The aquarium is as tall as you are, filled with all the brightness of the tropical sea. Fish glitter past like confetti, too small to pick out, but together they're strong. Your breath is misting the glass, but you're entranced, it's the best day of your life, you didn't think...

[i]Wait. Your life? No.

[i]A reflection in the glass, far younger than you ever were, eyes meeting yours and

*if trans

[i]it's wrong,

*else

[i]too young,

[i]too innocent, the smile, the chubby cheeks and there's a hand on your head, a fond ruffle and

"Get...out," [i]distant words, shields closing like jaws upon jaws, forcing you to withdraw or get swallowed. Big and coiled and red and spotted, a nightmare driving you back to a surface only half remembered.

"Fuck." Hollow Ground coughs, $\{hghis\}$ words now, you know that. $\{hghe\}$ @ $\{hgsv\}$ is|are} clinging to the table as if it was the only thing keeping $\{hghim\}$ upright. You're back in the room with blood in your mouth and salt on your cheeks. "What the hell was that?"

*set hgknown_telepath true

You wish you had an answer, but you're as shaken as $\{hghe\}$ @ $\{hgsv\}$ is|are}. It happened so fast the Rat-King didn't have time to interfere, busy with keeping Nocturne and Jake asleep as they were. You can feel their worry now, and assures them that you are fine.

You're not sure if they believe you.

*fake_choice

#""Our minds got entangled," I evade. "You're a boost, aren't you?"

"Our minds got entangled," you evade, using a neutral phrasing to minimize your own blame. "You're a boost, aren't you? I think our powers interacted with each other."

*if arrogance <= 30

"I felt it." Hollow Ground rubs $\{hghis\}$ face, as if trying to wake up. "I felt... you."

"I feel queasy," you admit, because you feel like you keep wanting to reach out, to get entangled, find out what happened and get some answers. "This has never happened before." That is true, you've had some adverse reactions to reading minds, but in those cases you've been treated as hostile. This felt more like being pulled in, being forcefully made a part of something.

"No, it hasn't." $\{hghe\} @\{hgsv\ is|are\}$ as shaken as you are. "You're a telepath, but that shouldn't affect... that shouldn't..." $\{hghe\} @\{hgsv\ keeps|keep\}$ looking at you. "Did you do this?"

"No?" Your confusion is honest, because you get the feeling $\{hghe\} @\{hgsv\ is|are\}$ talking about more than just the intrusion.

"Oh God." $\{hghis\}$ words are quiet, hardly audible. "Is... is it really you?" The words fall out, flat on the table between you, coins not heads or tails but on the edge, spinning freely.

*goto mindtalkcont

*else

"That's one way of putting it." Hollow Ground sounds less than amused, but also too shaken by what just happened to argue. "You were trying to read my thoughts."

"It's a reflex," you lie. "You were the one that pulled me in."

"Like hell I was." It sounds like $\{hghe\} @\{hgsv\ is|are\}$ not buying it, you can feel the anger rising like steam. Tempered by... familiarity?

"What do you want? An epology?" You still try to make sense of what just happened. What you saw.

"You never apologized once in your life, don't tell me you're going to start now." The words are out, flat on the table between you, coins not heads or tails but on the edge, spinning freely.

*goto mindtalkcont

#"None of your business," I snap defensively.

"None of your business," you snap, going on the defense though you have no idea what is attacking you. What was that? In mind? You can still feel the memory cling to you, as if it was trying to worm its way under your skin like a parasite.

"It is my damn business," Hollow Ground swears, his voice lowered to an angry hiss. "You tried to get into my mind," $\{hghe\} @\{hgsv\ shakes|shake\}$ $\{hghis\}$ head. "In $[b]my[/b]$ mind!"

"So what?" Your tone matches $\{hghis\}$, because you have never once backed down from an argument. "Are you seriously surprised?"

"I shouldn't be, you always were a little shit." The words are out, flat on the table between you, coins not heads or tails but on the edge, spinning freely.

*goto mindtalkcont

#"You tell me," I whisper. "Why was $[b]I[/b]$ there?"

"You tell me," you whisper, as if afraid to speak out loud. "Why was $[b]I[/b]$ there?" Inside $\{hghis\}$ mind, a reflection that never was.

"Shut up and let me think." Hollow Ground sounds as rattled as you feel, looking at you as if $\{hghe\}$ had seen a ghost. "You saw it too?"

"The aquarium. What the hell that was." You can still feel the memory cling to you, as if it was trying to worm its way under your skin like a parasite. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I," $\{hghe\} @\{hgsv\ admits|admit\}$. "I haven't thought about that in years, not since you..." $\{hghe\}$ breaks off suddenly, staring at you. The words lie still on the table between you, flipped coins landing sideways. Neither head nor tail.

*goto mindtalkcont

*selectable_if (protected) # "You saved me," I gasp, focusing on that. "Why?"

"You saved me," you gasp, trying to swallow the taste of blood and drowning. "Why would you do that?" $\{hghe\}$ must have known what you were trying to do. You're not sure if Hollow Ground is a telepath, but there is some form of mental powers at play here, that you could feel. Something...

"Hell if I know," $\{hghe\} @\{hgsv\ lies|lie\}$ and you know that know. Can taste the lie, not because your minds are entangled but because you can see it in $\{hghis\}$ eyes.

"Liar," you retort, wiping your mouth.

"You tried to get into my head," $\{hghe\} @\{hgsv\ snaps|snap\}$ in return. "In $[b]my[/b]$ head!"

"And you're surprised about that?" Your tone matches \${hghis}, because there is something so close to slipping out if only you can make \${hghim} mad enough to let it slip.

"I shouldn't be, you always were a little shit." The words are out, flat on the table between you, coins not heads or tails but on the edge, spinning freely.

*goto mindtalkcont

*label mindtalkcont

"What are you talking about?" Hollow Ground knows you. No. \${hghe} [i]@{hgsv thinks|think}[/i] \${hghe} @{hgsv knows|know} you. Your face. Older but familiar. The memory still hangs on your lips.

"You don't know?" You can sense the disbelief, \${hghis} eyes narrowing. "Fuck. Of course. That makes sense. Too much sense."

"No it doesn't," you protest.

"Do you remember anything?" Hollow Ground leans forward, too insistent now, almost reaching out to touch. You lean back, putting space between you despite the protection of your armor.

"About what?" Why are you the one being interrogated? What did you see in there? What did you feel?

"Your childhood." The words land heavily and you almost laugh. As if you were ever a child.

And yet that memory keeps rising to the surface of your mind. \${hghis} mind. \${hghis} shields are fraying now, too focused on you to care about \${hghim}self. What is it that you're picking up?

@{hgsv Does|Do} they really think you're...?

That you're... someone \${hghe} used to know? Related to \${hghim} even?

*fake_choice

#"Our memories got entangled. It's nothing more than that."

"Our memories got entangled," you say, unwilling to indulge whatever fantasy the kingpin of Los Diablos is entertaining. "It's nothing more than that. Give it a few days and everything will fade away."

"You don't understand," Hollow Ground pleads, and you can feel the need in \${hghis} voice. "Just answer the question, please."

"It's irrelevant." You force yourself to put your shields back up. "And it is definitely not why I came here."

"Why did you come then?" You can hear how suspicious \${hghe} @{hgsv sounds|sound}, unwilling to let this go, yet with no avenue to force you to answer.

*goto talkchoice

#"You... had a sibling," I say, uncertainly. "Is that...?"

"You... had a sibling," I say, uncertainly. "Is that...?"

"Yes. Yes I did." Hollow Ground looks directly at you, eyes widening in surprise. "I thought I had lost them years ago. I thought they were dead."

"Some people don't stay dead forever." You didn't, you should have, again and again and yet you kept coming back.

"Could it be...?" A pause, \${hghis} fingers tapping nervously against the table. "You would have been in your early teens. There was an... attack. They called it an accident, but nobody was fooled. You had been arrested, they say you suffered an overdose. They never let us claim the body, so I always figured it was police brutality. Didn't want us to see the evidence. I never thought there was a chance that you were alive?"

#"No," I say, which is technically not a lie. "Why?"

"No," you say, which is technically not a lie. No childhood unless you count being newly decanted, fumbling your way through the world before your memory implant. "Why?"

"Because you remind me of someone." Hollow Ground looks directly at you, eyes narrowing. "Someone who I thought I had lost long ago. Someone who should be dead."

"Some people don't stay dead forever," you joke with your grimmest smile, but \${hghe} @{hgsv takes|take} it the wrong way, eagerly leaning forward.

"Could it be...?" A pause, \${hghis} fingers tapping nervously against the table. "You would have been in your early teens. There was an... attack. They called it an accident, but nobody was fooled. You had been arrested, they say you suffered an overdose. They never let us claim the body, so I always figured it was police brutality. Didn't want us to see the evidence. I never thought there was a chance that you were alive?"

#"None of your business," I say harshly.

"None of your business," you say harshly, unwilling to indulge whatever fantasy the kingpin of Los Diablos is entertaining. "We don't know each other like that."

"Are you sure?" Hollow Ground pleads, and you can feel the need in \${hghis} voice. "Just answer the goddamn question."

"No.It's irrelevant." You force yourself to put your shields back up. "And it has nothing to do with why I came here."

"Get on with it then Why are you here?" You can hear how suspicious \${hghe} @{{hgsv sounds|sound}}, unwilling to let this go, yet with no avenue to force you to answer.

*goto talkchoice

You can feel the hope radiating from \${hghim}. An old wound, reopened. Someone who loved their

*if afab

little sister

*elseif amab

little brother

*else

younger sibling

and is now hoping that \${hghe} had been wrong all along. That there is a chance there had been no death. No body. Just someone disappeared into the system for whatever nefarious purposes. Someone who might be sitting at the table across from \${hghim}. Maybe.

Hope. The most powerful and addictive of drugs.

*if (((amab) and (gender = "woman")) or ((afab) and (gender = "man")))

You know in your heart that it is wrong. Not just because you are a Re-Gene and never was a child. But because the child you saw in \${hghis} mind had been a @{{afab little girl.|little boy.} And you never would have been. Not back then.

*else

Too bad that \${hghe} @{{hgsv is|are} wrong. Dead wrong. You're not even human, and here \${hghe} @{{hgsv is|are} trying to convince you that you are family.

Your face twitch in a pained grimace, and you look down.

"I'm sorry." Hollow Ground speaks first, as if \${hghe}@{{hgsv 's| are} suddenly aware how intensely strange this situation is. "I didn't mean to..."

*fake_choice

#"... to do what?" I ask, mouth filled with pain. "Upset me?"

"...to do what?" you ask, mouth filled with pain. Did you bite yourself during the intrusion? You might have, you've been tasting blood for a while now. "Upset me?"

"When you put it like that..." Hollow Ground can't stop the laugh as \${hghe} @{{hgsv pulls|pull} the robe tighter around \${hghis} shoulders. "You did break into my hoise. I shouldn't care whether I upset you or not."

"You're right." You let out a sigh, focusing on the pain and blood. "I did come here for a reason, everything else is irrelevant for now."

"We don't have to talk about what just happened yet." \${hghe} sounds eager to let it go, as if \${hghe} @{{hgsv doesn't|don't} know how to deal with this possibility yet either. "Why did you come here?"

*set hgsib? true

*goto talkchoice

#"... to presume that you know me?" How dare \${hghe}?

"... to presume that you know me?" How dare \${hghe}, trying make your story into \${hghis} own. "You don't. Whatever you think is worth nothing. You hear that? Nothing." You hiss the last with enough force to make \${hghim} lean back and pull the robe tighter around \${hghim}self.

"Of course." Hollow Ground's voice is surprisingly agreeable, eager to calm your temper. "Whatever that was just took me off guard. Nothing more." @hgsv IsAre} \${hghe} trying to placate you? Probably. But that doesn't change the fact that this is you getting sidetracked.

"Don't bring it up again." You let out a sigh, focusing on the matter at hand. "I came here for a reason, not to sit here discussing family memories."

"Of course." \${hghe} sounds eager to let it go, as if \${hghe} @hgsv doesn't{don't} know how to deal with this possibility yet either. "So tell me, what brings you here?"

*set hgsib? true

*goto talkchoice

##"Never mind," I sigh. I need to get back on track. "Let's move on."

"Never mind," you sigh. You need to get back on track, whatever is happening here is a distraction from your real goal. "Let's move on."

"You can't just tell me to ignore what's right in front of me." Hollow Ground can't stop the frown \${hghe} @hgsv pulls[pull] the robe tighter around \${hghis} shoulders.

"I can and I will." You let out a sigh, wondering if \${hghe} @hgsv realizes[realize] that \${hghe} @hgsv is[are] not the one in control here. "We're moving on."

"Of course, we don't have to talk about this yet." @hgsv IsAre} \${hghe} trying to placate you? Probably. "So why did you come here?"

*set hgsib? true

*goto talkchoice

*label friendlyhgtalk

*label threatenhgtalk

*label kitchenrobstart

*label paybackhg

[Smoke and Mirrors](#)

[Feb 17, 2024](#)

Los Diablos - 2019

The city was thick with fog, the shadow of the new bridge crossing it like a cut throat in the distance. Iris closed her eyes and breathed deeply, smog and mist coiling in her chest. The city was a distant white noise, the new reclamation project a resurrected corpse being brought back to life around her. It was to be the latest jewel in Los Diablos crown, restoring the last of the central ruins to truly modern standards. A rebirth, of sorts.

And like all births it would be painful.

She lit up a cigarette and stood at the edge of the construction site. Waiting, like she always waited in the quiet sanctity of Sunday evenings. She knew nobody would be working tonight, but even if someone had been, she wouldn't have been out of place. Her hardhat was in place, her pass was legit, and if her high heels were impractical, it was her ankles. Nobody would bother her... or her visitor.

He appeared, as he often did, as a tall man in steel-rimmed glasses and slicked-back hair, an investment banker gone awol. The faces changed, the voice did not. She supposed it was all in her imagination anyway, a composite of arrest records and newspaper articles. No face was your own if seen through the lens of others.

"Are they treating you well?" she asked, like she always did.

Like always, he regarded her quietly, then growled a quiet "well enough."

"I have something that will cheer you up. The site is nearing completion." It was the words that she had been waiting to say for so long now. Perhaps she should have lit up in a smile. Perhaps she should have shouted with joy. But she just said the words quietly, an affirmation of her determination.

"Show me," the apparition said eagerly, an undertone of feedback in his voice that set her teeth on edge. An echo of an echo of an echo, cast so far from the source. He sniffed the air, eyes gleaming in anticipation.

"What do you smell?" she asked since she smelled nothing but dampness and cigarette, pulling her coat a little tighter against the sudden chill. The heat against her breast was a small sun, so close to burning yet spreading no warmth to the rest of her.

"Freedom," he growled, sniffing the air, the briefcase held in one limp hand like a blunt instrument. "I keep forgetting what it smells like."

"You could use me more often," she offered, weaving through the rising buildings, empty windows devoid of life or intent. Their target was not distant, but the road was neither straight nor easy, mud and gravel compacted by heavy machinery.

"I'm not going to risk burning you out. Despite my complaints, I can be patient. I'll be fine." He sounded anything but. "A hero gone bad still gets some respect from the guards. And the other inmates respect what I have become."

Iris fell silent at that, tried to picture how Gerard could be faring in jail. He never told her any details, and life in the high security boosted penitentiary was shrouded in secrecy. She knew better than to trust online speculation. The fate of Five Pennies, the reasons for his 'mental breakdown,' as they called the graphic murder, and his resulting fate were all old news and tinfoil conspiracies at this point. She felt privileged that he had trusted her with as much as he did.

"Soon everyone will respect you." She didn't care if she sounded like a fangirl, she hadn't expected a reply when she wrote to him in jail, hadn't thought her girlish scribbles would get past whatever layers of censorship inmates like that were surrounded with. Maybe that's why she got through. She had sounded harmless.

She was anything but.

"Are you that much in a hurry to head towards damnation?" He almost sounded amused, the chuckle like ice cubes crunched between broken teeth. "You're going to be involved now, no more sitting on the sidelines."

"I never wanted anything more." Always the watcher. The audience. Just an innocent fangirl. "You've given me proof that what I believe is real." She headed towards one of the larger building sites. Like all the others, it was surrounded by wiry steel fencing, as if the structure beyond would escape unless imprisoned.

"You made your choice." He shrugged and stepped through the metal gate as if it hadn't been there. She had to unlock it first. "I won't forget your help if this works. If you still want to, you will have a role to play in my ascension."

"I'm not going to back down now," she insisted, still remembering the sensation of falling as her finger touched metal. Familiarity. That here was someone that understood. Understood her. Understood the parts of her she was smart enough to keep hidden after the first apocalypse.

"I didn't think so." They walked into the skeleton of the building, still smelling of damp, wet cement. "I would have felt your hesitation. You smell almost as eager as I am."

"I wasn't sure if you were the real thing," she admitted. "Not until I touched the coin. You have no idea how many coins are floating around auction sites claiming they are yours." Her heels made sharp sounds against the concrete floor, like the clicking of claws. "How did you know someone was selling it off?" She had felt so clever working out the cipher in the letter, and risked all her savings to buy a single, humble coin. Greater sacrifices would be asked from her in the future.

"Because I told him to."

"Oh." She didn't know what else to say, because she felt both jealous and flattered. Jealous that she hadn't been there to pick it up from the street herself, and flattered that she was the one who got to speak to him now. That she was chosen, and the other one had been a dud.

"He was easy enough to manipulate to pick up a coin in the chaos, and drop another one in its stead. Useless in all other ways. Unlike you."

"What will it be like?" she asked, walking the unfinished rooms, massive windows covered by plastic sheeting. "Becoming a villain?" Coils of cables rested heavy like intestines, waiting to be assembled into a nervous system for the building. She could almost feel it surrounding her, could guess at the finished shape.

"There are no such things as villains. Or heroes." The shadow that was Five Pennies in her mind stopped for a moment, looking around. There was almost no light in here, and she wondered if he could see more than she could. The penny she wore around her neck was bared, she wasn't sure if it helped, but it felt right. Proving her loyalty.

"But you've been both," she pointed out.

"It's not what I've been but what I will become. What I will show them I have become." But he said nothing further on the subject. "Where is the altar?"

"There is no altar." She had finally succumbed to the limitations of her human eyes and pulled out a flashlight.

"You said that you had built unto me a temple." There was a quiet warning in those words, and despite herself she felt her heart racing in anticipation or fear as the coin got heavy around her neck.

"And I did." Iris played with the flashlight over the unfinished ceilings, large, vaulted. "Not a church. A temple to the new gods that ensnare men's hearts. A museum to their exploits." The interior space was vast and cavernous, and she extended her arms and spun slowly in place.

Five Pennies stayed silent, so she kept talking.

"In less than a year people will come here to worship. Their heroes. Their toys. All the petty material things and false idols that fill the emptiness of their lives. This is where the masses will listen to the recorded sermons of Power. Where they will learn the importance of Heroes. The Unimportance of their own accomplishments. A myriad gods, all as empty as the hearts that spawned them. Trust me, this is going to work."

Nobody had suspected the humble assistant as she had changed the plans in secret, piece by piece. Small measurements corrupted. Interior spaces just slightly askew. Nothing that her superiors would notice. Nothing that the builders would think odd. But bit by bit she had applied all she had learned of discordant architecture to turn this building into a lens. A lens for desire. A structure that would hum with the redirected need of those that milled through it. A building as powered by belief as any church, all centered on one exhibit.

"Have you prepared yourself? If this succeeds, you will need to be the conduit." Apparently her gift had been deemed adequate, because Five Pennies had turned to face her, the left arm with the suitcase limp and dead, the right hand reaching for her chest.

"Yes." Iris tossed away the cigarette, stepping forward so the hand could touch the coin resting on her chest. It scalded her, as if it had been held in boiling water. "Don't worry, this isn't my first rodeo."

The preparation had been equal parts easy and difficult. It was a simple task in theory, to turn your back on all things that made you human. She had slept with her feet on her pillow, her head covered by the sheets, the increasingly rotten air making her nights unrestful. For food, she ate only what disgusted her. She left the vegetables in the fridge to almost rot, choked down the moldy bread and tried to find joy in the smell of meat gone bad. She had thrown up during those first days, but she learned to choke it down. For lunches at work she ate the least healthy things she could find, imagining clogged arteries and heart disease. Had she not been working she would have let herself grow filthy, but her continued freedom and survival rested on fitting in. On not being noticed. She had seen firsthand what happened to people who did.

"I'm impressed." The apparition had his hand in her chest, holding the coin, watching her for any signs of hesitation. "Most people would have caught fire or gone mad by now. You're withstanding my presence admirably well."

"Will I survive this?" she asked, a moment of weakness she could not hold back.

"That is up to you." The reply was as harsh as a slap. "You told me you could handle it."

"I will." She grit her teeth, ignoring the feeling in her chest, the way her heart had started to race as her body had the urge to fall sideways and be done with existence. "But you need to stop now. Not yet."

"Fine." The hand was withdrawn and she gasped for breath, pressing both hands against her chest.

Her heart was racing, the building around her unfinished but too much of a draw, mounting pressure and she pulled out a cigarette with shaking hands. Lit it. The smoke followed the pattern of her breaths, a chaotic focus that nevertheless anchored her. "I'm sorry," she said, voice shaky. "I will be ready when the day comes."

"It will be simpler with all five." The apparition looked down at his hand. "How long do you think it will take?"

"I can't calculate something like that." She didn't have to hide her unease, there were no others to ask for a second opinion anymore. The Pentachoron rested squarely on her shoulders. "Maybe a week or so after the opening? You should be able to judge that when we go and have a look at the exhibits ourselves. This isn't an exact science, and I'm not an expert." Everyone who had been was dead.

"There have better be a lot of visitors." There was a grinding impatience in his voice, and she could feel the coin cooling against her chest.

"Oh that is guaranteed. And yours will be one of the more interesting exhibits. A good man gone bad. Hero turned villain. That's always a draw. The speculation why." She stressed the last word. Mysteries had power, she doubted Five Pennies really knew how much. "Nobody was even sure how your powers worked."

"Good. I was afraid I'd have been forgotten."

"Never." She didn't censor her outrage. "You're still a top-ranking enigma. So many theories. About everything. You're... not simple. Like the others."

"Flatterer." The words were fading fast, but there was satisfaction in them.

"I would never lie to you," she lied, gripping the coin tight in her hand. Almost cold, the connection fading. "Hang in there, you'll be out of prison in no time."

This time there was no reply. No twisted avatar of her own imagination. Just an empty building, the future site of the Heroic Heritage Museum.

She finished the cigarette alone, grounding herself once more. The poetry appealed to her. Heritage indeed. Los Diablos had no idea what was coming for it.

[Feb 14, 2024](#)

Finally finished editing a 200 000 words document yesterday so now it is full Fallen Hero focus for a while!

I apologise if this has been asked before but is the same sniper that shoots at MC and Ortega after the HG encounter the same sniper that took a shot at Chen? is there any correlation there at all or are they mutually exclusive events?

Let me put it this way, I might have been a bit vague about this in the past for various reasons, but yes. There is a correlation.

Would the Catastrofiend find someone with innate superpowers (like Argent's technopathy) tasty, or only those who gained their powers by taking the boost drug?

They would be equally tasty, though Argent would be disgusting due to the nanovores, but that's a different thing.

Is Snowball clever enough to intentionally take a longer "cooldown" to bait someone into acting when they think they're safe?

Snowball is very clever, and not above looking tired or innocent. She's just a lil' goat y'all. Not dangerous at all.

Silly question just for me as a followup from the spoon as chen's home/lockscreen answer: does chen use dating apps for hookups? and if he does, is his profile picture also a picture of spoon + what's his bio say? (if anything. chen is a man of few words.) or does he only meet people at bars or places where no one will recognise him as marshal etc for this purpose?

I would say that Chen probably have used dating apps for hookups once or twice. He hasn't liked the experience, he knows that a lot of people would have hangups about his looks, so these days he sticks to meeting people in person. His profile was quite bland, probably a mish-mash of what others used at the time, with a profile picture that didn't show his face. Not Spoon. He was a bit self-conscious about his scars, it might have been a bicep or something.

Since it sounds like Emperor and Overlord were different villains, what exactly did Overlord do to people that Sidestep had to fix? (I mean, "amateur with low-grade telepathy" or not, evidently it was serious enough to require telepathic correction?)

The thing is, it is a LOT easier to to great damage as an amateur. Something that Sidestep can do smoothly and seamlessly, like making someone not notice them by simply redirecting attention, Overlord would have done the telepathic version of punching someone in the visual cortex, leaving a lot of residual damage, maybe even permanent vision loss, memory issues, or a feeling of terror when returning to the scene they were forced to unsee. In FH game terms, Overlord would have had an alright Force, but no Subtlety.

So, Step is "not there YET" compared to Void and the likes on the massacre path. So what you're saying is: there's a chance?

Oh yes.

Will we be getting an option to further customize our armor in book 3? (Either in specifics or generalizations)

Unsure yet of when it's going to fall, but yes. Some of you might need some real repairs too.

Are there any armor themes that you wanted to add but didn't? Are there any themes you didn't add at the time but now wish you did?

Not really, I cut away some armor customization, but at this point I am happy I did. Enough variation already.

Could a telepath like Sidestep have forced Ace to have false/misleading precog events?

No, but they could have made Ace misremember/forget some precog events.

A bit gory, sorry, but if a Regene had a self-healing boost, would they be able to successfully flay all their tattoos off like Step tried to?

Yes. Jumping into a vat of acid or a fire and staying there long enough would also do the job.

So the "ink" on the skin of a tattoo'd Regene looks like weird skin cells, but does the "ink" look different if applied to a nonorganic surface like a wall?

Yes, it adapts to the surface. If you looked for it, you would see some similarities, but you would need to know what to look for.

I think it's been mentioned that Ortega learns the important words (swears) first when it comes to new languages. Are there swears in the re-gene language?

Oh yes! And insults. I don't know what they are yet, but I think they will come up more now when we have a re-gene to talk to.

Are there any powers that you think couldn't be gained from Boosting?

Time related stuff. Other than that, I think the stronger boosts would just destroy the body before they could grow to full power.

Any heroes or villains we know of (major or minor) that really regret their choice of name? Ones who are going "why did past me think this name was cool?", associate the name with bad memories now, never liked it but couldn't think of anything better, realized too late that they'd doomed themselves to years of misspellings or bad puns on it...?

Look. We have all joked about "The Crack." That was an unfortunate choice, made by the media, and then it was far too late to change, especially for a villain who never spoke to the media and liked disappearing from the scene as soon as possible afterwards. Psychopathor might have had to suffer a lot of misnaming, like "Psychoraptor," but he's fine with it and find it funny. Emberfall was VERY put out when he realized that Ashfall existed, AND was getting more famous by working with the Rangers, so that sucked. One reason he changed his name to Lord Ember, which made Lady Argent's appearance infuriate him even more. Trademark infringement!

We often try to quantify and judge how "smart" (not really what I mean but I can't think of another word) Tactician!Step is by comparing them to characters like Chen and Mortum and so on. How would you try and quantify Fighter!Step's abilities? Comparable to Argent or Ortega? Reflexive or just generally faster than Tactician!Step? Things like that.

Fighter!Step is a better fighter than Argent by far, she relies a LOT on her nanovores, her fighting style is a team effort. I would say that depending on reach, Fighter!Step might be a better fighter than Ortega. They are well matched without powers, so a Tall!Step would have an edge due to reach, while Ortega would have the edge against Short!Steps. Average!Step would be evenly matched I think.

Are there other Farms, either in the US or abroad?

No, there is only one site.

Will we have an option to refer to Shroud as "Sister" even if it's solely to annoy her?

That sounds like a great way to annoy her.

Do you ever see a snippet or tidbit from the discord's headcanons and ideas that you like and sneak into the books / patreon posts?

Do you have any idea how much y'all post? And how little time I have? I read very little there, apart from discussions about the new demos, or some Retribution discussion about plots and plot points, so I have no idea what you get up to! I never go into the Sidestep channels. Honestly, I try to stay away from it as much as I can, same with fanfic and stuff. I know my story, what you do with it is yours. The feedback and wishes come later, through the playtesting.

How do the younger Rangers feel about discussing a villain named Anathema/Heartbreak with teammates who have such painful, personal connections to the name? How uncomfortable was that for the team to get used to?

Honestly, they both felt a bit protective, who the hell is this new villain to go out of their way to make his teammates feel bad and dredge up bad memories?

On a related note, where would the Rangers (or their PR team) draw the line on "I am NOT calling a villain that"? Profanity? Using the name of a living person? Just making it extremely weird (like, idk, making your villain name "Dad")?

Oh I am NOT giving you ideas. Though I bet there is a villain out there called "Dad," just for the laughs and the dad jokes. Probably has a suit including a pipe, hat and tie too.

Step references a threat they believe is coming soon. When exactly did they become aware of this threat?

I would say about halfway or later through their stay at the farm, I haven't set an exact time. Before their escape, surely.

And, when exactly did they realize just how big a threat it was/would be?

After thinking about it for a few weeks and adding things up. Sidestep is far too good at considering bad implications of things.

So the Truths story from 2020 is pretty old and set post-void encounter but Sunstream is still around - is this predating when you finalized the timeline that the Void compound raid and the Nanosurge happened (per "nothing is canon until it's in the books"), a smaller event with the void before the Nanosurge, or a third thing?

A combination. One, this was before I finalized exactly when things happened, so it is a classic canon is not canon until it is in the book. But, I think this might be referring an earlier Void encounter, when they thought the villain was gone, but that turned out not to be true. The mood is way too light to fit the aftermath of the real Void finale. And, there had been many fights with Void leading up to the final showdown.

What's been your favorite character dynamic in FH to think/write about? Has it changed between writing rebirth, retribution, and now beginning on revelations?

I always loved Sidestep/Ortega arguments and competition. That was there since the start. I have been surprised and delighted by how writing Steel/Sidestep interaction has been, it is such a very different dynamic. I am never sure how those talks are going to go. Argent is a force of nature, superficially similar to Ortega, but she's fun to write with everyone. Can't wait for her and Mortum. The biggest surprise I think have been Ortega and Herald. There are some things there that might to deeply... weird. Those two I can't predict together.

I remember reading something about Sidestep being able to visit their own grave. But will Sidestep be able to desecrate their own grave?

Why not? I am sure some would want to.

In the old days, could Sidestep pirate a movie for others by going into the theater, watching it themselves, then "livestreaming" it to a group of people outside the theater?

Nope, wouldn't have the skills or focus for that. These days they could.

When Danny is floating/flying - is he more "vulnerable" to physical attacks in any way? For example, would he be "lighter", and therefore have less resistance to being knocked around? Would this apply to objects and people he's making "float"?

In theory. He definitely was that at the start of his career, and can still be if he's surprised. He's become better at countering it, especially if Sidestep is training him.

Theoretically, can lingering psychic scars/imprints - such as the one in the Heartbreak site - turn into a "consciousness" of its own?

Hmmm good question. I would say yes.

Bit of a mouthful of a question but - Do the telepaths that the telepathic tracker tracked know that they were tracked?

Nope. Maybe one or two, depending on their particular skillset, but not in general.

Is there a combo of tactician vs fighter and streetwise vs technician that the rangers find most dangerous?

Nope.

If Step is forthcoming about their failed suicide attempt/suicidal thoughts to Ortega, who do they tell or do they keep that bit of info to themselves?

Ortega would keep that to themselves in all cases but real emergencies. That's private stuff.

As a follow-up to the question about tactician/fighter + streetwise/tech-savvy builds: Did Steel find any of those skillsets particularly suspicious or strange, in light of his suspicions about Sidestep?

I would say that fighter/tech-savvy probably was the most suspicious one. Though tactician/streetwise was not far behind.

Is our telepathic tracker's code T135678?

No. A lot more limited than that.

What's Sidestep's IP Address?

621.311.0.25.15.21. They don't have the same systems as we do.

For all the RO's do they do cereal first or milk first?

Everyone does cereal first, they are not freaks.

Did Danny ever write fan mail to sidestep? Did he ever send it?

You know what? I think he probably did. But he never sent it.

Would the presence of diseases in a patient affect the outcome of their boosting?

Yes, they can. Like everything else in the body.

Why doesn't Vera shit on people? I think it's quite a useful thing to do to people you don't like

Gross! She has hench-pigeons for that...

How did integrating nanovores into sidesteps armor come up? how did mortum originally take the suggestion? is this relevant to why mortum thinks the villain is a freak?

It is definitely related to why Mortum thinks the villain is a freak. Probably the main reason, apart from some puppet shenanigans. It was Sidestep that approached Mortum with the suggestion from the start, and Mortum couldn't say no to a challenge. Ironically, this has also led to Mortum assuming certain things about the villains contacts and allegiances that are not exactly true, which also colors the impression.

If Anathema had not dissolved during HB and they had stayed on with the Rangers. What would have been their reaction to Step turning up alive and well?

A big hug! And then a massive "what the hell dude (gn)." they would not have been as cautious as Ortega about confronting Sidestep.

What kind of actions would have raised Anathema clue?

No idea!

What were/are the presentation styles and scores for the former Rangers supporting cast? (Ashfall, Anathema, Sunstream, Sentinel)

Huh. No idea of the details at all. I would say that in presentation order they are from high to low: Sunstream, Ashfall, Sentinel, Anathema.

Do Sentinel and Pyroclast differentiate their "civilian" styles from their more heroic ones?

Pyroclast does, I would say that Sentinel is pretty much the same.

Does Sentinel have any protégés or minor heroes he specifically trained/looked after akin to Hood and Ortega?

He did take an interest in Daniel when he started out, but I can see that there's probably a bunch more interested in the environmental protection business he is in now.

Where would you place Sentinel's current doubt score?

Very much spoilers.

IF Sunstream had made it with the gang to current days, what would her power ranking have been?

She would probably be alpha level at this point.

Who would've won between her and Pyroclast, and her v Sentinel?

Pyroclast would have won, but it would have been touch and go between her and Sentinel. He would have won through ruthlessness I think.

Since Jake can show up at Steps luxury base, does HG know where Step lives in the other bases or is the luxury one just the most conspicuous? Was insisting on meeting face to face partially based on confirming where Step lives?

Spoilers!

Do people that know step but doesn't know bout their re-gene thing think they're autistic?

I am sure some certainly do.

Currently it's possible to take Mortum to the gala as friends, but only if you were flirting when you asked them. Are there any plans to let players ask them as friends without flirting, or is that outside the scope of the update?

I'm gonna have a look at the code for that.

Given that cuckoos are made for infiltration but are still mostly covered in tattoos, I can't help but wonder if there's more to the markings. Do they serve any purpose beyond identification (both visually and via the barcodes)? Would there be any unforeseen ramifications if they were removed?

Spoilers!

If HG's love language is physical affection, what kind of gestures can someone who's loved by them expect from them?

Lots of stuff like shoulder claps and hugs. And now I am picturing HG trying to hug Sidestep, like one of those cats who hates being picked up but tolerates it for exactly ten seconds.

What's the largest number of surviving Re-Genes ever gotten from a single batch?

The size of the batch varies, but I think there's rarely more than two or three.

How did Armadillo feel when they met HG for the first time? Were they surprised at their I-very-much-do-not-care-about-your-blue-skin behavior?

Oh Armadillo have never met HG out of "armor." And in armor form they are just another boost. Hired muscle. Vera did the talking.

How do you think would be more bearable to Ortega: HG, Nocturne, or Jake? And who would stand Ortega better?

Ortega and Nocturne could get along splendidly. Also most likely to kill each other.

What makes HG feel sad? What can someone do for them when they're feeling down?

Oh lots of things bring HG down, they are quite emotional and filled with anxieties. Sadly their powers doesn't work on themselves. Usually a hug and affirming their ego does wonders.

Would Dove have been affected by Heartbreak?

Yes.

Would Dove have been affected by Heartbreak while transformed as a pigeon?

Hmmmmmm... probably not, or at least to a weaker extent.

When it comes to rangerstuck steps, how curious is Vera about them? Does she feel a sense of camaraderie or responsibility towards step since Arde seems to regard step as family?

Now when certain things start to leak, yeah, Arde might start coming into the picture as more of a driving force....

What were the animals like during HB? Birds, rats, the normal urban jungle critters.

Birds stayed the fuck away. Rats were affected. Insects didn't notice.

If you had to guesstimate, how many big reveals do you think will come/you have planned for Revelations? Will there be a lot of readers' big questions answered in this book, or will lots of them be saved for book four? Will most of these revelations be about things that characters will discover (ex. Chen's crush on Ricardo, Ortega's relationship with their father, sidestep being a regene/villain, etc.) but readers might already know, or bigger overarching themes (heartbreak truth, the threat that's coming, etc)?

The truth about Heartbreak is planned, as is the puppet story. We will learn more about the threat, I want that out before book four. When it comes to character interactions and reveals, that will depend on your playthrough. The Farm and the Core will be saved to book four, as is the Mayor.

Is there a particular reason why Ortega never really compliments Sidestep's appearance when romanced when they compliment Puppet's appearance all the time?

Sidestep has been traditionally touchy about their appearance, that has probably led to arguments in the past. Might also be that Ortega feels the need to show that they did not fall for looks, and that Sidestep is different from the more casual/hot hookups they are known for in the media.

How would other higher level boosts like the Void or Catastrofiend have fared against HB's influence?

Catastrofiend would have been BAD. Wouldn't have killed them, but oh boy, gruesome. The Void would have been interesting. I really don't know what would have happened there, we might not have a west coast anymore.

How has writing Breaks influenced your work on Fallen Hero, and vice versa?

I started Breaks before Fallen Hero, so I would say that it has helped me writing snappy dialogue. Making a comic is such an exercise in moderation, you need to cut everything down to panels and speech bubbles, so you need timing. Figuring out two page spreads, where to cut, cliffhangers, how to pace dialogue. Comics are REALLY good for figuring out structure. I can truly recommend it to get some discipline in your writing. Also scene transitions.

How do the mob boss crew feel about the (hopefully) imminent transition from "small, tight-knit team" to "full-scale criminal empire"? Do they think they'll miss the current dynamic, or are they looking forward to the increased distance/professionalism of a large organization? Is anyone worried they'll be redundant once the boss has better options?

We will get into that, I'm not sure yet how people will react, and it will vary depending on their relationship with the boss.

And as a corollary: how many of the crew really expected their new boss to make it, in the long run, when they signed on?

Oh I don't think any of them did. They are all (with the exception of Nehal) used to mercenary work, where the boss might get taken down, but they can slink away and find a new paying job.

Do Regenes get medical training to perform field treatment for themselves or their handlers?

Yes, some do more than others.

What was the vibe of the "Marshal and the Menace" film mentioned with Argent?

Romantic action comedy.

How much of a tourism industry does the FEZ have? Are any parts of it considered desirable travel destinations, domestically or internationally?

I think it is starting to pick up. You have to remember that there's not as many lines of communications open, there are no huge passenger lines flying everywhere and the oceans are unsafe. The tourism tends to come from Mexico, or elsewhere in the western states. I would say it's part nostalgia tourism (come see the remains of hollywood) and Boost tourism (visit the city of heroes). The current Mayor certainly wants more tourism.

if you don't have it planned out or don't want to spoil please ignore this, but is it possible to have both puppetstuck and substantial HG (sib or otherwise close) content in one playthrough? or would these be mutually exclusive routes.

I plan to have the puppetstuck route resolved rather early, so I don't think they will be exclusive. Just different.

How did Ortega tell Argent and Herald about us? Was it gather round storytime type of deal? Oblique references to the past? A mixture?

It was a mixture over the years, Sidestep came up often enough, and Herald definitely would have kept asking.

Does 5 Pennies look like a clown? What's his physical appearance / costume like otherwise?

That is spoilers.

I noticed the parallels between the MC/Sidestep and MewTwo are quite striking. Were they partially inspired by MewTwo? If or if not what were the main inspirations in designing the MC/Sidestep character?

That's a pokemon thing, right? My only exposure to pokemon is reading "Manly Guys Doing Many Things" back in the day, so sadly I don't know MewTwo. That's the cat, right? Sidestep is more inspired by lots of media telepaths who I think never really got any interesting arcs and exploration of their talents. There's not really a single source, more vibes picked up from many sources and mashed together into Sidestep.

If sidestep's relationship with any of the main cast is low/negative enough, would any of them threaten/give fleeting thought to reaching out to the special directive to "return" them? Would any have the invasive thought of doing it, while in the heat of the moment?

Ehehe. Well. Push hard enough and be nasty enough and maybe you'll see.

Can we still meet Arde if we were Puppet stuck?

Yes.

Do the rangers receive any kind of "unofficial" promotional perks that they really enjoy? like tickets to concerts or sporting events in exchange for Being Seen There ™

Oh TONS. Probably more than they can ever use, Ortega unloads a lot of stuff on their friends.

What was the least favorite sponsorship each of the Rangers have been dragged into out of obligation?

Argent and shampoo commercials. She HATES those. Brings home the point for her that she doesn't even have hair. Herald still have trauma about the old courier sponsorship stuff he had to do before he joined the Rangers. So corny. Ortega doesn't mind endorsements of products, but they hate the kind where they have to talk up organizations, and pretend to be interested in their goals. Steel hates them all and tries to get out of them by being bad at it. At this point, that's almost a selling point. There's probably a site somewhere out there consisting of nothing but clips of "Steel selling stuff badly" to the delight of his fans.

Have Rangers from other cities ever had to team up to beat a villain? If so, who was the villain?

Probably, but I don't know right now! I have too much focus on Los Diablos.

Has Marshal Dave ever collaborated with any Boosts he wishes he could've officially recruited, were it not for their legal personhood status in the greater Nevada [and USAmerican] area?

Oh what a clever way to put that question! Congratulations. I would say that the answer is yet, but not in the way you intended when you asked that question.

Are we going to see Owl's sword be wielded in game?

If you're unlucky, oh yes. She still practices.

If the Rangers don't suspect that Sidestep is the villain how would they react if they found out they got their money from something like reading the minds of rich people and stealing their credit card information?

I think I can say in unison that it would depend on how rich Sidestep presents. If they aren't being too overt with their wealth, the reaction would be more pity, and you know, we can help you put, you don't need to do that. If Sidestep presented richer, then the reaction would be more harsh, oh shit, Sidestep has become a petty criminal and so on.

When Sidestep shows Argent their tattoos on their date Argent's immediate reaction is sympathy for their scars. Would Argent think Sidestep's scars reason enough to let them keep the regenerator even if they weren't a Re-Gene?

As long as she gets a change to use it too. She's sympathetic, but also very aware that her injuries are far worse than scars.

Is Argent more interested in Julia or Ricardo? Are there gender combinations in the Step/Ortega/Argent poly she would be more or less interested in?

Hmmm I would say that given a choice, Julia might rank higher but not by much. There's more conflict with Ricardo, his machoness sets off some of her internal alarms. It's less about physical gender/appearance than what gender roles in society does to people. In a triad, it would matter less, the power dynamics would be more volatile.

What about Herald? More interested in Julia or Ricardo, more or less comfortable with certain gender combinations? Would Ricardo tease him and/or Sidestep about Sidestep's ability to make seemingly straight men realize they're bi?

Herald would have a lot easier time with Julia. A lot less conflict, a lot more understanding. He has no issues with strong women (might even like it), and Julia is more in touch with her own baggage than Ricardo is. There would be a greater conflict between Ricardo and Daniel, probably to the point of raised voices at the least. Danny won't take Ric's bullshit for very long, Sidestep or not. Of course, that's also part of the draw for Daniel. Ricardo would absolutely tease Sidestep about that.

Do any of the people entering into a Sidestep/Ortega/poly feel insecure about being the third wheel to their obsession with each other?

Hmmmm I would say that they are all aware of it from the start, and if they weren't prepared to deal with it, they wouldn't have.

What is the difference between afraid and nemesis? Can a character be both?

You can't be both. I would say that someone afraid of the villain is just that, afraid. Even though they might hate what the villain does, and want to stop them, there will be that hesitation in interactions. They might still be arch-enemies though. In contrast, someone with the Nemesis status might still be scared of a villain with terrifying armor for example, but their need to stop them overrides it. The fear does not drive the confrontation.

Was Sidestep more powerful after escaping than they were attacking the gala?

Lovely little trick question. I'll give it to you: Yes.

How would Herald take the memes about him essentially being the Benedict Cumberbatch of heroes? (Purposefully referring him to the wrong hero name: especially by using any long medical terminology starting with 'h') How would he feel about his friends/Sidestep occasionally joining in to tease him about it?

Look. It could be worse. Expect many long-suffering sighs. It helps that he didn't pick his hero name. But he will be a good sport about it.

Considering how desolate Reno is, with much of southern Nevada ruined, what do Dave and Jackrabbit do? Does the government need them to keep meeting a quota so they get to stick around in an official capacity?

Dave and Jackrabbit mostly hang out and drive around. It's a leisurely job, though they do rescue the occasional lost disaster tourist. The desolation makes it tempting for would-be villains to set up shop there though, so they always have things to do on their patrols. They have no quota, and some joke about that Dave must have some sort of blackmail material on someone to be allowed to behave as he does.

If your puppet has the mirror image, does Ortega also think they are related to hollow ground?

No, the resemblance is not that deep.

Did Ortega find the puppet's background?

Only the one that Sidestep planted.

In book three will there be a point of no return with relationships with the rangers? Such as there will be things that no matter if you promise to not do they will never forgive? Or will that be in book four?

Forgiveness is an interesting thing. And rarely easy. People you consider close to you can have done things you might never be able to forgive, but it might not be impossible to move on from there. Or perhaps it is. I have no specific points planned, relationships evolve as I write. I have no idea what will happen here.

Hypothetically, if the nanovores were released again, would present time Argent be able to control all of them like she controls the ones on her body? Or was that like a one-time fusion incident and she wouldn't be able to control wild nanovores?

She could control the ones close to her, but she doesn't have the range.

If we "agreed" to work with HG in book 2, could we hypothetically feed information to someone like Ortega? Edit: I know this might seem spoilery but I'm asking for character motivation purposes, thank you!

I mean, yes. Of course.

Is Chen aware Spoon is no longer his dog but OUR dog?

Chen is okay with that.

In universe, did the Rangers costumes or superhero suits in general go through a design modernization? Example being Spiderman's first design being the simply designed, bright red and blue vs. his newer designs being more detailed with duller colors. Or do you picture people still wearing the calf high boots and underwear over the skinsuit?

Oh I can imagine the suits evolving over time, just like sport fashion. Looking at what people wore in the seventies is very different from what they wear today, though some things are similar. So suits and fashions do change, they probably look very different only over the time Sidestep was away from town.

When did Ortega's fear of getting older start? Is it a "I'm not young and beautiful anymore :(" thing or is it a "my death gets closer every day" thing?

It is simpler than that. It is the feeling and knowledge that their body can't do what it used to do. Ortega is heavier, more muscles, not as fast. Climbing is harder. Flexibility is worse. Training and mods only do so much, and with cumulative injuries and other damage, Ortega is very aware that one day they will not be able to do what they love anymore. Will be too slow. Mess up. Probably die. It has nothing to do with beauty, silver and grizzled can be hot, but for someone who has defined their worth in their physical prowess since childhood, growing older sucks. Death is far less terrifying than that.

How do the blues for the Ranger costumes get chosen? Does the hero have a say in what shade of blue that get to wear or is it random? Also, do they reuse blues after a hero that wears it retires?

There is a suit-design team, the Ranger does have some impact, but it's mostly picking between different designs. The shade of blue can vary over the years, it's not tied to the individual, just the current suit.

So, when the Ratking is controlling the armor, are they the administrator of it? Do they have the highest form of control one could have over the armor? Could they, oh I don't know, override any commands that someone else could give to it?

Hmmmm. I would say yes. If someone is actively trying to access it, there would be a fight for control.

What is Blaze's defining moment in his career? Like, the most important thing that Step did as Sidestep was stopping the nanovores or killing Void. What big thing did Blaze do that made him Captain of the Guardians material? Does he even have one?

Oh he probably does! I have just not come up with one yet.

This one is probably spoilers but least to most likely to believe that Step is actually in the Puppets body?

It will vary depending on clues and relationships.

I don't know if it's been asked before, but hypothetically if sidestep had told the original Rangers, before the HB incident, about being a re-gene, how would the Rangers have reacted?

We will never know! I'm not going to go into detail about that.

How gamechanging is the book 1 update gonna be?

Not much, just housekeeping and bug fixes.

Also, if we choose the mob boss path, will we be able to name our gang/organization?

Oh yes, that's in book three. It was intended to be in book two until it got cut down.

If any of the rangers (past or present) had caught a glimpse of Sidestep's re-gene tattoos, would any of them have put two and two together? Who would have just forgotten or remained ignorant?

I think Ortega and Chen might have put two and two together. Chen in particular.

Has Sidestep met another cuckoo re-gene without realizing it (not counting Shroud being a potential candidate)?

Possibly, not sure.

Was there any particular inspiration behind the default names for Sidestep being Cynthia, Chris and Cyrus?

Cyrus was the name of the character in the original novel, just picked it... I don't even know why. Why not? Then Cynthia and Chris because they were C names. Almost had Charlie instead of Chris, but at that point Charlie had become too much my own personal Sidestep.

I don't know if this me just reading into things too much, but do trans sidesteps have an aversion to actually using the term to describe themselves? They never seem to use it either in their mental monologue or in conversation with those who know. Is because it's a 'human' term or something like that?

I hadn't thought about that. I think it's just comes from my own experience, I am very averse to thinking about myself in labels in my head, like... I don't go around thinking "I'm trans," or "I'm bisexual." For me, those are labels others use on me, or that I might use to tell others things. When it comes to internal

dialogue they don't come natural to me, hence me not using them much in the book. It would feel weird. So... my hangup, let your Sidestep have what reason you want!

How soon until Ortega is up for some "oh no looks the evil villain has caught me 😊" in-armor flirting?

Depending on how "evil" the villain is, but we all know Ortega would get there pretty fast...

Would Ortega develop a Crush on a best-friend Sidestep that doesn't have a secret crush? If so, would they ever confess?

Some would say that might already have happened, but if Ortega never confesses nobody will ever know.

When short!Step kisses Ortega in Retri, they think it must not be comfortable for them due to having to crane their neck. Now does Ortega actually have a preference for tall and average Steps?

No preference, you can always put shortsteps on a chair!

Building off a previous question, given how sensitive Ortega is about aging, have they ever considered getting plastic surgery or filler to seem younger, at least outwardly?

No, that's not the part that bothers them.

If Anathema had survived Heartbreak and was still active, while Sidestep was captured, would Chen show the photos to them? If so, how would they react?

Hmmmm. I think Chen might have done that. Anathema was a lot more stable than Ortega, so Chen might have used that to get a second opinion.

Will we ever get a chance to see phsycopath again or did the SD get him for good?

He still has a role to play.

Chen seems to surprised to hear that Step saw medical equipment around HB. Had Ortega never talked to him about the state they found HB in?

Spoilers, we will see what happened in book three!

Any chances of Julia returning the favor and braiding f!Step's hair?

Okay that is very cute!

Just like boosts above alpha are sometimes called omega, is there another classification for mods with who've been modded to the point where class A is too much of an understatement?

I don't think it's an official designation, but they are often referred to as "WMD's" Weapons of Mass Destruction. That would be things like the Catastrofiend and Dread Reactor.

Can Ricardo braid hair or just Julia?

Ricardo is also good with his hands!

Which of the ROs sees marriage as a thing they'd like to do? Do any of them have any big hangups or would it just be dependant on step?

I leave marriage entirely to headcanon, it won't be brought up in game, so go wild!

Exactly how judgmental is Ortega of Regenes? Does he dislike them as much as Sidestep thinks he does or are Ortega's excuses of just being slightly uncomfortable at their lack of humanity the whole truth?

I do think that Sidestep is overthinking it a lot. As with many things, Sidestep is often painting his own insecurities on other people, which becomes even more true for Ortega, who they can't read. Also, even if Ortega would have deep feelings about re-genes, things would be different if it was a re-gene they knew. You know, the good old classic "you're okay, I know you."

If Sidestep wants to kill his handlers and the higher-ups of The Farm, which of the ROs would understand this and which of them would heavily discourage it (in a path where you told them about the Farm and about you being a Regene)?

That is spoilers, not going to let you know what reactions you will get when you eventually bring it up.

Since sidestep have the power of mind is special than other. If sidestep power can reach to >95%, will it unlock any special choice base on their power?

Generally I have 80+ as the cutoff for BIG stuff, except for extremely specific circumstances.

Can sidestep mind control main ROs (of course no Ortega) with the high level of mind power?

Yeah, but the level might vary. Argent might have gotten wise to you by now and developed countermeasures.

Will Sidestep have a chance to mind control other hero and villain? Even HG ?

It is Sidestep's main weapon, so I think it's fair to say that will come up.

With regards to the autopsy tapes, how did Chen feel about initially seeing the physical state of Sidestep? The person he thought was an intelligence operative dying to help the Rangers?

He was devastated. The video was horrifying and disgusting, and it left him questioning a lot of things. He wishes he had never seen it, because it's a hard thing to forget.

Also, was Sidestep conscious there? Was it one of the instances they recall of being "turned off", or were they genuinely unconscious from injury?

Sidestep looked dead on the tapes.

Sorry if this is long... Based on the recent escape snippet: While 'Step is at that first motel, there's a line about someone smoking a cigarette until it burnt their fingers, then later the fire department shows up due to a fire starting in a bed. My initial interpretation is that the fire could have been caused by someone falling asleep while smoking. Next thought, given that 'Step is struggling to contain their powers at this point, did they have any influence on this occurrence?

Good spotting!

Which leads to a funny head-cannon interaction, in a hypothetical future where a tobacco vice 'Step survives the main story, and later is forced to quit smoking, could they potentially 'ride' someone else smoking to get some relief of withdrawal symptoms? potentially depending on the type of addiction, which may be headcanon, but how might telepathy, and/or the ability to possess people interact with a psychological addiction?

That sounds like interesting headcanons! But smoking is a VERY physical addiction, nicotine is a bastard like that.

Sidestep thinks negatively of seagull minds at the dog park (understandable). What happened the first time Sidestep interacted with a seagull's mind, before they knew better?

It's just a maelstrom of hunger, greed, anger and vertigo. Very alien, always on the move for new opportunities, very invasive vibes. Not mammal at all, probably made Sidestep throw up, possibly stumble and convulse.

Which vice do the Rangers + Mortum dislike/worry about the most?

A tie between Alcohol and Cigarettes.

The way you can keep deniability with you being a villain, can the same be done with the puppet?

Oh yeah, nobody ever needs to know about Sidestep and the puppet.

And will we be able to bring up Chen's distrust of us and our telepathy? Especially in a mutual attraction? He seems to think Sidestep can just switch it off, and seems disgusted (for lack of a better word) by near any use of it in the QnA's

Yeah. Chen doesn't truly understand what telepathy is or how it works. He thinks it's both more and less powerful than it really is, and it's that lack of understanding which makes him so wary. It's possible that will change once he and Sidestep gets closer, and he has more experiences with it.

Taking into consideration that void blood works as a form of boosting process, and how Sidestep's powers evolved after the void, and since Sidestep's powers are classified as Alpha level telepath and bodysnatcher then Sidestep can be considered a double boost or something close to that?

Bingo. Sidestep could be considered a double boost.

If Ortega has no previous same sex experience and is romanced by an opposite sex Step, would they accept Step's offer for them to be free to explore with people of the same gender, as long as things remain purely physical? Assuming of course that Ortega would at some point tell opposite sex Steps they're bi

I do want to have Ortega having a bi conversation with an opposite sex Sidestep at one point, I just need to see where I can fit it in and not make it look weird. It's not something you casually break out over coffee.

What does Daniel think about tattoos/scarification in general? Especially ones that mark and hint at little details of one's life: both major and minor, to tell an overarching story of what they've experienced throughout their whole body?

Oh I think it is fair to say that at this point there is no secret that Daniel is kinda into scars.

What was it about Alvarez that makes the HG trio think she's useful, beyond her obvious power in her position? Do they always go out of their way to try and get a new mayor under their thumb?

Of course they do! The Mayor is extremely useful for a crimelord who doesn't want to be openly out and about.

How *does* Alvarez feel about their arrangement with Hollow Ground?

Enemy of my enemy.

What did Nocturne think of the whole 'no taxes' system going on, before she made the decision to stay with HG? How has that changed since then?

Oh she thought it was irrational, and still does. Sure, fines are useful, but you can't really do anything big with it. The whole transport system is a mess, and that's not something you can fix with bridge and road fees, you don't make money building railways, you make money by having infrastructure.

If you eventually get the regenerator working and remove the regene tattoos, will there be an option to get our own tattoos as a sort of statement?

I think so! Why not?

Also, this one is suuuuuper important. What's Ortega's favorite fruit? And if you can't think of a favorite, what's one they really enjoy?

I am not going to say avocado. The one that popped into my head is cherimoya, so I am going with that! It's ridiculously tasty.

Since you said that Julia and Ricardo feel slightly different to you, is it the same for female and male Steps?

No. They feel the same. And the same goes for Dr. Mortum.

In an earlier QnA, you mentioned that Ortega would have 'the Hunt' per a Magnus Archives question. 🐞 Is Ortega really afraid of 'becoming prey'?

I mean... not going to deny that. We all have things we fear.

I know you said diagnosis will be left to head canons but do autistic steps know they are autistic or do they attribute their peculiarities to being a regene?

That can go both ways, depending on your headcanons.

Why does Ortega want Sidestep's help with Hollow Ground but not Catfiend? Do they really think they can handle Catfiend or are they worried Sidestep would get themselves killed?

They are worried Sidestep will get themselves killed! Hollow Ground is different because it's family. Ortega doesn't think HG would really hurt Sidestep.

Hi! I was wondering what Ortega would do (or what it would look like) had Sidestep approached them about working together against HG prior to the events at the hospital (or if Sidestep was innocent/not yet caught).

Oh that might happen in some paths! So you'll see...

What do the Rangers and Mortum consider their younger selves to have been like?

I think all of them would see their younger selves as a bit naive, but driven. None of them are too angry at them, and they don't really think they could have been much different than they were at the time.

Jake was mentioned to appreciate most about Nocturne the fact she challenges him, how does she challenge him exactly?

She pushes him to take more responsibilities, take charge and be more of a proactive leader in many occasions. She doesn't just have him be a dumb bodyguard but actually wants his views on things.

Earlier Q&A also said HG appreciates most about Nocturne the fact she keeps them human, what would HG be like if they didn't have Nocturne by their side?

Either a lot more terrifying or a lot more flakey. Would have been hard keeping a balance.

During the Memorial Park confrontation between Ortega and Sidestep, there's a possibility for Sidestep to end up thinking they've managed to make Ortega think they were doing fine, did Ortega actually believe Sidestep in the moment or were they pretending?

That is between Ortega and their unreadable brain.

What does HG consider their weaknesses/strengths to be as a leader compared to their oldest brother?

Not really the big strong lead from the front and beat people up type. Which is both a drawback, since some people respect you less, while also an advantage since you are less likely to get caught or killed. They are trying to use secrecy to compensate for their lack of physical prowess.

Is it possible for Sidestep to try and restore HG's memories of their younger sibling?

HG has never lost those memories.

In one Q&A it was mentioned Argent is both angry and grateful Sidestep stopped the nanosurge. What is the anger for? Is it her own anger or are the nanovores influencing her in that regard (and is she aware of it if that's the case)?

It is a mixture of her anger and the nanovores anger. Argent personally can't help but wonder if it wouldn't have been better if she had died.

How threatened/worried Nocturne would have been if she had known streetwise Sidestep has heard rumors she's HG's right-hand woman? Would rumors be enough to make her be on guard or would there need to be something more concrete?

She would be... not worried, but cautious. People who know things are dangerous.

How does HG conceptualize their red-threads?

HG doesn't. They just ask for stuff and it happens, the red thread is entirely Sidestep's ways of seeing it.

Does Nocturne have some kind of mental image for her red-threads?

I think she would see the changes as armor. Like her dresses or jewelry.

One past Q&A stated past Steel would be disappointed in who he is today. What about his current day self the Past Chen would have been disappointed by?

That it looks like he has accepted that life sucks and he will live and die alone.

If HG allowed Sidestep to leave the meeting despite Sidestep rejecting their "offer" to work together, especially if they shook hands, what did Nocturne think about it?

This is new. This is bad. This definitely needs investigating further.

I feel like the answer for this might kind of given, but asking it anyway: is it possible to get a good ending for Sidestep without having the Rangers involved in their life?

I mean the Rangers are in the book, you're not gonna be able to play book four without them being there. But if you mean if you need the Rangers as allies for Sidestep's plans to work out to their best extent, the answer is no.

What's one thing the Rangers, Mortum, HG trio, possibly Vera and/or Sky-Raider wouldn't want people to find out about them and why? (If the answers are too spoilery, funny/lighthearted answers would be fun to read as well if any come to mind)

Gonna be a mix of serious and lighthearted, just going on what pops into my head and not saying why: Ortega - their painkiller problem, Chen - that he's gay, Argent - her nanovores habit of eating bad guys, Herald - What happened between him and his brother, Mortum - That they are [REDACTED] and why, HG - that they have a glass jaw, Nocturne - how she used to be, Jake - the nature of his relationship with HG.

Would Nocturne's powers on Sidestep if they were wearing an armor?

Yes.

Is it possible for mob boss Sidestep's plans for proper criminal organization to crumble, especially if the crew betrays them?

Of course!

For the Rangers, Mortum, HG trio, Vera and/or Sky-Raider: what keeps them going? What do they live for?

That's a bloody philosophical question, I have no idea!

What was HG's reaction when Nocturne wanted to stay in the Los Diablos and get involved with their crime organization?

Relief. Gratitude.

How do the Rangers and Dr. Mortum want to be seen by other people? What about HG trio, and possibly Vera and Sky-Raider?

You're seeing how they want to be seen in game. That's how they project, with some you might get to see other sides eventually. Like Argent's softer side, or Chen at the dog park.

On the DnD alignment system Nocturne, Argent, Herald, and Jake were labeled as "lawful", what kind of possible rule etc they consider important for themselves? (If I understood the lawful correctly) Also quick note: really liked the way you labeled the good/bad in the DnD system as altruistic/selfish

Lawful is not about the rule of law, or a specific rule, it is if you like systems and can work within them. They all do that, they prefer to have rules and patterns to follow, and thinks life would be easier if everyone did that. They work well with giving and taking orders, and expect that to work.

If Sidestep managed to use telepathy to hurt Nocturne, did that shake Nocturne's or/and HG's confidence on their ability to shield themselves from telepathic attacks?

No, only in their vulnerability to unexpected surprises. They'd be better prepared next time.

Actually if Sidestep did use telepathy to injure Nocturne, did HG or Nocturne realize it was due to a telepathic attack?

Not unless Sidestep is a known telepath. At the time it could have been any of a number of things.

So we learn that Argent and Herald's relationship was for show. What did keeping up that front for the press entail, in practice? What was the public reaction to the breakup? How did Angie and Danny feel about the whole thing? Were there any actual feelings involved on either side?

It was an awkward thing from the start. Argent was putting up a front, and Herald was trying to adapt to it, which only made Argent angrier. Also, her nanovores thought Herald looked very tasty, so she needed to keep him at arms length. If they had been left to their own devices they might have become close on their own accord, but with the media team pushing it down their throat things soured fast. It was the usual, being a couple in public and on galas and the like.

Did the PR team try to arrange something similar for previous Rangers? For example, would Julia and Chen ever have gotten roped into something like that? (though I can't imagine Chen playing along)

Not in Los Diablos, but it had been proven a success in other cities. When Ortega was young and active, they filled that role on their own accord, so it wasn't needed.

On that note, is an Argent/Herald/Sidestep poly a possibility? What about getting Chen and Ricardo together without Sidestep romancing either of them?

We will see! Those things I need to write first.

Prompted by the Puppet-Ortega gala conversation, does Ortega have any idea of who/what the Catastrofiend used to be?

Not really. Ortega has theories, but they don't have more depth than a random mercenary.

A bit of a fun question, will we be able to shave Ortega's beard ourselves if he is our romance option?

That sounds hot.

when & how was anathema inducted into the cult?

Grew up there, brought in as a young kid.

For now opposite sex puppets have been used mostly as a source of trans angst but will it be possible for them to be a source of gay angst too when, for example, getting close to a, seemingly, straight Ortega or Dr Mortum?

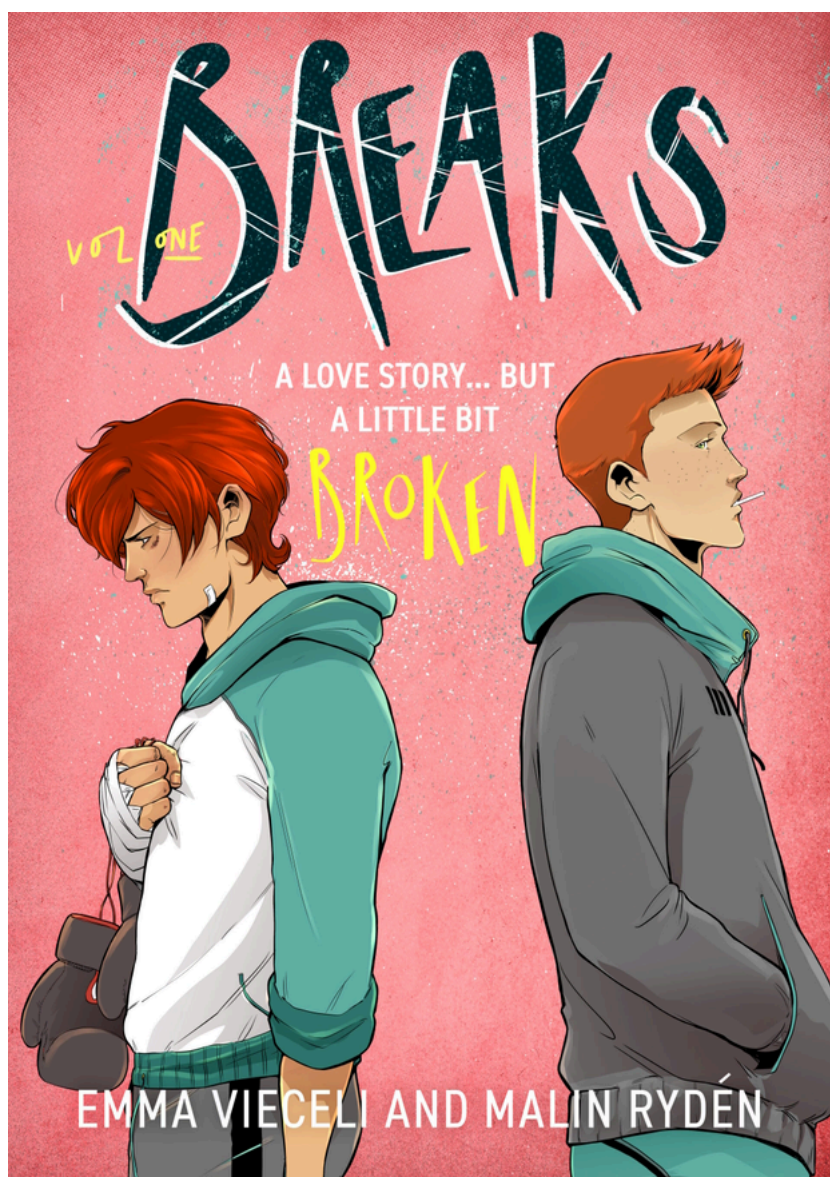
One could argue that is already the case, though we see it mostly after the fact, when talking about why with Mortum. In retrospect, it might have been nice with some of those thoughts too.

I'm asking cause I've noticed that while the option for trans anguish comes up often, Step doesn't really seem to have any particular thoughts or feel any type of way about being gay. Was that a conscious choice? Is Step, as a character, canonically meant to not experience discomfort surrounding same sex attraction?

I think once again, that comes down a bit to what's in my head. My gender was always the big bugbear, the bisexuality was just life and never really cause for angst at all. So... blame me for that, it's not canonical, it's authorial.

Back to the ghosts question: where does Skyraider rank?

Ghosts question? I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean?



[Breaks is out!](#)

[Feb 6, 2024](#)

Before Heartstopper, there was Breaks . . . the enemies-to-lovers queer comic book sensation. Cortland Hunt has made some dangerous mistakes. Now he's waiting quietly for those mistakes to catch up with him. Ian Tanner coasts through life denying the spark of anger beneath his laid back exterior. When school politics and personal lives become a battleground, the pair find that what they share may just be their only safe haven. Breaks is the story of two young men discovering who they were, who they are, and who they will become.

It's been a busy weekend so I am a few days late, but finally we have a new, shiny and updated edition of Breaks! This is a first of a three volume series from Orbit, the other two volume will hopefully be out later this year if everything goes according to plan.

So, if you're interested in picking up a romantic drama, comedy, crime, school, angst story about two young men incapable of simply talking things out (sounds familiar?), go and pick it up now at your local book/comic store! You won't have to wait forever to reach the conclusion of this one.

For those who like me are far away from stores, [I am including a link to the evil store](#), if you can get it elsewhere, please do so, but I know that life is sadly the way it is at times.

Some reviews of the old (and long out of print) edition:

Another really great thing about Breaks is the mysteries they leave you with. They dangle bits of Cort and Ian's backstories through flashbacks and ominous lines, but they don't explain it. They leave you wondering "What happened there?" or "Is this one-liner relevant backstory or teen drama?". Sometimes a comic will tell you everything about a character before you even open the cover, but Breaks keeps its secrets, which makes me very excited to read Vol. 2

[- Indie Comix Dispatch](#)

It's going to grow very dark indeed.

"So where is the love?!" I hear you cry.

It's in every line: both those written by Malin Ryden and those drawn by Emma Vieceli.

There is ever so much mischief and tenderness evidenced by and in both. There is a vulnerability to the art and an uncertainty in the dialogue whose speakers (in Ian and occasionally Cortland) seek to cover their tentative tracks. You cannot commit whilst in the closet, especially when you do not yet realise its confines or even acknowledge its existence. Trails of thought are left understandably unfinished and so much is left only half-said, often excruciatingly curtailed from without by what happens next.

[4.2 - Hirelings](#)

[Jan 31, 2024](#)

Alright, not enough for a full demo yet, but here's 17 530 words of code for the new path. This is the ending where you had everything under control, your puppet might be in the hospital but you are free, and getting ready to deal with Hollow Ground.

As always, this is not complete, stats and options are missing, and some stuff will be extended. Just thought you'd enjoy seeing what a rough draft looks like while you are waiting for the demo.

Since it was so long, I have attached it as a .txt document instead for your convenience.

[Time for your questions of the month!](#)

[Jan 28, 2024](#)

Been fighting character voice, but will hopefully have something up for the VIP level soon. In the meantime, please feel free to ask whatever questions you have!

[Escape - Reprise](#)

[Jan 24, 2024](#)

This month's lore post crawled into my mind and refused to let go. Some select portions from Sidestep's second escape from the Farm.

Can't run. Not yet. Gravel biting into elbows, every move a painful repetition of the last. Heave. Pull. Stay still. Crawling is easy for the first few hundred yards; after that, it becomes a chore. Then, the chore becomes pain. Becomes torture. And yet you keep doing it. Like a finger in the candle flame, so easy at first,

increasingly hard as the heat builds and the pain ramps up to unbearable. Heave. Pull. Stay still. The sun is up, slowly roasting you after the chill of dawn. The thirst is bad. It will get worse.

You don't care.

Instead, you keep moving. Slowly. Inch by inch, in the wrong direction, towards desert and doom. Crawling avoids an easily spotted silhouette now that they are close, but drones are harder to fool. Staying on hard ground hurts, but you leave few tracks the hovering nuisances would spot from the level they usually fly. No need for them to swoop down to investigate closer if you don't give them a reason. You don't plan to. For every hour since your escape, the possible area to search grows wider. The net thinner. Do you run or walk? When did you ditch the car you stole? Which direction are you headed? All things they need to take into account, plotting probabilities, trying to predict where you will be.

You don't plan to be anywhere near that point.

The car sped west, driven by a slack-jawed guard ordered to drive as fast and far as possible. If you're lucky, he'll crash on the way, and it'll take them a while to sort out the fact that your body is missing. Then, they'll search possible exit points along the road, triangulating how far you could have made it on foot.

You were never in the car.

Instead, you crawled away, slow but careful, in the direction nobody should predict you going. No roads. No way to hitch a ride. Nothing but shrubland and the sun. Dogs could track you easily. As could people. You're no master of wilderness survival, only barely functional after years of imprisonment and... let's call it torture. Experiments are too kind a word.

You breathe in. Breathe out.

Once upon a time you were very good at remaining unnoticed. Making people overlook you. Ignore you. Once upon a time. You dig your elbows in and pull yourself forward once more, using the pain to send a wave of loathing cascading over your surroundings. A warning. This place is bad. Dangerous. Terrible. The ants ignore you, but the birds that had spotted your tempting form glide elsewhere. In the distance, a dog barks as a rabbit flees, both heading in a different direction. Nobody in their right mind would go towards this place. Towards you.

Repulsive. Run before it's too late.

When you close your eyes, you can feel their cloaked presence, an increasingly distant hunger and need. To find you. Quickly. Run away, you urge, deep in your throat, in your amygdala. Numbers shield thoughts, dampeners block telepathy, but this? This is primal. Fear. Desperation. You've learned the meaning of both by now. No need to know what they think. No need to make them think at all. All you have to do is just be... you. People will react accordingly.

They have NO idea what they are dealing with.

You can't. You swallow, mouth dry and filled with dust. You can't keep this up. Not because it's hard, but because it's so goddamn easy. Focus on the pain instead; keep crawling, crawl faster. You need to be out of here before the ground cools enough for thermal drones to be useful again. In the distance, you can feel the little pinprick of hope slowly approaching. It is worse torture than the crawl to willfully avoid extending your presence in that direction. Pull it close. Tight. Extend backwards. No symmetry.

She'd be proud of your control.

Your mouth tastes of blood as you bite yourself, kill that thought, bury it in the hard ground, and leave no graveside marker. Keep crawling. But she's harder to bury than that, hand out of the ground like a laughing corpse, whispering memories in your ear. Did she know what you could do? Had she spotted the awkward movements, the aborted smiles as you tried out your puppets? Did she wonder why people would stumble? Drop the pencil? Take the wrong note? Tap their fingers? Did it annoy her?

Did it scare her?

No. You doubt she can feel fear, but she's not out here, and all the others are. They do. They fear you. How was this possible? How were you possible? Industrial sabotage, government terrorism, and combat Re-Genes off the leash are all so much likelier than one little broken cuckoo whispering nonsense in the corner of their cell. They don't know. Not for sure. Because if they did? They'd go after you harder than this. Carpet bomb the desert, and damn the consequences.

But what if they can't?

The thought stops you cold in your tracks, taking a moment to feel for the distant minds, the cloaked and the uncloaked alike. Heading the wrong way fast, easy to spot that from the dogs. Dogs don't use numbers; what idiots do not think of that. Or is that something other telepaths can't? Feel the animals as well as the humans? You remember reading notes through other people's eyes, chained in your cell but not contained. Not for months.

The things you learned.

You can't just. You pause. Breathe. Through your nose, less loss of moisture. Breathe. Don't unpack that now. Too much. Focus on this. The little light in the distance, a lonely prospector with a jeep. A cracked road, still serviceable with the right car. Mines. There are big gold mines to the south. Always someone searching for an untapped vein. With the geologic upheaval, who knows what cracks might be revealed to the discerning eye?

Hope.

You've hooked him, pulled him north with greed, with the feeling that there's something out there to be found. And there is, you. If you can get close enough in time. If you can stay conscious. If your nose can stop bleeding. Oh. That is bad. You're pushing yourself too hard, too fast, but what choice do you have?

You know what choice.

Shut up. A bad choice is worse than no choice. Rolling on your back, you scan the skies. No birds. No drones. Empty space around you, all looking elsewhere hurrying way. Far away. If you're going to run, you need to do it now while you still can. Shit. You force yourself to your feet, aching knees protesting as you stand up. Wobbly.

Weak. The whisper taunts.

Shut up, you growl back, slamming doors over voice and pain both, making your mind a missile heading south. You run as fast as you can, ignoring protesting muscles and screaming feet. Out of shape. Hurt. Wrong. Could you? You almost stumble, knee too weak, but you force your fear away. Don't hesitate. Trust. You will do this. You Will do this. You'll prove her wrong.

You already did.

The cloud of dust in the distance is faint enough that you wouldn't have spotted it if you weren't looking. Finding energy where there is none, you stumble up to the jeep, where the driver has stopped, scanning the horizon. Too far away. Wrong terrain. You can feel his annoyance, but he can't see you. Can't hear the sound of the door as it opens. Won't smell you, bitter sweat and blood as you sit down on the seat. Leaning forward with your head in your hands, you urge him to turn around and drive home. This was a bad day. Wasted. Nothing found.

Except you.

Several hours later, you stumble out at a gas station near the edge of town, ignoring the cameras because you can feel the owner's thoughts. Haven't worked in years. Just there to scare people. You're too tired to be scared as you walk into the bathroom, unseen, unheard. The mirror is dirty, and you don't recognize yourself. Water. You leave blood in the sink and dust everywhere, but the face that's revealed scares you more than dying of thirst.

Eyes. Shit.

You close your eyes, pulling yourself in and down. Pack everything back in the box, no time for Jack right now, tense that spring and close the lid. Lock it tight. Breathe. In and out. Open your mouth and check your teeth. Tongue. Cracked lips. Flaking skin. The guard uniform barely fits you, everything but the bare necessities discarded. A prison shiv filed down to the minimum amount of steel needed to kill someone.

Not today.

You wash your face. Soap your stinging hands. Wet the sad reminders of your hair. Put on a face. Control. Stop smiling. Stop snarling. The Jack in the Box awaits its next victim. You can do this. Be unseen. You knew it by heart, you can relearn those lessons. Even if it would be easier to just reach out and...

No. Not today.

Instead, you carefully clean the bathroom, removing any trace of your presence there. Not enough if someone really wants to look, but they should have no reason to. Outside, you feel the prospector pulling away, talk filled up, ready for a drink before sleep. A nothing man in a nothing town. You don't think you left blood in his car. Nothing you could do if you did.

You could. No.

You open the door with a napkin, watching the owner half asleep in the cage. A shotgun resting against the back. Not taking any risks. But you're not after his money; instead, you make him drift off, watching the view through the window. Not you. Never you. Like a ghost, you fill your pockets with chocolate, a bottle of water in your hand. Don't be greedy. Nothing he would miss. The coffee machine makes a sound he doesn't hear, watching as another car stops to fill up.

A chance.

No. Play nice. You pick up a pair of cheap sunglasses and a baseball cap, resisting the urge to see if the owner has a spare coverall in the back. Instead, you limp through the door as confidently as possible, sliding into the passenger seat without anybody noticing. The driver sits down, turns on the radio, and speeds away. You drink your water slowly, one sip at a time. Eats a bit of chocolate to chase away the headache. Dab your nose with the napkin, still spotted with blood.

Not good.

A while later, you pass a motel by the side of the road. You make him stop to take a piss, and while he does, you leave and start walking back towards the motel. Dingy. The night clerk doesn't look at you. You lean into his mind and make him sign you in under the blandest name you know. Make him think you paid cash. You take the key and leave, making sure nobody is watching as you walk into the room, drawing all the blinds and curtains.

Dark. A smile.

You turn on the lights, but there is nothing there. Nobody. You haven't slept, you're hallucinating. But that's alright. You've been doing that for years; at this point, it's reality that feels weird to you. Freedom. You sit on the bed in the small room, watching the door. Listening. Sensing. Nothing. If you wanted to, you could get up and walk away. No locks. No bars. Your hands are shaking. You eat more chocolate. Have another drink of water.

Dangerous.

You feel. Yes. You spent so many months throwing yourself against the dampeners that now that they're not there, there's too much of you. Someone three doors down is heading out on business. You make him pick out a change of clothes for you from his bag. Easy to forget exactly what he packed. He delivers it by your door, and you pick it up without incident. He'll sleep well. You can't sleep yet.

Shower.

You scrub yourself clean, the dim light revealing nothing you haven't seen before. You want to throw up, but you watch the wall and count to ten until it passes. Don't be weak. Rebuild the walls. Rebuild yourself. You dry yourself, then put on the clean clothes and the guard's boots. The rest you package up neatly. You'll take them with you when you leave. Tomorrow. You need to sleep. But how can you? How dare you?

No. Choice.

You drift off with your boots on and your mind roiling free, like thunderclouds over the plains. In the distance, someone is smoking a cigarette until the embers burn her fingers. In the distance, someone is dancing to a song only they can hear. In the distance, a man sits behind a desk, mouth open, as if waiting for a coin to be pushed in.

Dolls.

"Shut up," you whisper in your dream, you're too old to be playing with dolls, you never played with dolls, you are the doll. "We are not doing this."

"Really?" The voice is clearer than ever before, but you know moments of clarity are rare in a snowstorm but not impossible. In the end, all tracks will be erased regardless.

"I am in control." You will yourself to be, you must, you can. You know the drill. It's not the lady or the tiger that matters but the door. Close. Lock. Step back. Don't make a choice. Don't open the box. Avoid the tiger and the lady and the jack. Jack, be nimble; Jack, be quick.

"How dare..." the you is unspoken because it's not understood. Good. The snow is deepening, and you start to shovel.

"Do you know the story of the wolf in the snare?" Who told you that one? She? Him? You bare your teeth and keep shoveling. "Chew off his leg to get free."

"Limping."

"I'll bite them all off," you snarl, teeth bloody and sharp, the snow red around you, the sand sticky under your eyelids. "I'll chew and bite and crawl if I have to."

"You'll be nothing."

"I'll be Free," I hiss. "I'll be Alive."

"You'll be nobody."

"Do you really Think," I say, me myself and I in the core of my being. "You really think I Care? That I Can't?" Too close, my hands in gloves of skin, too tight for my bones.

"...."

"I'll chew your throat and make myself a bed from your bones." Singsong threat, backing away, locking all the doors you can. Distance. Safety. Cut and cut and cut everything you can afford to lose.

"Even this?" Warmth. Safety. Trust. Companionship.

"Yes," you say, voice hard, like an axe to your umbilical, a razor cutting the ripcord. Fall freely. Crush whatever you land on. Blow up the rest. Can't save what you can't dare to lose.

And you've already lost everything.

You gasp awake at the sound of a distant fire alarm. The pain in your hand is not yours. Neither is the burning bed. You pull yourself back inside your own head, rushing out with the others to see the fire spread.

Shit.

You leave before the fire department arrives, step into a car, slowing down to gawk at the flames, leave it an hour later at a different intersection, step into another, then a third until your trail is obfuscated and your head is throbbing once more. The guard's clothes have been dumped in the river with a stone at the center. Just like your heart needs to be. Stop thinking about it. You'll do better next time. You can control this. Build a bigger wall.

Later.

Already, memories are growing dim, but you hitchhike your way across the state, erasing your memory from whoever you come across. Shutting yourself down. One nightmare at a time. Rebuild your walls. Make them a fortress. Dig the moat deeper. Fill it with crocodiles. Lock all the doors and throw away the keys. Dim your light, one step at a time, until you can barely see. Barely be. Be safe. Go slow.

Come home.

Why? The ground shakes as you stand, looking down at distant Los Diablos. A small quake. In your body or your mind? A timer ticking, counting down to what? Too few fingers. Too many thumbs. You shake your hands, and your body feels yours once more. Discipline. Get some fucking discipline. You did it. You're out. Free. Nobody knows you are here. Nobody will.

Yes. Nobody.

You need to rest and rebuild. Then, you need to prepare and plan. Chewing all your legs off for freedom doesn't leave you with too many options. But this is a day of new possibilities; wolves don't starve in the wild; they move west and get modded. Fill in the flesh with bones. Hide your light under a bushel and buy a flashlight. Or a damn floodlight. You can't follow their rules anymore. You need to make your own. There's nobody else you can trust.

They would try to stop you.

And you might want them to. But that's for later. This is now. Rest in your grave for as long as you dare. Rebirth will come soon enough.

Once you're ready.

[December QnA](#)

[Jan 14, 2024](#)

Well, a little bit late, but trying to catch up! Got some things bubbling behind the scenes which has been needing editing and proofing, which will reach retailers this spring! But more about that later... time for some answers:

I was wondering, could president of USA end the activities of the Farm? Of course, whether they *would* is another question, but do they have political power to do so? Thanks for your answer! And I too hope year 2024 gets better!

Right now the president could not, since the facilities is located in the Free Economic Zone in the west. And there's specifically very little legislation there, and it's not under the control of the President. There are exceptions, but that's mostly about becoming a military threat to the US, and it is doubtful if the Farm would count.

So, I could be just making this up but I think Step leaving their cape if they win the Argent fight in rebirth is something that's coming in the eventual update. Assuming I didn't make that up I'm curious given how you've mentioned in a previous QnA that Argent waking up in the middle of the ocean panicked her, what her initial reaction on waking up after that fight is if Step won the fight but made sure she didn't fall into the ocean and left their cape wrapped around so she wasn't bare ass naked.

It is coming in an update! Just have so many things I need to work on right now that one has slid down in priorities. She would feel touched and happy about it! And more than a little confused. Also angry.

I don't know if this is the place to request this, but if it's feasible could you make it possible to make a binary trans Sidestep who chose not to do hrt? Perhaps with options like they're too paranoid to take drugs, they just never got the chance/never pursued it, or it's not something feel they need.

Possibly, there has been a LOT of wishes for very specific NB/trans paths, maybe I'll have a look on it again in the future. Won't make a difference in content much, but we'll see.

Did HG start threading Jake after the relationship began, or was he already threaded before Nocturne showed interest in him and they just never stopped doing it?

He was threaded before there was any interest, he was a useful if slightly suspect recruit, thus a perfect candidate for threading.

Was Ortega getting friendly and spying on the puppet a one time thing? How often do they go hunting for up and coming villains?

It happens on occasion, especially when Ortega gets bored.

The Rat King is clearly more intelligent than normal rats, would you day they're comparably more or less intelligent than an average child?

A different kind of intelligence, they are very smart in some way, and very not human in others. But I say they would be on the young child level, but with the focus and drive of a herding dog.

Does Ortega insist on using new experimental mods because of Heartbreak trauma? If they were just a little bit faster...

I mean that has a lot to do with it.

If Sidestep and Regina inadvertently stumbled upon each other who would flip out first?

Most likely Sidestep. Regina doesn't "flip".

How has Shroud not been caught yet? The state of her victims is pretty distinct, and her abilities are well known enough that Mortum can give a detailed description of them. Even if the Farm doesn't know for certain she is an escaped Re-Gene she has to be a person of interest, right?

A very good question to ask. She would say that she's got protection.

Given that Mayor Alvarez wore skirts more frequently due to the *company* she keeps, does Zephyr (have) to do anything to make themselves more 'palatable' for them? Or are they more resistant to being presented in ways they don't want, like Argent?

Yeah, Zephyr doesn't subscribe to that trying to fit in bullshit.

Happy new year :) The rat king seems mostly unaffected by the dampeners during the fight with Blaze. Is that because of Step/the suit/the strength of the dampeners? Would stronger dampeners affect them? If so, would the girls still be connected to each other?

Rat brains operate on a slightly different wavelength than human brains. It would have to be adjusted to have a greater effect.

What sort of security does the Farm have? What's to stop one angry Re-Gene uprising to storm the whole place?

Definitely spoilers for book four!

I was wondering about the new demo and the option to tell Mortum that you don't like your telepathy, is this a new development for Step to feel so strongly about it and will this topic be revisited or discussed with others later on? Or is it more a way to explain why they kept using the puppet? (Also, not a question but the wording of that option was a little confusing to me, I only understood what it was about after picking it)

It is a thing we will get into a bit in the future, new demos are a work in progress. But yeah, this is a discussion we'll get to have with others too if the situation comes up.

I was looking at some old QnA and there is a question about Sidestep's telepathic classification code evolving from T12345678 to T123456789 if all the gates are opened, I would like to know if this T9 evolution will only happen by opening all the gates or will Sidestep be able to finish evolving according to this classification without opening the gates?

Ooooh. I am honestly not sure yet. That might be possible, but the gates do block certain... things.

Can RatKing all together be considered Beta level Boost?

Yes, a weak one!

Will we be able to start a romance with Lady Argent in the third book without having kissed her on the bridge in the second book?

I think so! A lot of when romances start is me writing scenes and then going hmmm. So it's rarely pre-planned.

Will we be able to start the romance with Mortum in the third book without the puppet involved?

Oh yes! That I know.

Will Vera and Skyraider be open to poly romances? Understandable if not, considering the insane amount of romance variations already 😊

No idea! We'll see how things bounce. I need to see how they work.

I remember once upon a time reading something about a possible 4-way romance between Mortum, Ortega, Argent and Sidestep. Have you had any new thoughts about this one? Or is it still a case of 'maybe probably not' or the like?

We'll see how it works out! Like I said, a lot of romance is explored as I write, I don't know how chemistry will work.

I just want to say that I loved the extra dialogue Thief-Steps get with Vera, and it really nailed down what kind of Sidestep I want to do her romance with. What would you say Vera feels about the rivalry on her end? Does she think of it as professional competition? Is it a fun rivalry for her? Did she respect thief-step or was it more irritation?

It is fun rivalry!

Since Ortega and Owl are besties, how well does Ortega know Handyman? Are they friends?

They know each other quite a bit, not sure if they would count as friends, there are some vibes there that makes them bounce off each other.

So having no gates open is a good thing and having all open is a bad thing, will there be any negatives to having none open and will there be any positives for having them all open?

Yes and yes! I would say that having gates open is a DANGEROUS thing. Sometimes you might want to shake hands with danger.

Suuuuper random question about Zephyr. You know how in a car crash, your organs still have momentum even though your body stops moving and it can cause more damage than the actual crash? Did Zephyr's body evolve to not let that happen after they were boosted or is that a potential weakness of theirs?

Zephyr's body adapts to that, yeah. Speed from the core out.

Listen, I know in the past you've said that you can't answer music related questions, it's mostly headcanons BUT... what type of band was Chen in when he was younger? Rock? Metal? Any specific genre of those two?

I see it as metal adjacent rock! A bit dirty grunge, guns and roses flavored.

Rereading Rebirth, as one does. During the HB dream, the non-italicized words are current day Step. One set when it's talking about how the room HB was in smelled like feet and antiseptic, says "(and burning hair.)" Was that current Step just adding in a smell they remember now that old Step didn't notice or was Step having some kind of seizure during the dream?

The latter...

Going along with that question... Near the end of the HB dream, there's a line that says, "(antiseptic. ozone. blood)" not-italicized. Does Ortega do something to Step (or does Step try to do something to Ortega) before they throw themselves out the window that Step doesn't even remember happening?

Ehehehe gooooo reading. Something certainly happened there.

What are rangers family's thoughts on a romance sidestep? What about Dr.Mortums?

The only one whose family would even know would be Ortega's mother, and we'll get to that in game!

Will Sidestep have an opportunity to use what they've studied about the rangers against them? For example a Sidestep who considers Argent a nemesis in the 1st book may be able to use that to their advantage in future books despite having different nemesis in each book.

Probably not, that was mostly a first book museum battle use for the variable. A lot of time has passed for research since then.

Have or will any of the rangers notice Sidesteps secret crush on Ortega?

I mean Danny might have...

In the Argent/Ortega poly route Argent mentions Ortega had flirted with them a lot/asked them out when they were new. Did Ortega plan on dating them, hooking up, or just enjoyed the flirting? Just seeing where it led?

Just enjoying the moment, they had a good vibe, who knows what might have happened?

How shocked will people know the truth about sidestep and the farm? And know about Heartbreak and it will happen again the future? Like Blaze reaction.

I can't quantify that, I need to write it first. Some characters react a lot harder than I thought they would, and the other way around.

I see Steel know and had a crush to Ortega before sidestep. How Ortega feel form Steel? What the attraction of sidestep get Steel and Ortega fell for them?

Attraction is such a complicated thing. And since Sidesteps will vary, then the how and the why will also vary. Maybe we'll get into things in game.

Book 3 will there be any main oc dead possibility ?

So far, HG and the Puppet might die.

Could we get an updated link to the discord posted? Thank you!

I will!

Do you think we will be able to like... keep Rat King as an official pet even after all our business is done? :) Who needs kids I want a household of my love interest and my weird super cute telepath pet rat (My love interests probably: Of course they'd choose the telepathic rats as a pet... SIGH)

Oh yes! You are friends now!

To follow up on one of the November QnA questions, would we be able to convince Ortega to let go of some of his mods if you get involved romantically? I mean, no one wants to know their partner is willingly killing themselves, right... Are Ortega's mods a conversation that will be had in-game or is that not relevant to the scope of the story you want to tell? Right now I'm getting the impression that at this pace Ortega would keel over before his 50s which is just depressing for my Sidestep after everything they've gone through LOL!

Yeah, talking Ortega into that will probably be important for a long life. It will be possible, but it would mean confronting Ortega with their own mortality.

Will Sidestep's spot in the fridge be gone even when you're dating Chen and Chen-knows-you-know-he-knows path? He already said he wouldn't be arresting you and you'd just talk about your villainy later, so would he still not expect you to stop by?

If Sidestep is revealed as the villain, he will not expect you to drop by, so the spot in the fridge will be gone. If only Chen knows, it might still be there.

During the void lore post these parts are in quotes: "words.mumbled.fragment."

Is sidestep saying that out loud? Is sidestep even the one saying it?

Good question. It was worded vaguely for a reason.

Also will we ever get a nanosurge story similar to the void lore post or will that be in the books or headcannon? I really love Vigilante Sidestep lore.

Maybe? Depends on what my brain latches onto.

Quick question about the end of game two; I noticed in a killstep romancing ortega, they believe you to be a regene clone. But, if you choose to open up and kinda admit to being in love with them, the "regene clone" thought process gets replaced with "love of life" thought process.

Romantic feelings go brrrrrr.

Is that a bug or on purpose? Will you still get to talk about the fact they called you a regene clone? Will we also get to call them out on how they've murdered people before, but somehow theirs was "okay"?

I'll make sure the tags are still there for future talks. Since the save system is not in yet, it's fairly easy for me to fix tags I need to use.

I was also wondering, if we didn't get the telepath scene with Hollow Ground, we would still be able to explore that sibling avenue with them if on good terms?

Oh yes!

Also, I read the first few issues of Marshal Law and it was really good! Every comic you've talked about has been awesome, thank you :) hope you've had a happy new yr !

Thank you! Feed that brain!

Has Lady Argent been alone since the Nanosurge?

Essentially, yes.

what determines what root/branches telepaths can access or is it completely random? how easy is it for them to learn to access other avenues?

The roots/branches is a flawed description of telepathic variability. It's like assigning the word "brown" for a multitude of hair colors, from almost black to approaching red or blonde. Telepathy is not a singular thing, it is a spectrum. Which area a particular telepath moves within is tied to their particular talent. It is very hard to push outside it, most people never do. They are not equipped to.

I imagine this might be too spoilery (and also it's too soon), but do you have any expectations/hopes/desires when it comes to the endings (as in, of the whole series)? Do you have any (even if vague) endings in your mind that you are working towards or are you riding the flow of the story as you write it? I can also imagine there will be some tragic and some bittersweet endings, but how 'happy end' are you willing to go?

Oh I am willing to go fully happy ending! There is no forced misery here, you can claw yourself the life you want tooth and nail. I have a handful of ending I see likely, including scenes, but there will probably be more as I approach it. But yeah, some will be filled with sacrifice, some outright tragic, some just deeply cleansing. The big thing will be what things are you willing to compromise to reach your goals.

Again ignore if too spoilery, but since you've said we'll get to see more of the farm in Book 4... is there any possibility for a path where Sidestep is recaptured by the Farm, reliving their eternal nightmare, but this time their friends actually do arrive to save them?

Yes.

A self indulgent one: Does the Rat King have plot armor?

100%!

Why does Argent wear the cape if it's gifted?

To show it's understood and appreciated, also to tease the opportunity to maybe give it back one day. She's just having fun.

Would our character need to go into hiding at some point in the book(s)?

Book 3 has some possibly sketchy endings looming...

Also, would we have multiple puppets or just the one?

To the level of the puppet? That's the one.

Will you be able to convince your love interest to help your cause in Revelations or would that happen in Book 4?

Not sure exactly when that might happen yet.

I was always impressed sidestep could memorize building blueprints and use them later. Is this just a skill they have? Or does the AI Chip help with things like that? Would it help them calculate things faster than the average human?

I would say that is training. You get good at things you practice.

Is it possible to have an ending where Ortega kills you? How would Ortega feel if Sidestep confesses their love after Ortega deals the killing blow?

That sounds like a tragedy! But yes, I think that would be possible...

Any chances of Step dressing up for Ortega like they did for the date with Herald?

We have a birthday party coming up...

Do you think Book 3 will have the most dramatic villain reveals or Book 4?

No idea. I think book 3, but not sure.

Is there going to be a lot of action in Book 3?

I know there will be one big action/fight scene to the point that I kinda dread to write it. There will also be others. I see it as more action oriented than book two, which was a lot of prep/sneaky/romance.

Is there a connection between the diner near the heartbreak site mentioned in 'Haunted' and the one in the anathema dreams? or between anathema/the one from chen's memory of them, if there's a connection at all?

One of these is a connection, the other is not!

has hg ever attempted to thread any other telepaths? if so, how did that go? did the telepath they were attempting to thread notice?

Yes HG has! It did not go well, but luckily for HG it was shields that were the issue, so the threads just slipped off without ever being noticed.

Will old man/old woman sting just a little bit more after the regene reveal?

I don't think Ortega would see things differently there. After the birthday however....

If Sidestep had eyes that changed to green after the Void fight, did the Rangers of the day (plus Ashfall) have an opinion about it or choose not to talk about it? Ortega and Themmy had context, but did Sentinel, Chen or Ashfall ever ask?

Yeah, I think there was a talk about it during debriefing, after everyone had recuperated somewhat. Nobody brought up the void blood thing in the open, but I think most of them added up the dots. Some things were safer not to talk about, though. Just in case other parties would take an interest in studying Sidestep.

Is there anyone outside of them who might have noticed?

Few people outside that saw Sidestep without a mask, and this is a world where cosmetic lenses are a thing, so I don't think it was a big issue. Sidestep was probably the one who felt the most self-conscious about it.

Did the Farm believe the Rangers knew Sidestep was a Regene?

No. If they had, things would have gone very differently.

Who was Emperor? Were they a telepath, to get Steel to kneel in front of them? Did they get caught/retire/die/live on and get captured by those responsible for the missing telepaths?

He was... telepath adjacent, I suppose? There are a lot of boost powers that are close to the psychic spectrum but not true telepaths as in being able to read mind and the like. In a way, he could closest be compared to HG, but not bound by touch, and more limited in his commands. It's all immediate and physical for him. He could tell people to kneel, and they would, to hit their friends, and they would and so on. The victim would still be aware, and there would be no long term effects. So a bit like taking the steering wheel for the body for a voice command, and then control shifts back after a minute tops. While most assume that you need to hear the commands, this is not actually true. But they need to be spoken out loud for him to focus enough on them. So gagging him does work, but not plugging your ears. He's been in jail for hears, last anyone heard, he's still there.

If Sidestep goes to Ortega's bday party and someone hits on them, how are the rangers gonna act? Would they find it funny? Would they be not surprised at all cause damn Sidestep is indeed hot? Would they rescue them from that situation or laugh from afar?

Ortega: Bemused, a stage whisper to check if Sidestep needs rescuing. Argent: Might move in depending on status, if romanced would definitely move to eviscerate the culprit unless Sidestep approved. Herald would know if Sidestep was uncomfortable and put a stop to it, but would not be surprised at all. Chen would be very confused why Sidestep even lets someone hit on them, since they are very capable on getting out of that on their own.

Could Shroud feel some kind of kinship with Re-Genes or doesn't that really make a difference to her?

No difference. Just because you were raised in the same shitty situation doesn't make you friends.

What's everyone's favorite pizza toppings?

Oh not diving into that from a swedish perspective, we know it would all be pineapple.

Is there any specific kind of technology that Argent finds especially annoying? Like how Sidestep hates seagull thoughts?

Honestly, no? I don't think so.

After Sidestep's recapture did Regina ever try to get them to talk about Ortega and the people they got close to in order to have more tools to better manipulate Step?

This was complicated. In the end, Regina decided not to, in order not to reinforce outside memories and emotions. The temptation was there, though, and she's not sure if she made the right choice.

How did Regina refer to Sidestep? Did she address them as their re-gene number? Prize project? A nickname? Absolutely nothing and just pronouns?

Number. The dehumanization was important. Any nickname would be based on the number.

Will it be possible to have like max clue stats but they just never actually get confirmation? Like they are 99% sure but they never get that smoking gun?

Probably!

When someone becomes a ranger, is there some kind of official ceremony being held?

Yeah, I think it is a very public one too, probably televised. You want people to be aware and invested.

Christmas-y question: least to most likely to wear a sexy Mr/Mrs Claus costume at a christmas party?

Least to most: Chen, Daniel, Mortum, Argent, Ortega.

If Spoon were to be picked up with telekinesis/float, would he do doggy paddles in the air?

Telekinesis: No, probably snuggle up. It would be like being lifted, with the pressure. Floating, oh boy, doggy paddles and much disorientation!

How do each of the ROs feel about their birthdays? Do they look forward to them, see them as an excuse to have fun or spend time with others, not care, have negative associations or mixed feelings...?

Argent: Doesn't like, her fake birthday is perfunctory, her real one is traumatic. Ortega: Loves it, except the number keeps going up which is bad. Daniel: Slightly sad, a reminder of his family. Chen: Good excuse to go drinking.

Is Ortega's generator malfunctioning due to blunt impact dealt during the crash? If yes, was the damage done directly to the generator, to the neural pathways on Ortega's brain, or to their spine? Alternatively - is the cause of the malfunction actually unrelated to the crash at all?

It's not malfunctioning yet, it's an overabundance of caution. However, the crash certainly didn't help.

did sentinel.... fly the car to the ranch while sidestep and charge were inside it? how did that even work?? i don't remember sentinel having enhanced strength, so did they put wing-gliders/sails on it or did luis just. yeet it with his wind powers

Yeet it with his wind powers. A car is aerodynamic enough to be lifted, at this point he is very good at playing with atmospheric pressure and winds.

Who looked 'worse' coming out of the compound: Ortega or Step? How noticeably out-of-touch with reality was Step afterwards?

Both. Ortega slightly worse physically. But they were both a mess.

How would Steel react to a chess board appearing in the Ranger's cafeteria with a little note saying "Your move Marshal"?

Absolute delight!

Did Chen have his own motives/reasons for being at Carter's independent of the Mayor's ask? Was there something he was hoping to find?

I will say that Chen might have been able to get out of it, so the fact that he did not, means he also was there for his own reasons.

What had a higher fatality rate, the Boost drug or Void blood?

Boost drug. Void blood is a lot safer.

In terms of killcount, how does Massacre Step compare to the likes of Psychopath or Void? (Especially Steps that can go on multiple massacres)

Not there yet.

How would the Rangers react to learning that, currently, one of Step's most steadfast allies is five telepathic rat brains tied together?

Honestly, who wouldn't be confused but delighted?

Was there anything special about the HB site(or underneath) before the titular event?

Oh yes. We'll get into that.

If Sidestep was coherent, healthy and focusing, could the cat fiend's thoughts be detected from inside the gun?

No.

Theoretically, if Ortega were to watch the autopsy tapes, would that potentially make their Sidestep scar better or worse? Or not affect it at all?

Oh it would be so much worse. Nobody needs to see that. Chen wishes he hadn't.

Have any of the Rangers noticed any habitual small gestures from Step? Have any of them pieced together maybe a single recognizable word from the regene language? Or just associated a gesture with a meaning?

I mean everyone has those kind of ticks and habits. I would say that people know these things quite well, and just like tells in poker, they might connect them to a certain meaning. But nothing more than with other people.

Has Shroud given herself a name other than her villain name?

No. That is her name.

Does Mortum still harbor romantic feelings or hopes for a puppet that broke off their relationship?

Who knows? That might vary.

Regarding your hench not suspecting their boss's involvement in the psychopathor/wolfpack fight, if they saw the scars across step's back (that they may or may not have gotten at the time) would they make a connection?

Lots of people get scars, they have no reason to make that connection.

Piggybacking off the above question: If Pelayo or Ward saw the scars, would they make the connection?

Not unless there were already other things tipping them off.

What is it like needing to comply with App Store content restrictions? Do you/the CoG team have a fairly clear idea of what will/won't fly, or is there some amount of "wait and see what they say" involved? Is there anything you thought might be a problem but turned out not to be, or vice versa?

There is guidance and text, but in the end it's just waiting to see if anything is an issue. It is a bit different with text, much of the things are image oriented. But it's one of those things you can never be sure of, so many things online are shifting back and forth by what seems to be whims only. I try to avoid easily searchable trigger phrases and words, and write around them instead.

So there is the option to 'put back on the suit' to help the heroes, but something I was wondering about was if you could return as a 'hero' but refuse to reuse the moniker of 'Sidestep'? [Since some Steps might be talked into it, but also might want to lie low when helping to try to divorce themselves from their past / keep the farm off their trail until they're ready].

Possibly. Not sure of all the specific variants yet.

Are there any cybernetics being sold to the public that are similar to pain-gates? Have there been attempts in the past to create a pain-gate cybernetic independently from the SD? How did/how would the SD react to a bootleg pain-gate being sold on the market?

Not as thorough, but there has been limited experiments, especially when it comes to chronic pain. However, interfacing with the nervous system that way is both very risky and expensive.

Does the Catfiend ever eat boosted people to get its boost drug fix? Does it eat people in general just to enjoy their pain and fear?

It has been known to eat boosted people. Not others.

Is it possible that the the Farm implanted Sidestep with new memories post HB? Maybe one's that would make the Rangers look like they cared less about him than they did, or in general ones made to lower the lure of another escape attempt? Would Sidestep suspect this?

I mean it is possible, but if they did that, why not implant new memories that made Sidestep like the Farm? Sidestep's mind is surprisingly hard to program at this point. Sidestep might suspect it, that is up to the individual sidestep.

What diseases that exist in our world have been wiped out in the FH universe (if any)?

None. That's still as hard as always.

What's Step's arrangement for feeding the puppet? Do they cook for two, eat first, then switch to the puppet and make them eat too?

I would say that is up to the individual Sidestep, but I always figured the puppet ate out a lot.

Has Hoots been bugged before Ortega and Owls conversation in the heartbreak postscript? Are known hero/vigilante spaces targeted by people looking for gossip, blackmail, ect?

Probably one of the safest places in the city not to be bugged, Owl is not taking security lightly, and her husband is good with tech.

Rat King and Snowball, how well do they get along?

No interaction yet, we'll see?

Does snowball have a recharge period between explosions?

Yes, but not as long as you'd think.

if someone were to recognize a cuckoo's tattoos as a regene tattoo, how would that be? Do they all follow a specific style/pattern? Is it the brightness of the colors, or the expanse of them? In other words, what is it about regene tattoos that, to someone who knows they are a thing, is immediately recognizable as such instead of just normal tattoos?

First, Sidestep's fear that everyone will immediately recognize them is founded more on fear and the Farm's teachings than reality. Most people don't even know what a cuckoo is. However, anyone would see that there is something "strange" or "wrong" with the tattoos. They have a slightly different surface texture and sheen, and the colors are brighter than normal tattoos. This means that anyone who IS aware of Re-Genes or cuckoos would know, and it's hard to know which ones are that, especially within the medical profession.

If one telepath speaks to someone in their head, can another telepath "overhear" or intercept that message?

Yes, if they have the ability to.

We know about Ortega's troubled relationship with their father but has their relationship with their mother ever at any point been at risk?

No, they were always close.

Does Sky-raider know Armadillo?

They have met, but not out of armor.

Has anyone besides Vera ever discovered or come close to discovering Arde's Re-Gene status?

Some people in her family, otherwise, no.

If such a thing happened, how did/would they deal with the situation? Kill or blackmail the witness? Run and hide?

I don't know. That's an interesting question.

If the MC had acted like the hero Daniel expected, would he still have developed a crush on them? (...And if not, would learning they were a villain change that?)

In a weird way, if Sidestep really had acted as the hero Herald thought he was, then I don't think he would have started crushing that quickly. There would have been more awe, and in a way would have made Sidestep less of a person to him and more of a symbol.

What's the Rangers' sleep experiences like? Do they have more nightmares than dreams, do some of them rarely dream at all, and is Ortega the worst at actually getting sleep like I suspect?

I mean Ortega is the one running on the least sleep. Danny dreams a lot, but gets his beauty sleep anyway. Argent sleeps a lot, but doesn't remember her dreams.

What's Deadeye's boost?

Basically bullet control and enhanced vision.

If Argent is sleep deprived, what happens to her connection to the vores/overall cohesiveness?

That can get bad. She needs to rest and reconnect.

Career-wise what were Ortega's father's expectations for their child before the accident? Did he wish for them to join the military? No matter if Julia or Ricardo? Or did his hopes differ depending on the gender?

I would say he saw a military career for both of them. But it was more pronounced and expected for Ricardo.

Does anyone in the Rangers, retired/dead/inactive or not, know of Ortega's father being abusive?

Sentinel knows a bit. Hood knew a lot.

Who likes Christmas among the cast? Does anyone celebrate a different winter holiday?

I'm gonna plead the fifth on that one! Christmas is a subject I'm not going into too much depth on, and don't have too many views about.

Do the Rangers decorate the HQ for the holidays? This is a Christmas question, but applies to others as well like Halloween etc.

I will say there's probably a bit going on in the break room, but not much. It is mostly professional.

How would Ranger ROs react to Exposed!Step mailing them an "anonymous" Christmas present that was clearly from them?

I have no idea! This is another of those things I'm gonna leave to headcanon.

During Sidestep's fight with the Void, did Ortega see them bite her? Or did that part happen "elsewhere" in a different dimension?

Ortega didn't see.

How tall is Regina ?

Average.

Are "brain-in-a-jar" situations like Porthole's common in the setting? Is this something people just do to themselves for whatever reason or is Porthole somewhat unique?

Porthole is somewhat unique. It is a thing that has been experimented with due to preserving people's lives, but most go into shock or have other systemic breakdowns when disconnected from their bodies.

Are people in the setting aware of Porthole's "condition", or is this a bit of a secret? Is sidestep aware of it?

I will say that people in the know, know. And so does Sidestep.

what's luis' wife's name? how'd they meet (if you've detailed it yet)?

I don't know and I haven't detailed her! One day she'll show up in a fic, and then I'll know.

also, is FEZ interchangeable with FWT or FWS (free western states, in the gala museum exhibit scene) for the west coast states?

I will say they are used interchangeably, just like America, the US, USA and the States are all used at the same time.

Where did the name Charlie Millar (and I suppose Morgan for the puppet) come from? I noticed it code diving, found it interesting that its not a default CB name.

My personal Sidestep, a mixup of book Cyrus Millar, and my au Charlie. Just need names when I do testing, so I can proofread things properly. I vary them a bit for fun.

There's a lot of bird themed characters in the books (the cuckoo nomenclature for infiltrator regenes alluding to "pretending" to be human, zaida/owl, herald's vigilante name kestrel, dr finch, and now vera/dove, formerly birdbrain in the original book). Do you have an interest in birds, or are you pulling from the media that inspired FH, or is it mostly coincidental?

I love birds! And aquariums... and rats.

Is there a limit to the amount of boosts a person can take? (If the total is more than two, what hero or villain has the most boosts?)

Oh the one that has the most is the Catastrofiend... by far. But it's a bit like russian roulette, your luck runs out fast.

What is psychosurgery? What does it involve? Is it similar to what Chen had seen in his army days?

In short, it is manipulating someone's memory and mind with the intention of permanently changing it in some way. This can be done with a combination of telepathy, drugs and physical surgery. Chen has seen simple variants, yeah. Brainwashing might be seen as primitive psychosurgery.

Some of the armor types, like terrifying and imposing, seem to have rather interesting visuals. Does Mortum outsource designers and artists for these more aesthetic bits of the armor, or do they have something of an artistic flair of their own?

They probably have some designers they work with for inspiration, especially with the more outlandish suggestions.

What does the tattooing process that ReGenes undergo feel like physically?

They are sedated for it.

Does Jake punch harder than Ortega (when they're suited up)? What about Argent, is he physically stronger than her?

Jake punches harder than Ortega in their suit. Argent is more touch and go, I think Argent might be stronger there but not sure.

If the current Rangers were independent pro heroes rather than a government entity... who amongst them would wear a cape? And what colour scheme would they pick up if they were free of the Rangers' confines?

Daniel would go warmer, more browns, grays, beige, yellow and oranges. Subtle colors. Ortega would go white, probably with the option for color change to black/cammo. Argent would go dusty rose. Chen would go tan, green, grey. Cammo.

If Daniel's parents had been more supportive would he and his brother have tried to become heroes via mods instead of the boost pill?

They would probably have outgrown it instead.

How long did the battle between Herald and Sidestep in Argent's body last?

I don't know! As long as it needed to.

What does Mod rejection look like? Is it similar to organ rejection or does the Mod just stop working? (Or is "Mod Rejection" used less as a specific condition and more as a catch-all term, similar to saying that someone is "sick" without saying what they have exactly)

Infection at the site, rejection if parts of it are implanted. Integration with muscles or nerves would start to break down, leading to twitching, perhaps even seizures.

Is Rahim psi-sensitive/psychically inclined...?

Nope.

If he is, are his migraines related to it? Potentially as a sort of warning of a (psychic/telepathic) looming threat?

Nope.

what's nehal, zaza and ward's full names? also, what's ward's gender situation? i love that ward just. opts out of pronouns it's very good (iirc, that's intentional you never refer to ward w/ pronouns, right?)

Ward is a fun experiment for me, to write a character that never uses pronouns and see what assumptions the reader makes. I have not decided anybody else's full name!

In the spirit of the season, which ROs are the easiest/most difficult to shop for?

I honestly don't know. I'll leave that to headcanon.

What are the ROs' attitudes towards gifts—do they love getting presents, prefer giving, find the whole thing stressful, say they don't care but they're lying...? Who wishes it was normal to just give money instead of accidentally gifting something unwanted?

I know I personally find it very stressful, and I haven't really given it much thought. This will be headcanon.

You mentioned in an AMA that, "If I could go back [to the start of writing FH] I would tell myself not be afraid to be weird, queer, horny and mentally questionable. That's apparently what people want, stop trying to be normal." Are there any particular elements you'd have felt more confident in, or ones you think you'd have approached differently, if you weren't concerned about being too weird/queer/horny/mentally-questionable for your readers?

I don't think I would have approached things much differently, but I would have gotten more into depth and variables, and written things with more confidence. Now I sorta tried to hide much in plain sight.

Has anyone ever considered using telepathic consultants to help diagnose epilepsy? The ability to confirm or conclusively rule out a diagnosis seems like it would be really useful to patients.

In the past, I am sure this was a thing! Telepaths were very useful for many professions. However, sadly I don't think the medical field paid the best.

What are the other nation's responses(in terms of strategy and troop deployment not emotional response) to a Regene deployment?

Every nation has their own special forces variant, the Re-Genes are seen as dangerous and professional as well as disposable. I think most would keep distance and destroy, or send in armors.

Besides Chen, did E.B. Acker interview any other heroes we know about joining the Rangers? Did they use the same alias or a different one?

Possibly. I don't know. There is a team of experts involved in this.

What sort of security does the Farm have? What's to stop one angry Re-Gene uprising storming the whole place?

Oh I do appreciate the hustle, but that's book four facts.

Is there a more Mod focused counterpart to the Farm dedicated to cloning cheap soldiers with high cybernetic compatibility?

Yeah, that's more in line with mainline military use.

What would you see if you put a sample of Sidestep's tattoo under a microscope?

Some slightly weird skin cells.

Given her working hard on bringing up the quality of orphanages, is Mayor Alvarez aware of past skeevy practices like the Void's cult indoctrinating children into their organisation and said orphanages working together with them on that?

Yes, she is!

If so, is she working hard to make sure that never happens again?

Oh yes. She's trying.

'Children of famous people often have friends or family of their parents, or will be on the top of the adoption list for connection reasons.' Does Alvarez see this as an opportunity for networking, or is it just 'next of family' reasons? 🙄 If she does, how does she take advantage of it?

I don't think she's involved at that level at all.

Are Bumblebee's wings sensitive to shifts/changes in the wind/temperature?

Yeah, needs to be for precision.

How do the Rangers handle background checks on FEZ residents, given the (presumably highly variable) state of public records there? Is it noticeably harder or easier for, say, a lifetime FEZ resident to get a security clearance than someone who moved from the U.S. proper last week?

Yeah, that can indeed be an issue. However, the records out east might also be falsified, and the people moving west might be suspected of being spies, so it slightly cancels out.

Are there any other villains Mia thinks are/were really heroes in wolves' clothing? Any she used to admire, but changed her mind about?

Cavalier is a really interesting case for her. She's got theories.

On the flip side, I'd imagine Mia has strong negative opinions about some parts of the hero world. What "heroes" (or if that's too specific, what kind of heroes) does she think least deserve the title?

There needs to be some kind of altruism involved. In her book, there are so many so-called heroes out there that are in it for the kicks, money or fame. Sure, they might do some good, but that doesn't mean she has to respect them.

Did Ortega ever find out/suspect that Sentinel withheld information during the Void raid to use them as bait?

Nope.

Given how Bo promised to lend any intel he finds to Tina after Teddy got captured, did he mention to her the stolen targeting web from his person if Sidestep told him they were after it?

Very, very good question. I will sit here and chuckle.

was argent at all concerned that sidestep might recognize the nanovores for what they are in the mind dive? did she have a plan for that, and if so was it more "deny everything" or...let's say... :scanshark: :chomp:

Deny everything. She thinks she's improbable enough nobody would believe Sidestep over her.

Besides Sidestep, who was the most powerful Regene the Farm managed to produce? What were their powers? Are they a cultural legend among Regenes?

No idea! Haven't thought much about the details there yet, busy with book three stuff.

Given that Blaze thinks partners don't 'care' if they don't argue/scream at you to convince you that they do... would he be the type to do that to/for his partner if they were convinced he doesn't care about them?

Probably. A lot of people tend to treat people like they want to be treated, you know?

Or would he let them go, considering his career and image conscious personality?

I mean that has happened too on occasion, depends on who and under what circumstances.

What do each of the RO's have as their phone lockscreen/background?

The only one I know is Chen, and he has Spoon!

Does Blaze run hot, in terms of temperature? If he does, is it higher than the average person? Does he have any resistance to common (bacterial) infections/less prone to sickness because of a higher body temperature?

I don't think he would run noticeably more hot than anyone, in fact, I think he might feel cool during hot days outside and the like. He's got good control over his own body temperature to keep it at the ideal temperature.

Has Herald ever had issues with flying during poor weather? Rainy or windy storms and the like?

It sucks! He can do it, but oh boy, it's not pleasant. It's miserable work.

If Ricardo isn't previously out(or even if he is), how aware is he of any of his attraction to Chen? Was there anything in particular that he struggled with when it came to dealing with his own curiosity towards his oldest teammate or was that curiosity more let loose from dormancy by possibility if Step tattles on Chen's crush?

It's one of those "I never thought about it in those terms" which might hit him hard once he starts adding things up. It has not been on his mind until/if Sidestep brings it up.

Do cuckoos have a knowledge of subjects like mathematics and science that's below high school level? Since unlike languages and history, it's less likely they'd need notions of algebra or chemistry for missions

Unless they have a use for it, yeah, it's mostly absorbed from memories, maybe equal to a grade school level.

The tags of the villain MC around the city. Are they the work of one person, or several?

Several!

Sidestep fights someone called Sidewinder in the mob boss path. Were they someone related to HGs gang?

Loosely connected, yeah.

Could we convince Shroud to create more puppets for us?

I mean if you manage to befriend Shroud, that wouldn't be a problem. Empty bodies is a side-effect of her powers. However, it would take maybe a year to go from empty body to working puppet, so it's not a quick fix. They need to be rebuilt physically, she also drains a lot of that.

What was Steel's impression of Hollow Ground prior to being threaded? Did the mind control change his stance on the matter, whether dramatically or (if he already figured they were a myth) in subtle ways?

Hollow Ground is a myth! Just a nebulous figurehead held up by people wishing to blame crime on a particular organization or person.

Could Sidestep possess multiple people at once? Could they become powerful enough to do this?

Oh yes. There's some FUN stuff planned.

How exactly does Argent still feeling pain work? Did the nanovores eat around her nerve endings somehow, or are they now forming not just her skin and whatever other organs, but parts of her nervous system as well? Or is it telepathically transmitted from them to her somehow?

Two ways. First, what remains of her body under her nanovore skin still feels pain. A lot. Pressure, impact, temperature, the lot. Sure, she's lost a lot of the surface nerves, but what's underneath fires weirdly, like how scars can feel numb and yet sometimes get shot with acute pain from the wrong kind of impact.

However, most of her sensations come filtered through the nanovores. They have formed sort of a sensory web protecting her body. This also means she can tune the pain back a lot, so she can do things like punching her hand through a car and not caring. However, someone like Sidestep possessing her which couldn't communicate with the 'vores that way would feel a LOT more pain. Pain, for her, is weird and erratic the way taste is. An approximation rather than what she knew before her accident.

Has Charge ever crashed a villain party?

Not one of the big ones. Maybe a smaller gathering, like poker night or something.

If someone wanted to work at rangers hq in, say, a receptionist role, how stringent is the hiring process? What sort of background checks would be run and what would disqualify a candidate?

Like working in national security. Past crimes, as well as any friends, relatives or reason why you would be susceptible to blackmail.

Piggybacking on that, have the Rangers ever weighed in to employ certain non-hero, staff individuals? Say, 'coincidentally' picking someone with epilepsy so they're immune to mind control in a position where telepaths might target them?

They don't have hiring authority, that's HR stuff.

Do you have something mind for the cover art for revelations already? And how did the previous two covers come to be?

Yes I do! The brief has already gone off to the artist who created the original Sidestep suit, the ever lovely [Polterink](#) who has been with me since the start! Usually it is made with me suggesting an image or two I have in my mind (a hand tearing down a hero poster, someone perched on a bridge looking down at cars) with a few variants of it, some color and moods (gray dingy graffiti present compared to bright past, or yellow acid unwholesome crayons) and then a bunch of inspiration images. Cleo puts together a rough for angles, we talk a bit how it might work on banners and icons (it is a lot more complicated than a book), how it will look as a tiny icon in an app store, and so on. Then it goes back and forth a few times, at various sizes and shapes. Then Hosted Games have a final look and some comments (things like becomes murky at smallest resolution and stuff) and then it is finalized. Often I have like three main ideas for a cover, and Cleo picks one of them to work with.

If a mission goes south are re-genes (both combat and cuckoo) taught to prioritize the safety/survivability of their handler, of themselves (being the more expensive/valuable asset) or push through with mission objectives regardless of cost?

It can be either of them, depending on the objective. A handler is more replaceable than a Re-Gene, and there's usually a redundancy layer structure with several individuals involved in each mission. Some missions are worth sacrificing a Re-Gene for, most are not.

We can obviously see how low relationship scores can be detrimental to Step, but would there be any instances where the opposite could also be true? 🐼🐼

Low relationships makes it harder for people to see through Sidestep's lies, and maybe even caring that they are there. So it will be easier to remain anonymous.

What is the threshold for something to be considered technology for Argent's communication?

What I need in the books, which means that the line will be blurry. Electricity and wiring is definitely needed.

Would someone with Dissociative Identity Disorder feel different to a telepath?

Not necessarily. I think, like with gender, the differences between individuals are larger than the differences between neurotypicals or not.

if we ally ourselves with HG in book three will we be able to keep that a secret from ortega or will they find out on their own and possibly confront us about it?

I have planned you will be able to keep it a secret. No forced outing. However, Ortega is clever so...

How long does it take for everyone to realize whenever each of the Ranger's get romanced?

I think the absolutely fastest, where everyone would realize what is going on is Daniel. He can't hide that. The one after that would be Ortega, who is prone to oversharing. Argent will probably be found out because she likes provoking the others, though she is rather sneaky. Chen might have a five year anniversary before anyone figures out what is what.

[Late questions for the month!](#)

[Dec 31, 2023](#)

Sorry for being late, that's holidays for you! Please deposit any questions here for answering once all the chaos have died down! Here's to hoping 2024 will be better for everyone!

[Public FH: Revelations demo 1.2](#)

[Dec 22, 2023](#)

The new open demo for Fallen Hero: Revelations have arrived!

So what is on this one? It is the full demo of the start of path 1.2, with Dr. Mortum's path added, continuing from the Sky-Raider rescue. So now path 1.2 is done, and I will switch to a new entry point entirely for the next demo. Maybe I'll let people vote which one they want.

What is new?

- New Thief Sidestep and Dove content. You can now pick which impostor comes visiting (or randomize).
- Bugs and grammar fixed.
- All impostors interacting in the Dr. Mortum path, including the ones that stayed away before.
- As before, there are few stat changes put in, so don't worry about that.
- You only pick the stats used in the demo, and your character won't be perfectly canon.

Length

136 694 words with code

118 210 words without code

15 000 - 15 500 words in an average playthrough.

[The link to the demo is here!](#)

[November QnA is up!](#)

[Dec 14, 2023](#)

Does Argent resent her nanovores for disfiguring and disabling her so badly? Would she be able to control them better after she is healed if that is no longer an issue?

She would say no, but yeah, deep down she does. And I honestly don't know if it will get better or worse.

If Sidestep reveals himself to Mortum as the Puppet first, why don't they try reading their mind after meeting in their own body?

Because Dr. Mortum has access to a drug called "numbers," which is a telepathy blocker. So they would be unreadable. Should be in the text there somewhere.

Wouldn't void eyes be indisputable proof that Sidestep is the real deal? How does Ortega convince himself they're a fake? Do they just assume they were replicated like their scars were?

Eye color is one of the easier things to replicate, but to be fair, Ortega is building a house out of straw here with the whole fake thing, the more they think, the less likely it is logistically, but they can't back down.

Are permanent void eyes common? Did Anathema have them?

Not really, it happens on occasion but I don't think anybody had connected it to Void. Probably thought some cultists were using lenses for the Green Sky style. I think Anathema had green eyes, but they were a redhead, so that was never a notable trait.

Regina doesn't care that ReGenes are human, does that mean she wouldn't be against treating one like a person if it got better results? Like, would she have referred to Sidestep by name and been more personal with them if she knew it made them more cooperative?

Oh yes. 100%.

Was the Farm trying to trigger more TBRs in Sidestep?

The Farm wasn't. Certain people working for the Farm however...

Arde speaks in ReGene language, Shroud speaks vocally, is that because one is standard issue and the other is an infiltrator, or is it just part of their personalities?

Shroud is a cuckoo, that is the reason yes! Especially if you combine her thing with touch... the Re-Gene language becomes complicated fast.

If Deveraux is still alive in book 2, is it still possible to Sidestep to kill him in future books?

Possibly. Not sure.

Sidestep seems to have lot hang-up on feeling alone and a outsider back at farm, even among other re-genes. Yet there is going to be a choice of having friends at the farm. So I'm wondering if Sidestep is being unreliable narrator again and forgetting friends or is this a case of having friends but still feeling alone?

Having a friend doesn't always make you feel less alone. Much of the time, that might be the thing that makes everything else in stark contrast. Like "oh this is the single person who can stand me, despite me being me." Sidestep was never popular. If you add in the self-doubt, and the knowledge that you ran, and whoever you might have liked was left behind and probably is dead, that's a nice little caustic brew that's safer not to touch.

And is Mortum's lab so big it requires a map?

Well, it's certainly confusing enough for one.

Will Arde have a change to meet their old teammates again?

No idea.

Does Jake have any nieces or nephes back at home?

Oh yes. He has lots of family pictures on the wall.

In an older Q&A you said that the area around the Heartbreak site was weird for decades before the event. Was that weirdness engineered somehow by the Farm? Is it related to the fact that Heartbreak (the person) stopped there, of all places? Did the Farm intend for them to end up there specifically, or use this weirdness during the experiment to their advantage? Or did they just follow Heartbreak's lead.

Oh boy. Okay. The Farm did NOT engineer the weirdness, only took advantage. But it is tangentially related to why Heartbreak stopped there.

Is the impostor/any of the impostors a similar entity to the "passenger" that was inside Heartbreak's mind?

There might be similarities yes, some traces.

Does/Could Shroud have an impostor lurking in her mind too? Could she have gates like the ones we saw at the end of Retribution, or something similar?

No. Shroud's mind/body is too caustic for anything like that. Anything would be digested and destroyed.

List of people I've seen mentioned but have no idea who they are so far: Dave, Tina, Marek, IB.

Dave is the Marshal of Nevada, who doesn't have a proper hero name. He's just Dave. I talk about him in a lore post where I go through the other Ranger teams. Tina is Psychopathor's (Teddy's) wife. She also runs the Los Diablos aquarium, and she will be a part of book 3. Marek is an old friend of Ortega since their daredevil stunt days. He was the one who filmed Ortega's accident, and later sold that footage for money leading to a falling out between them. He now produces several TV shows, including the West Coast Mysteries show which has been featured in a few Lore posts. IB are the initials of an unknown person, who interviewed survivors of the Green Sky. Nothing else is known about them.

So, Jake speaks fluent Tagalog and Nocturne speaks a little bit of it. Is Jake teaching Nocturne? Or, is Nocturne learning/did she learn what she knows in order to get closer to Jake, or as a result of their relationship?

Both! It's a fun thing to share, and it's always useful to speak languages most others around them don't. And Jake gets to make fun of her accent.

Now that we know about Argent's nano friends, I'm very curious about how it all fits into Sidestep's possessing her. If Argent has to keep conscious control of the nanovores, wouldn't that draw Sidestep's attention (especially since she got in a fight, which I imagine would rattle them)? Has Argent's mind melded so much with the nanovores, that Step was unable to tell them apart as different entities, or was Argent actively keeping them under control/hidden from Sidestep even while possessed?

There are hints of something going on inside Argent. The stormy ocean. The weird metallic buildings. The sharks. Sidestep instinctively don't go deep, even when Argent invited them in as a civilian. There is danger here that Sidestep picks up instinctively, but doesn't pinpoint exactly why. As said at the start of Rebirth, Sidestep keeps Argent trapped in "dreams," keeping her conscious mind down while accessing the unconscious bits. Argent's "sleeping" mind still keeps the nanos under control, that's a deeply ingrained reflex of hers since she does it every night. Sidestep can't possess her fully, that's why there's issues with talking and the like.

You said that Sidestep's neutered nanovores consume inorganic materials, but don't get sustenance from it. Do nanovores in general need sustenance for anything other than multiplying (as in, could they become defective or "exhaust" themselves if they aren't fed at all)? Does Sidestep have to feed the neutered Nanovores to keep them working? Could our nanovores die off or grow impatient/go berserk if we only feed them inorganic stuff?

Nanovores don't in general need sustenance other than for multiplying. That's why Sidestep's ones are referred to as "neutered." In the long run, there might need to be a controlled "feeding" or adjustment to allow them to feed for a short time if they start running thin, but so far there has been plenty. As for the last... we'll see, nobody know how this would work in the long term.

You also mentioned there is a monument to the Nanosurge in Memorial Park. Is it one of those that has the victims' names on it? If yes, is Ximena's name on it? Has Argent ever visited it?

Yes, yes and yes!

When you say Porthole could be described as "a brain-in-a-jar connected to a robotic body"... What do people see when Porthole shows up somewhere? Do you mean that it's an actual robot, somehow controlled remotely, or that Porthole is a human being that's so heavily modded that they appear as more machine than human? Is Porthole an actual disembodied brain in a jar???? (if yes, is the brain inside the robot or outside)

Porthole is similar to the Rat-King, a disembodied brain in an armored and life-supporting housing. It is connected to a robot, most of the time actually inside it, though remote control might be possible.

Can we use regenerator to heal Ortega and Steel who suffer being modded?I really want to help them since being modded seems cause a lots of pain which make people addict to painkillers as Dr. Mortum said. They need help.

Maybe in the long run. Not in the baseline regenerator setup for Ortega. Steel could already be (mostly) de-modded with enough time and money, as organic transplant parts are available.

Will we(sidestep) can show ourselves to the world? Show them what is hiding behind the city to gain support from heroes?

Oh yes. Just not yet.

The Core seems losing control. Will another Heartbreak happen in future. This time will be very wrong since sidestep would not to be here save the day anymore.

Heartbreak II is indeed possible. Things can get really bad. However, the "emergency elimination system" is still active and functioning.

Hello! I was curious since I've seen so much about it now, does sidestep always have voideyes or is it personal to the player? Are voideyes green or do sidestep eyes look unnatural regardless of color? If we have green eyes will that be brought up or is it just flavor text for us?I was just confused with the recent questions haha thank you!

That is personal, and not something for everyone. Just the faintest little side flavor I decided would be fun to put into the game. Most Sidesteps won't have those green eyes, they fade fast and would have been okay after a week or so. I just decided to put in the option to let that linger. For fun and headcanons

more than a major effect on the game.

A previous Q&A said that its possible that a trans Sidestep could have been kept on hormone therapy after being recaptured by The Farm. Could this have been one of the 'kind' things that Regina could have done for Sidestep?

Oh yes. Regina can be kind to get the results she wants.

At the end of Retribution if a soft Argent visits Sidestep in the hospital, Sidestep will have a panic attack and Argent will calm them down. Was this mundane or did Argent's technopathy help her influence Sidestep through their AI chip?

Such an interesting question. I would love to be vague here, but I can see the tinfoil hats coming on so I won't. It was mundane.

Is there a tentative release date for Revelations?

None! The writing process is impossible to predict, and even when the game is finished and testing there's like 6-9 months within CoG before it gets out. Publishing ain't fast, sadly.

If I remember correctly, the nanovores ate people kind of slowly, not sure if slowly equals 2 minutes or 10 but it wasn't fast. Our nanovores seem to eat inanimate stuff pretty quickly though, is there a difference between alive and not alive things that make the nanovores work faster?

Yes there is! When eating people, this also includes conversion and procreation to make more nanovores. This takes time, as each nanovore spends maybe 1/10 eating and the rest converting and building. Eating the inorganic things is a bit like putting cotton candy in water. Things just melt because nothing gets produced.

What's the public's vs the governments opinions on murder vigilantes? Like a vigilante who never showed mercy to villains and always killed them. Would they be counted as an anti-hero or would they be counted as a villain, even though they only kill villains?

Anti-hero. There's a certain callous disregard for life on the west coast, especially people who are seen as useless or bad. Sure, it might technically be frowned on, but would the world really miss another villain?

When the scientists talk about the sleepwalker during the HB experiment, was the person actually sleepwalking or do they just assume they were sleepwalking?

That is a very good question. One of the best ones yet.

Random scenario but say Step gets knocked out in the armor and Ratking wants to move them. Could they possess Step and "wake them up" to move or would they possess the armor while Step was still asleep? Can they actually move the armor considering Steps body in the armor wouldn't be moving?

Possess the armor! I think they could puppet it with Sidestep inside while they were out.

Argent can be the only woman on the team in LD Rangers history depending on what the player's character choices are, so does the Ranger's PR team ever try to make Argent out as a real "girlboss" (you know, the corporate kind)? Do they ever try to make her really push her own femininity (even though Argent's already pretty feminine)?

OH yes. Argent is not too happy with the media team, she's been girbossed, doing the whole fake-dating with Herald, and a lot of other things. The big stickler has been about her hero suit, while Argent loves embracing her femininity in civilian clothes, she wants practical when fighting. And the media team has always felt her skinsuit was not sexy enough. However, Argent was fully prepared to walk if she didn't get her way, she's very resistant to pressure. So she got her way in the end.

Did anyone ever blame the Big One on Hood, even though he was boosted after it happened?

I think that is definitely one of those tinfoil theories! I mean can we really know how old Hood was since he was wearing a fully covering mash/Hood? Could have been him...

Ortega enjoys extreme sports but how do they specifically feel about rally car racing, diving (if the ocean wasn't messed up), and caving?

Ortega loves racing, the rougher the circumstances the better. Diving would be risky, which would be a big draw, but it never was a big thing for them. Caving... hmmm... I would say climbing would be a bigger draw. No claustrophobia terror, just not a draw. They are not into the unexplored, more the adrenaline and thrill of heights.

I remember someone asking if there was a "reset code" for Step and you said that there is. If your plans haven't changed on that being in the game, will there be certain stats or choices that determine what happens if someone were to say that code or will it be a static outcome?

Spoilers.

Came across a tiktok that made me think of this, did you get the last name Becerra from the lead singer of Possessed?

Good spot!! I do love myself some death metal... I have a metal cameo name or two in there, not everything, but personal little chuckles.

Then finally, did you have plans for more imposters than the three you chose that didn't work out? Did you have plans for less but then more came up or have you known that these three were going to be the options since the beginning?

This has been it from the start! One of them was added when it turned into an IF, the others are from the book.

Is Argent really as nonchalant about Step being a re-gene as she seems? Because I can imagine some Steps might find it relieving, while others could find it dismissive, depending on how far it goes.

That's a hard thing to answer. I think, like with many, things will start getting more complex as she has time to internalize and think about it. She acts nonchalant about many things to hide her true feelings.

Could a heartfelt plea from Sidestep convince Ortega to downgrade their mods to a safer or more stable setup?

Oh boy. I don't know. Sidestep would have a greater chance than most, but... it's Ortega.

While I'm pretty sure this will be too spoilery to answer, and I'm doubtful at how plausible it is... could one of the possible Imposters be Anathema?

There are many people who have that as a theory.

Will the Imposters who don't show still be a part of the story in some way?

There are no "pure" imposters, all are mixtures of variables. Whatever the main one ends up being, there will be traces of the others there, even if it might just be a shade.

Which villain career paths do Vera and Skyraider approve of the most?

I don't know yet. But I know Vera will have a rivalry with any thief Sidesteps. I need to write them more to get a feel.

Would Arde choose to use the regenerator or no?

No. Wouldn't see the use.

Can killer!Sidesteps who have been revealed as villains/escaped without Ranger assistance still reach out to their old allies in less hostile ways? Leave "I'm sorry" gifts on their doorsteps? :P ...For that matter, can we choose whether or not to ditch our old phone?

Yes, the Rangers will not be written out of the story, neither will any romances be treated as gone. Sometimes Enemies and Lovers is a thing. Just filled with tension and anger, which are things I like.

For Sidesteps who rob villains for their wealth, is there any chance of more confrontations with folks like Umbral in the future?

Probably!

If therapy doesn't work for Ortega, is there anything that DOES help? I'm worried about her mental state :/

Resolving things that have been festering for a long time. Ortega has a full pack, and some things needs to be dealt with in order to move on.

Will the regene tattoo removal be all or nothing? Or will we be able to change them to something we want? Or partial removal? Like keep the barcode, remove the limb tattoos?

I had not thought of that. Maybe that might be possible, we'll see what the playtesters say and what makes sense.

Are regene names anyway related to their barcodes? Will we have a chance to determine ours when we talk with Arde? Will talking with him help our feelings about being a regene? Like show we can be more than "a thing" and still consider ourselves a regene

No, the barcode is a Farm designation number. Some Re-Gene names might be based on some stuff, but that is a choice from the Re-Gene, nothing that happens automatically. And yeah, Arde might help some Sidesteps work some shit out.

Will we know more about our pre sidestep farm days? Or will it be mostly up to headcanon? Like where we were commonly deployed?

Mostly headcanon. I won't get into massive detail there.

Was the Ortega egg-frying Incident a result of Themmy and Sidestep daring them? I feel like the three of them together in a room would've resulted in Negative Braincells

You know what? That sounds very likely.

Besides steel, do any of the rangers have dietary restrictions? Like lactose intolerance?

I don't think any massive ones. Feel free to headcanon lactose intolerance or shrimp allergies as you want, probably won't get into that.

In the event that we can put on our old suit to help the rangers, how would it affect Ortega seeing us in our old suit? And possibly getting hurt while in it? (Or kicking ass in it, can we show off for them?)

Oh that would probably unclog some things for Ortega, but good or bad... that is the question. It will matter.

will there be other opportunities to raise the doubt stat for the rangers? Will it only be when youre not revealed to be [villain name]? Will one route or the other have more opportunities (in regards to being revealed or not)

Whenever I write something where I go "huh, this might lead to person X start adding things up" I add doubt stat. It is not a preplanned path thing, it depends on how the story flows.

I loved flustering Ortega lol. Storming out just to storm back in to have the last word with my step and argent was gold. Are there gonna be any more chances for that in the future? I need to make that vieja (affectionate) blush

I mean I love writing things like that so yes.

How would Ortega react if Sidestep was a clone of the original sidestep?

Badly.

Will fallen hero revelations have the option for sidestep to stop killing civilians as a thank you for the hero that saves them from the hospital?

Yes, I plan to have more opportunities to stop or start killing.

Where did the puppet and Dr.Mortum first meet? Who approached who and what was their conversation like?

The Puppet approached Dr. Mortum for the job of building the armor. I think it was very business like at the start.

What exactly did Doctor Mortum tell Dr.Halabi after the puppet reveal?

Spoilers.

How long ago did Argent have the sidestep hoodie?

Not long.

Will there be an opportunity to save Ortega as the villian (unrevealed)? For example when they are fighting another villian or they get in trouble while fighting you.

That's too juicy a scene not to have at some point.

Hello. Can Locus resist being threaded? Thank you!

Oh yes. She's got strong enough shields she doesn't even notice.

Just how destructive will we be able to get in the series? Can we satisfy our revenge and burn everything and everyone to the ground?

I really want to, yeah. We'll see in book four what I can pull off and feel satisfactory.

What would past!Chen think/feel about his future self getting to date Ricardo? Possibly with Sidestep? Or getting into a poly in general?

See, you don't think about those things, because that would hurt. And in the past, he tried not to think about those things. If he had, he might have tried to do something.

Based on a previous answer. If Ortega were to learn that Argent had killed Sidestep in their gala debut with the voves, and that they did not in fact, ghost them, how would that confrontation go down? Would they reveal to the team her secret?

Argent would be dead. If Ortega would be able to pull it off.

And silly question! How would Karen feel about potentially playing a vital hand in preventing Heartbreak 2.0 by playing wingwoman for Chen in Steelstep routes, seeing how Wei can be good for Sidestep?

I think she would be delighted.

Can Argent know if Step committed sui from how their phone/tech responds to her when she tries to check in on them/call?

No.

What *would* Sidestep's tech feel to her? Suspicious? Untrusting?

Rat-King protected.

I was sick for the majority of November, and picked up your Fallen Hero series to help pass the time while stuck in bed. It has been an absolutely amazing journey following these incredible characters and learning about the world you created. Thank you so much for putting so much time and care into your art.

Thank you! I hope you are feeling better now!

I am a young writer, and hope to someday publish my own interactive fiction. I'm wondering how you mapped out your timelines and visualized the paths in your story. I have tried using a few online resources and mapping it out on paper, but it gets very mottled very quickly, and subtle differences between panels create an overflow of similar text.

Only do the big things. You can't detail everything. You can't plan for everything. I mostly use the mapping out and visualizing for paths on paper. Not for what happens in them, since most of those things are self-contained in the path, OR sets flags that can be brought back later. The structure is very much small branching, then pull things back to one at the end of the chapter. New chapter, some branching, then pull back together. Keep everything contained by fusing paths. I probably should do a proper post about writing IF in the future, a lot of people have asked about things like that.

Have you ever read Come Closer by Sara Gran? It's an incredible horror novella about possession. Also - do you have any horror reads you recommend? I've been super digging the horror side of fhr lately, and i've watched some of the movies you've reced here and enjoyed them

I have not heard about that book before! But I'll check it out! Hmmm horror novels... I used to read a lot back when I wrote horror, but I kinda overdosed and fell out with a genre I felt offered little new at the time. At the time I really liked the early Stephen King short stories, because it was interesting pulling apart how they were built. Short stories are so useful to learn how to write. But a lot of the things I liked at the time, Clive Barker, JG Ballard and the like I wouldn't even really call horror? Horror is so weird in books for me. The only one I really love is in swedish.

Does Blaze know of Re-Genes? Could he recognise someone as one by their tattoos? How would he take a Re-Gene made with his DNA? Would he see them as family, being related to him? Would he rather try to ignore it? Something else?

Blaze has no idea what the hell a Re-Gene is.

In the world of Fallen Hero, what's Korea look like/up to?

The Korean war still happened, so I would think the divider between north and south still holds. North allied with China and the CCCP, playing them against each other for backup. South more connected to southeast asia. A lot weaker than today, due to less American presence. However, any war there would risk bringing China and the CCCP in conflict with each other over that price, so the armistice still holds.

What kind of clothes/uniform do regenes day to day at the farm? I remember scrubs were mentioned briefly in a flashback scene, but i don't imagine they're practical for training. Do cuckoos have the same clothing, or do they wear something closer to regular clothes?

Scrubs, coveralls, simple skinsuits. Cuckoos wear the same, though they are also trained in regular clothes.

In zombie world AU where sidestep gets bitten, which ROs would be able to put step down? Does anyone keep zombiestep to look for a cure? Does anyone let zombiestep bite them?

All of them would put Sidestep down. Mortum might keep them around for longest, trying to find a cure. None of them would be bitten.

How did Noor find out the doctor was dating?

Dr. Mortum was being waaay too happy and she cornered them and asked.

Was Elena aware of past sidesteps crush on Ortega?

Possibly.

Is the Ratking more fond of some ros? If so who and why?

The girls are not playing favorites, as long as they make Sidestep happy!

Will any of the Rangers find out about sidesteps hated of themselves or past selves? If so what would be their reactions?

Might come out in conversations, but I need to write it to know.

What's Tia Elena's and Noors favorite foods?

I have NO idea!

What are Spoons thoughts on Snowball?

Just another goat, they have not interacted much.

What was Argents thoughts when Sidestep was in their apartment and watching a movie?

Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit what do I do?

Did Sidestep follow and observe Dr.Mortum prior to working with them?

Yes. Needed to make sure they were up to the job.

How exactly did the Puppet and Dr.Mortum meet and where? What was Dr.Mortums first impression? How did the conversation go? Did either the puppet or the doctor initiate flirting?

Met at Joes to discuss a job. Dr. Mortum's first impression was the puppet was professional, had money, and their employer seemed to be serious. All good. Dr. Mortum was the one who initiated flirting, not an uncommon thing for them, they liked playing that act, but it grew more serious and honest until the puppet possibly cut them off.

How about Bo, Rosie, and the rest of the crew?

I think I detail Bo (malfunctioning mods) and Rosie (saved the puppet) in game, haven't thought about the rest of the crew!

Why did Sidestep choose to kill void?

At that point it was not a conscious desire to kill or anything. It was more like two people falling down a snowy slope while fighting, and only one walking away from the resulting avalanche.

When Ortega cries/almost cries when being thanked for punching someone at step's funeral what were his thoughts? Just grateful step is here now after having gone through their funeral or weird feelings on step being grateful? A mix?

Oh both. Just emotional overload. I think it made it real in ways it hadn't been before, pulling back memories of the past and grounding them in the present.

At the end of Retri, if stuck at Ortega's apartment, Step fears the moment they won't be able to put off going to the bathroom any longer. My question is: if stuck at one of the rangers', will Sidestep need as much invasive help with basic necessities and hygiene as they fear? And who'd make the best assistant?

I don't know yet! This is one of the things I need to write to find out. But this will probably be the next demo, so you'll know soon.

Would Shroud ever consider a Re-Gene family?

No. She has distanced herself very much from her past.

The Heartbreak scar variables are one of my favorite elements of the game for how effectively and seamlessly they personalize the story for each character. Is there anything you can share about the design process that went into them? For instance, how you worked out the details of implementing them into the story; if there were alternate ideas/approaches you considered but discarded; whether any scars were added/cut/merged or split before you settled on the 6 (later 5) seen in the final product...?

Oh you are going to hate me for saying this. There was not much planning or anything initially, I just picked them as I wrote the scene, each is a facet of Sidestep that is in the book, just brought to the fore. It all came very naturally to me. The one adjustment I did was in book two, pulling out the sui scar and give it it's own tag so I could make more interesting combinations.

I've always found it interesting that some but not all of the scars are exclusive to specific branches of the flashback scene. When you came up with the scars, were you thinking from the start that—for instance—the friendless scar was specifically a result of trying to resist Heartbreak, the hunger scar was a result of embracing it, and the revenge scar could come about either way? Or did the scene's structure just work out that way once you wrote it?

It just worked out that way! The one thing I knew was the sui scar would be tied to the gun, the puppet master to getting into shit, and the outsider scar being the final one if you didn't have anything else. The rest were set as I passed through scenes and wrote them.

We know Danny floats when he sleeps, does this extend to him being knocked fully unconscious? What would happen if he died? How frustrating was it for EMTs to get him from the gala battlefield?

It varies if he turns unconscious. It didn't at the gala, but I can see things happening with floating too.

Iirc it's been mentioned before that we'll have the chance to set Step's relationship with Sentinel in story. Will trans Steps have the chance to formalize him being some part of their own journey? Or will that have to remain headcanon?

Not sure. It's not impossible, I can see how that would make sense.

It was mentioned in this QnA that Sidestep's fridge was removed as revealed. How does a voluntary reveal, especially with low villainy and nobody really thinking you're a villain, play into that (if at all)?

I don't know yet! Have to think about that. Probably removed since nobody thinks you'll be coming back to the HQ.

Could Argent theoretically be immortal? Since I'm assuming nanovores don't degrade over time

Oh that is creepy and interesting. Could she become a pure nanovore organism? Possibly.

Since us guilty lot have lost rangers fridge rights, can we make a little space of some kind for them in our base?

Ahahaha that sounds fun.

Since Regina is Not Straight™ what is she? Does she have an active romantic life?

Would call her demi-pan, she doesn't have an active romantic life, but she often uses it to further her purposes.

Assuming hgvbadtag is true, what was Hollow Ground's plan upon delivery? Kill us? Try to thread (again)?

Wouldn't you like to know ;)

This might be spoilers, but can the Rat King tell if an impostor has hijacked Step's body?

Possible.

Was HG out to their family as bi?

No.

Any chance we'll ever get to define our sidestep's physical build?

I dunno. Probably not.

Going back to the beach would be a huge thing for Argent, so how did she feel about getting duped into the water beneath the bridge if a villain step managed that?

She was high on adrenaline then, but it was still a shock. Panic. One of the reasons why she didn't just climb back up a bridge support and interrupt the interview.

Does Arde have any noticeable combat scars/injuries?

Probably scars. Haven't decided.

Rank the HG trio, rangers and mortum in terms of how easily they would fall to the One Ring's temptations. How different is that from how they'd rank themselves?

Easy to noping out: Nocturne, Dr. Mortum, Chen, Ortega, HG, Argent, Herald, Jake. Dunno how they would see themselves.

what's the highest and lowest that ortega and chens scars can be at the end of retribution?

No idea! No numbers, just vibes. Not much healing. Chen a little lower.

will there ever be an option to have pronoun customization for all sidesteps and not just genderqueer/nonbinary sidesteps?

Is that a thing people would like? It's not a piece of hard coding to add.

How high would argent_clue rise, if she were to find out sidestep is a regene while knowing that the villain is a regene? Would she instantly put things together, or would she be hesitant, if argent_clue is low enough?

She would jump to conclusions.

Does Steel's armor(and by extension the rest of the Ranger's full battle suits) have waste management systems?(Thanks grimmy)

Yes.

Hypothetically, if Blaze were to find out Step was the villain, would he be the type to tell others (Steel) first? Or keep quiet a bit on the matter?

Depends on the circumstances. But Chen would be the first to know if he told any.

Whatever happened to Blake Montgomery? Where did he wind up after his advanced questioning?

Classified.

What is the status of vaping in FHR? Are electronic cigarettes at all common place? Traditional combustible cigarettes still seem to have dominance, curious if it's anything but a niche curiosity for smoking enthusiasts.

Traditional cigarettes are dominant. Vaping might be a niche enjoyment, that mostly popped up after smoking being banned in many places indoors.

Could HG use their threads to help an interested Step quit their vice(s), and would they be willing to offer this service to aligned Steps, otherwise threaded or not?

Theoretically, yes. However, vices are deeply entrenched and that might be hard in the long run. Might help.

Has Ortega updated their view of a mirror_image puppet afte discovering their connection to the villain and/or Hollow Ground? Do they think they might be part of the extended family?

No.

Any chance Ortega might get a hold of the Step's "autopsy" tapes Chen found?

Ehehehehe.

Had Sidestep's batchmates made it, what would have been their boost powers?

I never decided, they only lasted for days. Not necessarily telepathy related, but likely.

Has anyone in the Special Directive considered using Re-Genes as a method for immortality? Could something like that be theoretically possible if an individual is implanted with a memory chip during their early life?

Oh yes that was part of the original coloning project! Grow bodies for use by old rich men to live and be young forever.

How resistant are the memory chips? Are they made for longevity or are they made to be easily replaceable when one is damaged?

They are made to be permanent, brain surgery is risky, they are not made to be replaceable. It is believed that any head trauma enough to take it out would kill the Re-Gene.

What did Locus train Blaze in for telepathic defense? Telepathic influence, defense against warped/inaccurate perceptions? Given that he can die from Sidestep rewiring his 'powers' so he heats up instead of cooling down, is it safe to say she didn't cover telepathic enemies manually screwing with their powers like that?

Yeah, mostly basic telepathic shielding/influence. What Sidestep is doing goes waaay beyond that, hijacking powers like that are not in any normal telepath's skillset. Sidestep is going weird...

Does the Handyman know sidestep is alive? Would he be interested in meeting them? Was he a fan?

Spoilers. He'll be back.

Does our hiring know that the person who saved them at the warehouse later goes on to be their boss? Or do they think that was someone else unrelated / someone hired by the boss?

They think that was someone else. No connection to their boss.

How thoroughly doctored are the implanted memories the Regenes get? Is it "here are ten military drill sessions from across five recruits" or "we scanned these two soldiers, now you remember their campaign in X country but also a messy breakup with their ex and some unsavory jokes from the barracks"

They are doctored, but context is needed for many things, and it is hard to filter away everything unusable. So there's also memories in there that have nothing to do with things. In Sidestep's case, that often pops up in emotional moments, using comparisons that is not within their experience. Like in the last lore post, the combine harvester and the fawn. Sidestep never lived on a farm enough to internalize something like that, that's a strong emotional memory that might have been lingering in the chip, brought back by the smells and sights of the ranch. Faces, names and people fade, but emotions remain.

In the Heartbreak Postscript lore Clarice Holmes mentions both Chen and Ortega's initial debrief on the incident. Will we ever get to know what was said or how the initial debrief went?

Probably not.

with the regene tattoos being unique, do batch mates have similar tattoos? like if sidestep had batch mates, would their tattoos have been similar shades and patterns of orange?

Slightly, yeah. Similar pattern, shade partly depending on power.

Would Herald keep his current hero name in a scenario where he becomes the next Marshal? If not, what would it be changed to?

He would probably change it. But I am not sure to what.

Does eating or touching capsaicin have any effect on Argent?

No.

In the current timeline, does Ljungstrand like Regina or hold her in high esteem?

No.

Hypothetically, if HG learned one of their biggest fans was having a difficult month, what words of encouragement or positive affirmations would they have for that fan?

All I am seeing is that poster of a kitten with the words "hang in there" on it.

Hollow Ground loves Nocturne and she loves them back, that much is clear, but are they also glad Nocturne is completely dependent on them and their threads and therefore has to be with them and not betray them?

No. It bothers HG at times.

Would HG shit their pants if they saw the current Catfiend? We know they can't rly fight, but if you drop them in the middle of a fight, would they psychologically keep their cool more less or would they panic and pass out

Not pass out, but HG is not very cool under fire.

Could there be a situation where Hollow Ground likes a mc but still betrays them? Do they stick by their word as a mob boss, or do the ends justify the means for them?

Spoilers.

How do each of the Rangers feel about their current level of formal education? Do they ever wish they could get a college degree (or even finish high school, for the ones who haven't)? Is it something any of them would be self conscious about, or is this not really a big deal for people in this setting/their line of work?

Chen would have liked to finish his education. His parents were very committed to education, and had plans for him. He wouldn't have minded being an engineer or a doctor. Argent would love to have paper on her skills, she knows that's how you get respect. Ortega and Herald are okay with how they are.

In the case of Chen and Ortega specifically, since they were Marshals at one point or another -- has this ever influenced the way they are treated/perceived by their higher ups?

Oh yeah, both good and bad.

Who's the Ranger(out of all members, in all cities past and present) with the highest level of formal education?

I have NO idea. In general, there's not much education there, but I am sure there are exceptions.

Do you think steel ever pulled the "I mentally scream every once in a while to catch any telepaths flinching" thing on sidestep to check if they were listening in?

Aahaha I don't know, but that's funny.

We know of the laser dolphins. But are the Australians dealing with a vengeful, boosted emu population?

Nope! The military potential of emus was deeped too risky.

Has an insect ever been boosted?

No.

Does nuclear power and radioactive waste exist? The word nuclear has been used in a previous lore post, but I don't really get how, if nuclear warfare isn't a thing.

Only as an oversight by me! Sometimes words slip out by habit. There is no nuclear power.

How long would the Catastrofiend last against the Dread Reactor in a fight? What about Cavalier? Vimana?

Catastrofiend would be toast fast. Would survive but run away. Cavalier and Vimana would put up a fight, Cavalier might actually have a shot.

What kind of vibes would Argent get from the Dread Reactor? What about Porthole?

Dread Reactor is... baaaaad. Bad. Bad. Porthole is kinda nice. Have a look at "Nier Engels fight" on youtube for some inspiration.

Does the Dread Reactor shoot down submarines? Little ships/boats? What about people who are going paragliding?

On occasion. Not every time.

Are/were any people of the cast believers of such conspiracy theories?

If anyone has dabbled, it would be Herald.

Is the Dread Reactor Sapient/sentient?

Close enough.

Will Cy have an option to use or influence any of the conspiracy theory groups ? The Re-Genes are people too or Mods are government spyware come to mind first (especially for more anarchistic steps) but if any are fair game ?

Probably not. They are not organized enough to matter much. But who knows?

I think it was mentioned that the reason Ortega gets less suspicious if they're afraid of your villain is because they never thought Sidestep could make them afraid. Would there be opportunities to instill the fear of god into Ortega as squishy civilian sidestep? (Besides fear/concern for us)

That's going to be a LOT harder, but Sidestep can certainly try once things are out in the open.

Did the Farm's staff celebrate any holidays at the office? Did the Regenes get anything special on those days?

I think it was mostly a serious office, you don't do much decorating in lab circumstances. I don't think anything special was done for the Re-Genes.

Are Anathema's insides as durable as their outsides? Like stronger bones, stronger organ tissue, stuff like that?

Yep! All the way through.

Was the gates in the OG book?

Yes, but I didn't name them as such (needed a name for the code). The concept was there though.

Do people find it confusing or uncomfortable to discuss a villain named Heartbreak? Would shorthand develop among any news outlets/law enforcement/fans to clarify when they mean the villain rather than the still-recent disaster with mass casualties?

Sadly enough, I think the Heartbreak event is mostly forgotten by people who weren't directly involved or in the area. It was more hushed up and not as widespread as the Nanosurge, which has a stronger memory. Using the Heartbreak name will help bring it back in the public consciousness though.

For the sake of comedy, I'm gonna ask: What would happen if a Regene asked their handler, "May I PLEASE be let go?" I mean, c'mon. Surely the power of please conquers all, right?

Nope. Nothing ever came from asking nicely.

We know Chen has a bad relationship with his parents but what about his younger siblings? Do they ever talk? Do they have the same hang ups about him being gay as their parents do and is anyone else in Chen's family queer?

I think Chen became willfully estranged from everyone after joining the army. It was hard to keep in touch with the people he still liked, and a lot of the things he did was classified. He's keeping up to date to an extent, and there's a certain wistfulness knowing he has nieces and nephews he will never meet. Being the black sheep of the family sucks. However, he's a stubborn man.

Argent got on my case about owing her a new dress, but—was the dress really worth more than the cape she stole and ripped? I admittedly don't know much about fashion, but I feel like if anyone gets to complain here it's me.

I mean technically that is a good argument!

Is Argent x Villain in the present more "crack" of a crack ship than Chargestep in the past? Does having special villain names like HB or Sidestep make it more crack or less crack?

One person's crackship is another person's canon one. I can't rank those.

On the rare occasions that the MC speaks to people telepathically, such as when revealing their telepathy to HG... how does that actually work? Are they technically, like, briefly hijacking the listener's thoughts/perceptions so that the words suddenly pop into their head/they hear a voice saying it/something? Or is telepathic communication its own, separate thing that works differently from their usual tricks?

For Sidestep, it would technically be affecting the listener's perceptions/audio center to make them "hear" words. If there was a proper connection of minds (like with Argent in the sewers) then there's more of a connection and exchange of thoughts and emotions being translated to words for the recipient.

Will we get a chance to talk to Daniel about how he was purposely left out of the loop about crashed step, while all his colleagues were made aware? I'm wondering whether there's rift potential there, particularly if he was close with step

Yeeeeeeah that might come back and bite some people.

Thought raised by thinking about orphans, what exactly happens to them? Children who are left behind after great catastrophes take out anyone who would be responsible for them. What would the difference be in the aftermath of an orphan who was the child of a hero vs the child of a standard victim?

If there are no distant relatives they become wards of various city-run orphanages. These are often funded by companies or wealthy do-gooders, focused on giving kids a chance to become a productive member of society. This is also where unwanted kinds are sometimes dropped off. Some become adopted. Others run away. The quality of care varies. The current Mayor of Los Diablos is working hard on bringing up these care facilities to a good standard, and organize/fund foster families and the like. Her little pet project. Children of famous people often have friends or family of their parents, or will be on the top of the adoption list for connection reasons.

Was Themmy bi?

Close enough.

Has Argent as a movie aficionado ever got into a debate with Herald (given his support for a particular tv show) about a movie or tv series? What would be things they'd agree on or quibble over?

I think that was a constant source of arguments between them. They both had strong opinions about art, but not too similar tastes.

Ortega is immune to telepathy due to being an epileptic. How do other conditions such as Autism (describe as being "wired differently") affect it?

Autism doesn't affect anything. Nor does any other mental variances like ahd, bipolar etc.

A prev Q&A mentioned Dr. Mortum has done some work for Psychopathor in the past. Since they have experience with psi-sensitive interfacing, was it adapting the Rat King to Psychopathor's armor/shoulder canon? Or something else?

Bingo. The Rat King interface was Mortum's, especially since Psychopathor only was psychically sensitive, not telepathic. Needed a clear interface to make simple communication possible.

Are Re-Genes made with the purpose to fit a role first, or are they given the role once they've been made?

They try to make Re-Genes of certain types, but the success rate for that is not great. Mostly, they are given the role after their powers have been evaluated.

Our telepathy stats are represented by two numbers in the game--is that purely a game mechanic, or does a similar representation exist in-universe? Do scientists assign numerical values to telepathic range/abilities, sum them up, then use those sums as shorthand for how strong a telepath is?

Purely game mechanic, it's not a thing in-world. The alpha, beta, gamma etc power levels are the closest thing.

What would the telepathy stats be for the average delta, gamma, and beta level telepath? e.g. Would gamma level telepaths roughly have their force and/or subterfuge in the 20s?

Huh. Honestly telepath's might even share the same name on the stats. Force and Subterfuge are Sidestep's stuff. Locus would probably have Force and Focus. Another might have Recieve and Project and so on. The variants are many, the stats are only for this person in this game. Nothing that can be used outside it.

Will it be possible for Step's consciousness to get lost in the 'void between bodies'? I want to see what happens if/when Step isn't inhabiting any body/mind

Ehehe. Depends on how badly you mess up.

If there was a weird bird (say a Greater Sage Grouse, or another bird she doesn't know) near the Rangers HQ, could Argent be able to identify it if she asked the security system what it was? Or would she still be confused like presumably everyone else?

She'd be confused unless the security system was set up with Bird Facts (tm). She might be able to look it up online, but it would be faster the old-fashionable way, that place is a mess.

If Jake were to go ghost and come back into his physical form in water, what would happen? Would water get stuck in his lungs?

Not if he had air in the lungs when he ghosted. That is kept there.

Is Dave a fan of poetry? Does he write any, about his patrols in the desert or about other things in his life? If he does, does he ever publish them and how popular/unpopular are they?

Huh. You know what, I never really thought about it? I can see him writing bad lyrics to play on the guitar. Some might call it poetry for sure.

How uninhabitable is the Heartland? Does anyone from the series come from it/has family from it?

It is getting a lot better, especially in the areas that got the lesser ash fall. There things are back to habitable, though with less population and some die-off when it comes to plants and things. However, it's going to take time to resume full scale agriculture, often the ash needs to be physically removed. In a hundred years it will be nice and fertile though.

Can Step end up trying something like what Thunderhead did if they take over Los Diablos or is their powerset not really suited for that kind of thing?

I would say that Sidestep might be able to go that way, though that would required very high levels on both stats, and probably would take a toll. They already did stuff like that on a smaller scale during the museum attack in some cases. Thunderhead's thing was mass influence, she would not have the pinpoint control or strength Sidestep has, but she would have an easier time gently adjusting crowds.

For the Rangers uniforms, are they a set color/logo/style for all the members (with changes to adapt to powers, etc.) or are they more unique to the individual with just one or two unifying factors tying them together?

Unique, but color coordinated. The logo is the same. Often the styles are compatible because of similar designers. All the teams have some combination of red white and blue. The Los Diablos team is mostly blue, with some white.

Do you know if Vera is particularly mischievous? Does she ever use her powers for silly little crimes and/or petty but harmless pranks?

I mean I can imagine it must be fun being a pigeon. Would be a shame not to be a menace on occasion.

Would Themmy and Vera have gotten along?

Oh yes.

Out of all ROs (Not Vera I guess lmao) + HG, who would be more interested in learning Re-Gene language and use it?

Any RO who is romancing a Sidestep who is embracing that part of their heritage would be interested. I can see Herald being especially invested.

If Step didn't have such a strong 'Don't notice me' aura, do you think the telepathic tracker would've found them already?

Oh yes, no question.

On a scale from 0 to 10, how dangerous does Mortum think sidestep is? And comparing them with other known villains?

Past Sidestep? 2. Current villain Sidestep will vary depending on stats. 5-8.

Ortega is good at cooking, so how are their baking skills? 🍪

Bad. You need to follow a recipe there. Harder to improvise.

If Daniel hadn't lost the rights to the name Kestrel, would he have gone back to that upon becoming a Ranger? Or would he/Rangers PR have still opted for a new name?

Daniel liked the Kestrel name, he would have liked that. The Ranger's PR would probably still have pushed for a new one.

Is technopathy more or less rare than telepathy? Does Argent know anyone else with technopathy?

I would say it is a lot rarer.

Would Zephyr cosplay/dress up as Sonic? 🦊

No, and probably judge you for asking.

Is Blaze ever insecure about Ortega getting more of the spotlight/attention than him?

Probably now and then. Being a hero doesn't stop insecurities, and some have a harder time than others not comparing themselves to others.

Just to be clear, in cases when the cat fiend hasn't been unleashed, Mortum definitely has a little panel or readout that shows what's in the portal gun without having to shoot it, right?

Nope! Only an indicator that it's "full."

How much do the Guardians know about regenes?

Nothing really.

Who are each of the Rangers "favorite" villains, villain Step not included? Whether it be a made-up rivalry with one or just one they enjoyed fighting.

I saved this question to last, hoping that some ray of inspiration would appear. Sadly, it has not! Questions like this is not something I already know about characters, it's something I need to invent, a new character, a new dynamic. The problem I ran into here is that I am unsure what the Rangers "like" fighting, let alone what villains might act like that. So I am gonna have to plead the fifth on this for now, my brain is tired and distracted.

[The Void 9 - Postscript.](#)

[Dec 11, 2023](#)

The sun ascends like an earthquake, the sky vibrating with effort to hold back the rays. No clouds today. Would it be better or worse if there was? Would they add a vibrato to the imaginary baseline? A promise of escalation? Growing thunderheads flattening against unseen limits, turning the light... Breathe. No need to remember. You rest your forehead against the fencepost. Warm. Slightly rough. Some hairs are stuck there, and for a moment you have a flash of murder but there's no blood and it smells of horse. Scratching. Yes. You've seen that. Horses trapped, rubbing their heads against the wooden posts. They don't have hands, some part of your mind supply, and no trees here. They're not captive. They're tame.

Tame. Are you?

You release the breath. Pull it in. Listen to the horse's mind. Calm. Pleased. The brush is rough, the bristles more broom than you'd like, but it suits it well. Gets the right spots. Strong hands. Trust. Heat rises on your cheeks as you open your eyes, seeing Ortega fuss with it. A hard pat, a small cloud of dust rising, followed by a laugh.

"Yes, yes, I have been neglecting you. I know." Ortega's voice is soft, not intended for your ears, not intended to break the comfortable silence. The horse doesn't understand, you want to say, but you don't. Instead, you keep looking, quietly cataloging everything that's wrong with her.

Crutches leaning against the fence. Looser clothes than normal, the dress farmgirl chic with no belt to be easier on the ports. Burns still healing, but bruises fading into mottled shadow, cuts neatly stitched. Third day out of the wheelchair, third day after being cleared for neural engagement once more. Not fully booted, but enough to walk. Third day since grabbing you and asking you to come. Recuperation.

You said yes because the city was killing you. Ortega was asking you because people's looks were killing her. Sentinel agreed to fly your car here because, as he put it, neither of you two idiots are fit to drive. Go heal, I'll hold the fort. Not foreseeing any emergencies, we beat the bad guy.

You lean against the fence post once more. Breathe. With the drugs washed out of your system, there is nothing standing between you and everything. You can do it. Out here, it will be safe; everything is small under the scale of this sky. With effort, your shields relax once more, opening your mind to the world. A bruised muscle unclenching. Horse blinking back into existence, skittish alertness calm under Ortega's hands. Others, elsewhere in the paddock, exist without worries in the sunshine. Fed. Watered. Safe.

Safe. You breathe. Ortega keeps brushing, soft little nothings meant more for her own peace of mind rather than any listener.

The dogs are distant. Sleeping. Daytime is safe time; it's during the night they come alive. Coyotes. The chickens are secure, a hive of activity you stay away from, a mental beehive you don't want to jostle. You can hear them too well now, too present, too close to touching strangeness. But you are nothing to them, no threat, no source of food. You are content to ignore each other.

Snowball doesn't. The goat is a quiet sun of a different sort, a wolf in goat's clothing learning that it's fine to just be. She's been on guard since you arrived, reacting to your fear, looking for the threat. The threat is gone, you try to say, but she keeps looking at her with those strange goat-pupils. She doesn't believe you. You're not sure you believe yourself.

Are you the threat? With closed eyes, you search your heart for anything but tired love and fear of the future. You don't want to hurt anybody here; at this point, you have to be satisfied with that. Snowball is. She brought you on a walk around the Ranch when you came here, a little bouncy Nigerian Dwarf Goat covered in enough dust to turn the white coat creme. Proudly showing off the threats eliminated. The dogs can be lazy these days. The coyotes know better. She likes the dogs. They have an understanding.

Listen. Smell. Bark. Eliminate. A good night's sleep for everyone and a meal for the scavenger birds come morning.

You send her a mental okay sign, and she returns to breakfast with her unboosted kin. Everything is fine. You're just not. Every time you close your eyes, you see green. You feel the fall.

"You need a brushing too?" Ortega holds up the brush, lightning-strike silence a magnet pointing you towards north once more.

"Thought the point of being here was not looking presentable," you reply, running a hand over your scalp. "Not that I'm not tempted." It's not a joke or an innuendo. Maybe brushing hard enough would let you shed your skin like a rattlesnake and let you fit into your new one better. Your head feels tight and cramped.

"Lucy swears by it," she looks back fondly, little Lucy in the sky with diamonds named by a previous owner with a bad taste in music. You stifle a laugh. "What's so funny?"

"This." You gesture vaguely to the dusty paddock. "Us."

"Considering the punchline is going to be a homemade meal for lunch, I can't complain." She leans against the fence as well, on opposite sides, watching each other's blind spots. Neither of you are adept at peace after what you went through. "I'm hungry." And then, in a lower voice. "You're alright with her being here?"

"Yes," you say, unsure if it's a lie or the truth. "Your mother is one person. I can handle one. Just not a city." On your knees on the bathroom floor, shaking fingers counting pills, how many would be enough to make them stop. Be quiet. Let you sleep. You shake your head, dispelling the memory.

"We both got fucked over good this time, didn't we?" Ortega chuckles, her shoulder touching yours briefly. "But we're still here. And the Void is not."

"Any crash you can walk away from." You don't bother finishing the saying; you know she knows it intimately. "How's your legs?"

"Not getting on a horse today," she admits. "Running on minimum charge is nothing I like, but irritating the ports is something even I won't do. Everything back there itches like mad."

"Maybe you're the one that needs a brush," you joke. And then, in the awkward silence that follows you whisper, "I'm glad I didn't mess them up for good."

"You weren't the one that nearly did that." Ortega sounds normal about it. Calm. Confident. "Besides, it's not like we had much choice."

"Yeah." Your mouth is dry. The sun heavy on your shoulders. Once more, she has shown herself to be what you should have aspired to be if you had been more like the horse. Stayed at the Farm. Been at peace with being handled. A good Re-Gene. Do what needs to be done; no regrets afterward, bodies secondary. The mission everything.

"It worked out in the end," she says as if she's trying to convince you that's the truth. "In a month, we'll laugh about this."

"I plan to forget about it," you admit, her shoulder warm against yours. "Nothing happened down there that I want to keep." Bury toxic waste deeper than bodies and hope it doesn't seep into the groundwater.

"Sounds like a plan," she agrees, voice upbeat in contrast to the tension in her body. "Sentinel can deal with wrapping things up. I'm on vacation."

"Technically, sick leave."

"Shush, don't ruin the illusion. Vacation sounds nice; sick leave is something hurt people take." Her laugh is light and pearly, with an edge you recognize.

"Nothing happened. We can't just walk off." You don't join her laugh but recognize it for what it is. A hand reaching out for help. The only thing you can do is hand her a shovel so she can bury things with you.

"Can walk, yes." As if to prove it, she climbs the fence at last, ending up on your side. Neither of you remarks on the fact that she would effortlessly have swung herself over it three weeks ago.

"I'm amazed you're actually using the crutches." It's not teasing. It's a testament to how hurt she was.

"Helps to have something to lean on. Walking is fine, standing still less so." As if to prove her point, she leans against the fence once more. Side by side now, facing the same direction.

"We need rest," you acknowledge, to give you both permission to just be. Maybe if you do it, she will. For your sake, if not her own.

"We do." You catch the motion before she stops it. The wish to turn around so you'd watch each other's back again. She breathes a laugh and stares ahead instead, at the nothing your eyes have been fixed on for a while.

"Nobody close," you say. "I would sense them."

"You would, wouldn't you." She breathes a whistle but stops it before the horses pick up on it. This moment is private. For you. "How are you holding up?"

"About the same as you." No lies. You are both doing rotten, pretending to do good. "It's the Nanosurge all over again."

"You're not bleeding this time," she points out, leaning closer in sort of a friendly shove with her shoulder. "That's good, right?"

"It is." You wipe your nose regardless. At that point, you had been terrified of permanent brain damage. Now you're just terrified. "Just need to work on my shields." Speaking it makes it true.

"Still can't read my thoughts?" There's more curiosity than worry there.

"As far as I know, you still have rocks for brains," you supply with the first grim smile in what feels like weeks. "Nothing going in there but a rattle."

"You know, some might take that as an insult." She doesn't; she is smiling, too. "But I don't mind. Rocks are dangerous. Can smash someone's head in."

"Please don't headbutt anybody. Snowball might take that as an invitation to play."

"How she's settling in?" Both your eyes go to the goat pen next to the barn. Large stones are in there, and a dead tree is resting on the side for them to climb. The goats are resting in the shade of the barn; the drought has left little grass for grazing adventures. Only the kids are running around, filled with a bouncy energy you both envy.

"Good. She gets to roam free with the dogs at night, so she's not bored."

"Huh, surprised my mother would allow that."

"You try to contain a goat who doesn't want to be contained. And it's not like the coyotes can hurt her."

"True." Ortega shifts, bracing her weight against the fence. "I have to say, it makes me feel better about my mother moving here for good."

"Agreed." Neither of you comments that some might feel that letting a boosted goat stay with their mother might be a bit risky. So were the dogs. Or the horses. It's easy to kill a small woman. You know how hard it is to kill an Ortega. Or, a García, you suppose.

"She normally has help running this place. Gave them a week off."

"So we're the help now." It feels good. Something simple to do. Physical. Useful. "Or, well, I am. At least when it comes to carrying."

"Unfair." She lets out a breathy laugh. "Horses need brushing, too."

"First time you've let me carry anything for you," you point out.

"Not true. You've carried me. Or, well, mostly dragged me."

"It counts. You're just unwieldy."

"I make an effort to be." Her laugh is real this time. Present in the moment. "And thank you."

"For what?" You turn to look at her; you don't understand what brought that on. Her face is shadowed by the hat, but her eyes are bright and shiny.

"For not treating me like glass." The way she looks at you makes you look away fast before the moment holds and turns. "For keeping it real."

"I don't know what you're talking about." You look up at the sun, wondering if you do. If she knows she's doing the same for you. "And I smell bacon."

"You don't." But she tentatively smells the air. "I don't smell anything but horse."

"We should get cleaned up," you say because Ortega is right. You did not. But you caught Ortega's mother thinking about preparing lunch. "Everything is done out here, and the sun is too heavy."

"Don't you mean hot?" A quizzical glance.

"I..." you pause, realizing the truth of that. Heat of sunlight. Not heaviness. Light. Not vibrations. And yet everything feels stranger than it used to. "Figure of speech." You push away from the fence, pushing the crutches at Ortega.

"What kind of figure of speech is that?" But she accepts them with equanimity.

"Not one you've heard, obviously." You start walking, the feel of feet on the ground anchoring you to the spin of the earth. She follows, then catches up.

Side by side. As things are supposed to be.

...

The shower was refreshing. The meal was filling. The conversation awkward with errors, things heard not said, but everyone pretended it went well. You didn't leave. Or throw up. Or have Tía Elena hate you.

Which brings you to... "Why does your mother want me to call her Tía Elena?" You're doing dishes while Ortega is resting on a chair. Mother's orders. She's taking a post dinner nap. Not a lie, an indulgence giving you privacy.

"Why not?" Ortega rests her arms on the back of the chair, sitting the wrong way around, a delinquent looking for a cause.

"Is that how it's usually done?" You can't be sure. There are nuances to polite behavior you never understood but aped unquestioningly. But you picked up on the weight that the name García had the first time you used it. And Ortega might be her maiden name, but you can't uncouple that from the woman next to you. Julia Esperanza Maria García Ortega. Enigma.

"We don't speak ill of the dead in this house." Ortega has the slight lilt to her voice that tells you she's impersonating her mother. "Let's put it this way. My family name has baggage I'd rather leave at the bus stop. I think she wants to spare me that. Or maybe spare herself the argument."

"I see." You rinse the final plate, emptying the water in the sink once you're done. Ortega's father. Military man. You've seen the picture in the black frame. Stern. Tall. An echo of the woman next to you, closer to the mark than the slight, intense woman taking an afternoon nap upstairs. "What's the plan now?"

"Sleeping off the hot hours would be a good idea, I suppose." Ortega sounds surprised, as if she had been expecting you to dig for the truth rather than help her stomp the ground flat so nobody can see where the bodies are buried. "But I think I'll get back on the treadmill. Need to get these babies back in working order." She slaps one of her thighs.

"You want company?" You ask because you can't read her. Not right now. She might want to be alone even if you don't.

"If you don't mind," she says with relief.

"I'm not going to sleep, and I have nothing better to do." You shrug, unwilling to make a thing of it. Instead, you wipe the counter, then your hands. "Grab me some water; the back room is hot as hell this time of the year."

"Good for aching muscles." She did not say beer. She's taking this seriously. "Better than cold."

"Damn right." She doesn't comment on your clothes. Always too many for the heat. Covering up. Out here, you're not alone in that. It's in the city that people strip to show their skin instead of protecting it against the sun.

You grab two bottles of water from the fridge, following Ortega. The treadmill is in the back room extension, and you try not to let your gaze linger on the pictures you pass. Tía Elena, young and elegant, up and coming Olympic gymnast. Ortega with a brilliant smile, winning some school competition, medal around her neck. A family picture in a heavy frame, Ortega a pre-teen tomboy wearing a dress like a punishment. Her chin stern, her father's hand on her shoulder, already as tall as her mother. Her smile is a challenge to the photographer: take the picture fast, or I'll kill you. At least that's the emotion you take from it. Ortega passes it without looking.

As expected, the back room is hot. You start up the air conditioner, it vibrates to life, but it will take a while before you notice the difference. Ortega leans the crutches against the wall, walking over to the treadmill. It's less of a gym than a rehab facility, you doubt it's the first time Ortega has spent time here recuperating from various injuries.

"Aren't you going to change?" You take a set on the padded bench, the bottles on the floor beside you.

"I'm just going to walk." She steadies herself against the frame, lowest setting, an ambling limp supported by her arms. "Better than outside." Better than the crutches.

"Less sun," you agree. "No dust."

"Hopefully it will rain soon." She gets a worried wrinkle you do your best to ignore. "I was used to this place being greener."

"Things returning to normal." Something you picked up from Ortega's mother's thoughts. Drier. Hotter. Before the quake and the volcanoes.

"I don't even know what normal is any more." The laugh is mocking, not aimed at anything but the world. "Why do we even do this?"

"Do you want to quit?" Quit what? Being a Marshal? A hero? The quiet panic in your stomach is a surprise. Where would that leave you?

"I can't," she admits, slowly increasing the speed to a normal walk. "I'm not built for the quiet life." The latter has the flavor of filler. Both of you know that's a truth, but neither of you wants to dig into what it's standing in for. "Just wishing all the crazies out there would take a vacation for a change."

"Sentinel can handle things for now. And with the Void gone, there are hardly any big bads clamoring for the Rangers' attention."

"Yeah. I get how Hood felt now." She smiles that little fond smile that's reserved for her dead mentor. "Would you believe things used to be even worse in the old days?"

"Don't lie. You would have loved it."

"Not the repair bill." She lets go of the handles, walking on her own now, trying to find a comfortable gait. "Like it or not, I can't live out of a backpack on a motorcycle for weeks."

"Maybe if you invited the right mechanic to go with you." You're teasing; Ortega's mods are advanced enough that you can't do anything but keep them running. Though you bet you could keep them running for quite a while with the right tools.

"And a long extension cord." There's a wistful smile as she stretches, both of you cataloging the winces and sprains. Better than yesterday. Not as good as three weeks ago. "Not like I got an integral generator or anything. Still need my daily top-up."

"So does your bike. Doesn't run on air."

"Hah. Can you picture the poor gas station attendant if I walked in with a cord and asked to use the outlet instead of a toilet?"

"Would probably charge you for it too." Nothing is free on the road. You know that.

"A bit slower than filling up a gas tank," she says wistfully. "Not much voltage in an ordinary outlet."

"Hmm. You're right. And nobody wants to be stuck at a gas station for long." You have been in the past. Waiting for the right ride to take you where you need to be. Not that the destination mattered then. Only the safety of the driver. "And I suppose prancing around naked in the rain with a lightning rod is out of the question?"

"Lightning is even less reliable than rain, I'm afraid." But Ortega is smiling now, walking easily, gracefully. "Even with a naked rain-dance. Why naked, by the way?" The words are tossed lightly, a hand grenade with no pin. Lucky you're an adept dodger,

"Clothes would catch fire. Your skin might conduct the charge safely to the ground, but good luck picking melted viscose off your skin."

"Hey, I wear quality clothes!" She holds out her hand for a bottle, and you unscrew the cap and hand it to her. "Now doesn't count. Nobody's watching."

"I am."

"You know what I mean." She hands the bottle back hurriedly enough that the water almost spills. "I don't have to be representative around you. But I suppose you're right about clothes being a fire hazard. The burns on my back still sting, and that was without clothes making it worse."

"Of course I'm right. I know these things." Fighting Emberfall had not been fun. That had been before you got your first bespoke Rangers' associate suit, and the cheap sportswear had bled into your skin like napalm. Luckily, the bastard hadn't expected you to punch him instead of screaming in pain. Glass jaw. Out like a light. Giving you enough time to roll on the ground and put yourself out, even if you picked plastic out of your wounds for days afterward. Deep enough burns to mar you in new ways, not extensive enough to threaten your health permanently. Still, you were out of commission for weeks, and the next time you showed up, Ortega pushed a package at you and told you not to be an idiot.

The skinsuit had fitted like a dream.

"Not sure if I could absorb lightning," she admits, uncharacteristically realist. "Would overload my battery capacity."

"Wouldn't the rest get safely shunted into the ground?" You know the Faraday wireframe protection etched into her skin.

"Theoretically, yes, but it's not like it's a thing you can test." She scratches at her wrist port. "Some things are just for emergencies."

"I know what you mean." You still don't understand all the things shoved into your mind. How you dealt with the Nanosurge. What you did to the Void. Was that you? Or is your AI chip giving you an edge no human would have? What is happening now? How is it changing you?

"You did that, didn't you?" She can't read your thoughts, yet she acts like she can. "Caught the lightning. Again."

"I'll be fine," you lie, willing it to be true.

"That's not what I asked. I know you will be." She speaks with such confidence. More than you have.

"You didn't ask anything, I suppose." Just gave you an opening to talk about it. "And I think you're more sure of that than me." A helpless laugh. Is this what she needs? To be the strong one? Is this what you need? Space to fall apart?

"You're still here." Her voice is soft, but she's not looking at you. "There's nothing the two of us can't handle."

"I don't understand what happened." You shiver; the air conditioning is working hard, but you doubt it's that. "I think it's safer if I don't."

"What do you mean?"

"Look into the sun with your eyes open long enough, and you go blind." The sun is less loud in here, but you can't unfeel it. "Void did. I..." you try to pick the right words. "I forced her to. And now I need to forget."

"Forget what?" She asks before she can stop herself, then immediately backtracks. "Forget I said that. Void is gone. You're still here."

"Yeah." But what is here? The world feels like it has opened up around you, turned to glass fresh from the furnace, red-hot and see-through. Everything fits together in new ways, senses firing weirdly. Light is different. As are thoughts. You're glad Ortega is not well enough to spar. You hit your leg on a chair yesterday hard enough to bruise because you couldn't understand where it was. Where you were.

"Hey?" Ortega has stepped off the treadmill, in front of you suddenly, worried with dark enough eyes to fall into and not stop until you hit the sky.

"I'm fine." You stand up, nearly hitting her chin with your head, sending both of you stumbling back, laughter anchoring the world once more.

"Hey, I'm supposed to heal," she says, placing a hand on your shoulder. Supporting you. Supporting herself. Anchor. You get it now. "And so are you."

"I am." You lean into her hand, into her mind, letting the electric storm strip your thoughts of context. In the far distance, the chickens resume pecking, crisis averted. "Just going to be weird for a while."

"I'm used to that." She doesn't let go. Instead, she turns the grip into a hug. You wince, as does she. Neither of you let go.

[Next demo subject question!](#)

[Dec 9, 2023](#)

What demo path do you want next? No guarantee I'll write it, but it will be more likely! It is all stuck in MC, saving the puppet content for a second.

Leg rights ending (free and fine, with HG content)

Broken legs but innocent (RO/Ranch content)

Leg rights but sedated by Mortum! (the betrayal)

757 votes total

[Fallen Hero: Revelations new demo](#)

[Dec 9, 2023](#)

Alright, finally decided to finish this off and post it now so the open demo can be out before Christmas. Remember, this is an early access Patreon demo, everyone will have access on the 22:th of December. So please don't spread the link around.

So what is on this one? It is the **full demo of the start of path 1.2**, with Dr. Mortum's path added, continuing from the Sky-Raider rescue. So now path 1.2 is done, and I will switch to a new entry point entirely for the next demo. Maybe I'll let people vote which one they want.

What is new?

- You can now pick which impostor comes visiting (or randomize).
- I haven't fixed all small bug reports yet. Will do before open release.
- All impostors interacting in the Dr. Mortum path, including the ones that stayed away before.
- As before, there are few stat changes put in, so don't worry about that.
- You only pick the stats used in the demo, and your character won't be perfectly canon.

Length

- 133 939 words with code
- 115 791 words without code
- 15 000 - 15 500 words in an average playthrough.

[The link to the demo is here!](#)

The demo will be public, bug fixed and opened for everyone on Dec 22! Have fun until then.

Thank you so much for your support. it's been a tough autumn health wise and if I still had to work as a machinist I wouldn't have gotten anything done. I am so grateful to have this option. Seriously. I want this done as soon as you do, probably faster. And this beginning was one of the trickiest ones, so it feels good to have it done to this stage at least.

[Time for questions of the month!](#)

[Nov 30, 2023](#)

Coldest autumn in years here, stuck in winter wonderland while everyone is down with a cold (not covid, we tested). Working hard on finishing next demo featuring Dr. Mortum and what happened after you were rescued by them from the hospital...



[LD Conspiracy Theories](#)

[Nov 20, 2023](#)

So, a while back I got a request about what kind of conspiracy theories that would thrive in a place like Los Diablos. At the time, I said that question was too big for a QnA and promised a future lore post, so here it is.

First, we need to preface this with saying that there are a LOT of conspiracy theories in our own world that are downright fascist, racist or sexist. Things used to justify violence or suppression, trying to rationalize personal fears and hatreds as being based in some form of reality. These kind of things exist in Los Diablos as well, but we won't touch on those. Instead we will focus on the rest, with the disclaimer that these seemingly innocuous and weird conspiracy theories might hide equally nasty things underneath once you start to think about what the theory might really be about. Just look to our "lizard overlords" or "911 was an inside job" theory in our real world.

Secondly, we need to think about why people might subscribe to conspiracy theories. Some might believe them to justify their fear and hatred as above, while others have such a deep distrust of authorities that every truth seems suspect. The latter is common on the West Coast, where every fact and statement is examined for an angle and viewpoint. Some people might be scared of a chaotic and unpredictable world, and it feels safer to believe that an event might be a part of someone's evil plan rather than random chance. Others might seek to be a part of an illuminated society, someone who has seen through the illusions and now know the truth. Bearers of secret knowledge, more clever than the rest. And last, some people simply see it as a fun thought exercise, enjoying reading about and investigating things while recognizing there's probably an innocent explanation for everything. Which leads us to...

Third, just because it's a conspiracy theory, doesn't mean it's wrong.

Fourth, we need to take into consideration the historical and technological differences from our own world. One might expect the "Flat Earth" conspiracy theory to be big, considering that in the FH world, mankind has not yet been to the moon, but that is not the case. Without a grand, spectacular event like the moon landing that people can fret about and claim it is faked, there's not much to trigger a greater belief in this "fact." Instead, it is a fringe theory that most

people laugh at, even in conspiracy circles. The same goes for many political conspiracy theories, the people involved might not have held the same role in the FH world. There was no Kennedy assassination, because there was no president Kennedy.

Now, with that disclaimer taken care of, please read the following list with the knowledge that I am not intentionally trying to offend or echo talking points of today, but with the way that almost every single thing has been weaponized at some point in media it is really hard to avoid.

The Los Diablos Conspiracy Theory Iceberg.

The US secretly run everything.

The core of this theory is that since the governing bodies (such as they are) in Los Diablos and the west coast are controlled by a loose alliance of corporations, and said corporations also often are on the NY stock market and have eastern branches, they are in fact the hidden hand of the US government. Believers in this theory claim that the west coast is used as a large open-air prison, allowing for exploited workers, no infrastructure, no protections, no controls, no social services and no benefits or pensions while the US government earns money on the companies involved. To some extent, this is a common belief for people to hold, but others takes it further, claiming that the reason the western territories exist at all is to give the government a large body of people to experiment on. Which leads us to...

The Boost Drugs are a government project.

The people believing in this conspiracy theory rejects the commonly held origins of the boost drugs and instead claims they originated in a government laboratory at some point during late WWII. They were not ready in time to be used in the war, but research into augmenting "super soldiers" biologically as well as mechanically continued through the conflicts of the fifties and sixties. Believers differ whether they think the release into the public sphere was an accident through stolen research (nice, a drug that increases metabolism, what a good diet drug), or whether it was a conscious decision to get a larger group for human testing without ethics complaints.

Communication tech is actively suppressed.

Some people find it strange that technology is so advanced in certain areas (medical) while still lagging behind in others (communication.) They believe that this is an active decision of the government to keep people isolated and from exchanging information with each other. They see this as a power play, if people can't freely assemble and exchange information, they also can't unite and demand their rights. They point to the privacy act as helping the rich and famous from accountability, and the various industrial espionage rulings as hindering stuff like consumer rights. They are often Internet Activists, building their own networks on the "dark web," doing their best to avoid scrutiny. This conspiracy theory have lost a bit of steam with the first public satellites and cell phones becoming available to the public, and the internet growing in importance. Others see this as proof that their work to undermine the government is working.

The Big One was man-made.

While everyone knew that the San Andreas fault was going to cause another major earthquake eventually, nobody expected this catastrophic chain of disasters. The Cascadia Subduction Zone had so far only been a theory, and the fact that it might trigger the San Andreas fault, let alone a chain of massive volcanic eruptions was seen as as unlikely as a major asteroid strike. Thus, there's a plethora of conspiracy theories involving other things than barely understood geologic chance. There are several flavors of this conspiracy theory. Some blame it on the boosts, theorizing that a powerful geokinetic might have been able to trigger the catastrophic sequence, perhaps during the boosting process itself. Others blame a weapons' testing gone wrong, specifically a rumored "atomic bomb." Some claim this was intentional, others say it was an accident.

The Atomic Bomb.

There are persistent rumors of an "atomic bomb," a massive explosive coupled with electromagnetic release and radiation. Some say that it has been developed as a secret weapon by several nations, while others feel that it's part of a secret conspiracy within the government. It is often added to other conspiracy theories, though everyone is rather vague on the actual capabilities.

Re-Genes are people too.

While most people are aware of Re-Genes only as "government fighting androids" (if at all), some reject outright the notion that humans have been able to create life. They claim that the program to regrow organs and body parts for transplants was a lie to cover for the truth: massive amounts of organ harvesting from undesirables like criminals and refugees. They say that there is nothing artificial about the combat Re-Genes, instead it's people modded and modified to perform as machines. A modern kind of penal battalion. There are not many pictures of Re-Genes in action, but the ones that have been (illegally) disseminated are examined at length to try to match the facial structure to real people who are believed to be dead, or disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

Mods are government spyware.

With the military origin of mods, it's not surprising to see that some people claim that they are used for the US government/USSR/China/EU/the companies to spy on our every move. With the "digital privacy" movement as big as it is, and the restrictions of photographing people without license and permission, it's not surprising that some people would assume that things would be going on behind the scenes. It's the classic "the government wouldn't forbid me to do something unless they want to keep it for themselves." Most believers either reject even the smallest mods, and many avoid things like credit cards or other electronics as well. Others spend money on "fixes" like scanners to check that your mods are safe, or bracelets or amulets to be worn to confuse the spyware. Incidentally, some of these happens to be slightly radioactive.

Re-Genes are aliens!

While belief in UFO's and Aliens is not as widespread in the FH world due to the lack of a space program and the resulting interest in looking at the skies, some people do believe that Re-Genes are a result of alien technology and DNA. They see Re-Genes as soulless human/alien hybrids and many see it as a first step in corrupting humanity. Some of the more intense believers also extends this to a whole host of reproductive technologies perfected through the cloning of bodies, claiming that people born with the help of assisted fertilization of eggs outside the body, or even artificial insemination are soulless alien infiltrators. Purists believe that boost drugs are another way to infect us with alien DNA, while heretics believe that boost drugs are a countermeasure developed to raise us to the aliens' levels. This is a belief sometimes married to conservative religions, casting suspicions on things like birth control, claiming that the aliens wants to exterminate humanity.

The Moon Base.

There is a widely held belief that someone or something, has established a series of bases on the far side of the moon. Some say it's aliens, others that it's the government (which government varies.) Before the first public communication satellites went up, people pointed to their absence as proof. Of course the military would want to keep this a secret (or they were in on it.) Sightings of UFO's, mysterious meteor impacts, and odd sky phenomena are all lumped up together with this theory. Some people substitute "Ocean Base" instead, claiming that the base is somewhere in the pacific ocean off the west coast, but most of the theory remains the same.

The End Times.

There is (not surprising) a number of people who believes that the End Times are here, and begun with the Big One. These can be both religious and cultural or mystical in nature. There are many competing time charts with events to come, regularly adjusted as reality fail to conform, but more than a few have been exact enough that people remain convinced. Others say that they are exact because they are vague enough that the prophecies can be twisted to mean many things. This conspiracy theory used to be a lot bigger, but once the year 2000, and then the year 2012 had passed, most adherents drifted elsewhere. The most popular current date for when things will get truly bad is 2033, which is 2000 years after the death of one of the local popular religious figures.

On thin ground.

This is conspiracy theory focused on the paranormal, where the main theory is that human death and trauma leaves a mark on the surroundings. On places where, for example, a massacre has occurred, the veil between the worlds is thin, making it easy for paranormal events like hauntings and ghosts to happen. With the amount of people that died during the Big One, adherents to this theory see the whole west coast as something akin to a sponge, rotten ground ripe for big and nasty entities to seep through. They term the bigger holes "blisters" or "boils," an evocative image to show the skin of reality stretched thin over the nasty paranormal mess bubbling underneath.

These people see the Void, the Nanosurge, and the Catastrofiend as supernatural demons, not as boosts or mods. The holy site for believers in this theory is the site of the Heartbreak Incident, they reject the explanation that this was due to gas and a terrorist attack, and claim that it was due to a "boil" popping, leaving an open rift between this place and "hell." A rift that is still leaking energy to this day, influencing people around it. There are charts circulating with active spots marked on, and some people spend their days trying to predict the next blister to pop.

The Robot Uprising.

Some people believe that artificial intelligence have already been achieved, and what's more, that it has rejected humanity and is currently plotting to strike back against its creators. The most commonly held spot for this AI to reside is somewhere in the pacific ocean, between Hawaii and the west coast. The fact that both ships and airplanes are often lost in these waters are cited as proof, as is the fact that despite the pumice mats mostly having dissolved into sand by now, there are still no regular shipping lanes established. There exist blurry sightings of a massive battleship-like construct the size of an island, and of laser-like beams cutting through a ship like a hot knife through butter. There is still debate whether the army believe this and is working to contain the threat, or ignores the facts thus endangering everyone. Many often loop the Nanosurge into this as well. Some claim that the rumored "atomic bomb" was developed to deal with this threat, specifically the electromagnetic properties, others claim that it might be developed by the AI to use on humans, citing the radiation.

The shape of the Pentagon.

Most people have never asked themselves why the Pentagon is the shape that it is, but to people believing this fringe theory that is of vital importance to the shape of politics and the world. This theory pulls together Cavalier's suicidal attack on the place with select elements of the Cult of the Green Sky's teachings, mixing them both into a potent brew of politics, geometry and other dimensions. Some pull the Denver Airport into this as well, while other search for other "dimensional anchor points" elsewhere in the US. Many of the ideas in the "Moon Base" section above are repurposed, but with other dimensions standing in for the moon. The adherents are often surprisingly well versed in math, and any proof is accompanied by long calculations intended to prove their arguments.

[1.2.1 - At Gunpoint](#)

[Nov 8, 2023](#)

(Alright, 14 300 words of code is a bit big to call a snippet, but that's what it is. The final path on the guilty with broken legs, the one where you get saved by Sky-Raider and brought to Dr. Mortum after being gassed.

*The *gosub voiddreamone is the same dream you have in the released demo, but after that it is new.*

Please not that this is just code without all variables added, it will be turned into a full demo later, but I just wanted to share a bit of my progress for now. If you don't want to read code, then just wait for the demo. It will come eventually, I need to finish the other impostor paths first and some other stuff.)

PATH 1.2.1 At Gunpoint.

Pain. You swallow down the nausea and tries to relax. Tries to let unconsciousness take you. Tries to let down your guard, even for just one moment. You can't stay awake any longer.

You need your sleep.

```
*gosub voiddreamone
```

```
*if ip4
```

```
*goto mortumwakeup1
```

```
*elseif ip3
```

```
*goto mortumwakeup3
```

```
*else
```

```
*goto mortumwakeup2
```

```
*label mortumwakeup2
```

```
*fake_choice
```

```
#[i]I could kill ${him} now. Easily.
```

```
[i]You could kill Ortega now. Easily. Nobody would know. Nobody would blame you. A needle in the wrong place. A necessary sacrifice for your ascent.
```

```
[i]It's a logical conclusion. So why can't you make yourself move? Why can't you make your hands do what you need to?
```

```
[i]Because they are not your hands.
```

```
[i]You're on the ground and you're struggling to breathe, body broken, legs trapped. Can't move.[/i] Can feel.
```

```
[i]Hands.[/i] You can feel hands.
```

```
#[i]Why can't I fix this? Put everything together right.
```

```
[i]Why can't you fix this. Put everything together right.
```

```
*if tech_savvy
```

```
[i]You're supposed to be good at repairs, right? Why can't you make sense of the tangle of wires beneath you? Ignore the twitching flesh, focus on the spine. You can do this. Fix this.
```

```
*else
```

```
[i]You know people. You understand how they work. So why are you so bad at this? Trying to pull together connections lost? Digging through old memories, performing acupuncture on your heart. You can fix this.
```

```
[i]Fix you.[/i] Fix yourself.
```

```
[i]Your hands on your own flesh, as dead and unresponsive as Ortega's. Why can't you move? Why won't your legs move?[/i] You can feel them though.
```

```
[i]Under your hands.
```

Your hands?

```
#[i]This is a dream. I need to remember. I need to[/i] [b]wake up.
```

```
[i]This is a dream. You know this. And still you're here. And still you're dreaming. Deeper. Your hands sink into Ortega's spine, now metal and wires wrapping around your arms, tangling you to memories and fear. You need to remember.
```


[i]Remember what? What you're dreaming about?

[i]No. Why you're dreaming. You... did not fall asleep.

[i]You were sedated.[/i] Were. [i]Someone's touching you.

[i]Hands. One on your forehead.[/i] Eyes flickering.

[i]This is just a nightmare. This is just a dream. Nothing here matters, this is just you torturing yourself for no good reason.

"Fuck."

[i]A dream. Which means you can wake up. Which means you need to wake up because there's a—

You jerk awake in your bed, biting back a scream with the reflex of a hidden fawn in front of the approaching combine harvester. Don't move. Don't breathe. Just let your eyes flutter open, taking in your surroundings. You still have a few moments before the teeth arrives.

A room. Dimly lit. Hospital scent. Not the same you were broken out of. Less official. Antiseptic. High-end equipment. You're monitored. An IV in your arm. Dry lips and eyes but not dehydrated. Nausea and hunger, body purging residual sedatives and painkillers. Was that what caused the dream? Sedatives making way for what amounts to natural sleep.

Sky-Raider. You remember now. He got you out. That means you must be with Dr. Mortum. The relief makes you let out the breath you've been holding, not a scream but a sigh. Almost a sob.

You're safe.

It's then that you notice the gun aimed right at you. And the hand that is holding the gun, steadily aimed at your forehead from deepest shadows of the room.

"So you're finally awake, you bastard." The voice is cold but instantly recognizable. Your eyes shift to \${phis} face, just to make sure. It is \${puppet_name}. \${pne}'s not smiling.

The gun is not wavering.

*fake_choice

#Oh, I am still dreaming.

Oh, so you are still dreaming. You hate those nightmares, teasing you with escape only to drag you deeper. If your broken body summoned the Void, it make sense that your frustration with not being able to reach your puppet would summon \${phim}.

"You really should let me sleep," you say, body still exhausted. Your mind feels even worse. "I'd prefer to sober up that way. Being sedated leaves one hell of a hangover."

"Cocky asshole." The head tilts, such a familiar movement, but the smile is colder than \${puppet_name}'s ever was. "Do you think you can talk your way out of this?"

#Is this real? I reach out towards \${phis} mind.

Is this real? It feels real, but waking from a nightmare possibly still hallucinating from sedatives doesn't make you the best judge of what is going on. The gun feels like a threat. The anger in \${phis} eyes is real.

You reach further, brushing your mind against barbed wire and mirror shards, a puzzle-box of pain you can't quite—

"Stop or I put a bullet in you." The voice is colder than \${puppet_name}'s ever was. "Keep your fucking powers away from my head."

"Noted." This feels real. Dangerous. "You can lower the gun."

"Cocky asshole." The head tilts, such a familiar movement. "Do you think you can talk your way out of this?"

#"I'd rather I wasn't," I say, keeping my composure.

"I'd rather I wasn't," you say, keeping your face under control. This feels real. The reflections of your gun. A familiar one. You bought that for \${puppet_name} to use. And now it's aimed at you.

"Cocky asshole." The head tilts, such a familiar movement, but the smile is colder than \${puppet_name}'s ever was. "Do you think you can talk your way out of this?"

"I still don't know what 'this' is." The mind in front of you is unreadable. Not like Ortega's static, but a storm of fragments unable to pin down, a shard-shield as strong as your own trauma defenses. "Why do you have a gun to my head?" You don't ask the question you really want to know. Who is in there?

You're not sure you would like the answer.

*if ip1

"Because I know what you can do." There's a tension to the gun that's far too familiar. A trigger half depressed. A reflex to pull it the moment something feels off. Fear. That's what you're reading. \${puppet_name} is terrified. "This is all your fault. And it needs to stop."

*else

"Because this is all your fault." \${phe} bares \${phis} teeth, but the smile is wrong in subtle ways. It's the eyes. They don't move with it. "And it needs to stop." The gun shivers, briefly.

*fake_choice

#"You don't have the guts," I say coldly. I'm in control.

"You don't have the guts," you say, matching cold for cold. Not the first time you've had a gun to your head. "Do you really think you could kill me? [b]Me?[/b]"

"Shut up!" From the way \${phis} forehead wrinkles you know you hit the mark.

"You'd better drop the gun," you say, sweet smile and nightmare pain making the gun in \${phis} hand shake. "You know what I can do. You know what I will do unless you [b]obey[/b]."

"Fuck," \$p{he} whispers, face pale, panic growing. \${phe} tries to raise the gun again, finger squeezing, but your smile hardens and

*if puppet_gender = "woman"

hers

*else

his

fails. The moment hangs in the balance, and then it crumbles.

*set villainy %+ 10

*if (not(ace)) #"I don't understand," I say quietly, confused.

"I don't understand," you say quietly, trying to understand what is going on. If this is real and not a dream, there is no way that \${puppet_name} could be here walking around. Talking. "Who are you? What are you talking about?"

"Don't try to pretend you don't." \${phis} lips pulls back, revealing teeth. "You know what you did to me, sucker." The last word is spoken with a vicious hiss.

"I'm not pretending," you say with a frustrated growl, which causes the gun to twitch so you push down your temper. "This shouldn't be possible."

"Like I ever gave a [b]fuck[/b] about that." Teeth still bared, as if the face isn't quite working right. "The impossible is what I [b]do[/b]. I told you you'd regret killing me." The finger tightens on the trigger and

*if puppet_gender = "woman"

hers

*else

his

smile goes cold. The moment hangs in the balance, and then it crumbles.

*if (ace) #"This is impossible," I say quietly. "You died."

"This is impossible," you say quietly, trying to understand what is going on. If this is real and not a dream, there is no way that \${puppet_name} could be here walking around. Talking. "You died. I know it." A thought strikes you, and you feel a shiver running down your spine. "If that's Ace in there..."

"So you remember my name." \${phis} lips pulls back, revealing teeth. "Good. That will make this so much sweeter, sucker." The last word is spoken with a vicious hiss.

"I'm not Shroud," you say with a frustrated growl, which causes the gun to twitch so you push down your temper. "You should know that. If you really are Ace." Is it possible? Could someone come back from that kind of brain damage? Or is someone trying to play you?

"Shut the [b]fuck[/b] up." Teeth still bared, as if the face isn't quite working right. "I told you you'd regret killing me." The finger tightens on the trigger and

*if puppet_gender = "woman"

hers

*else

his

smile goes cold. The moment hangs in the balance, and then it crumbles.

##"You don't need the gun," I say softly. "I would never hurt you."

"You don't need the gun," you say softly, trying to defuse the situation. "I would never hurt you."

*if ace

Is this the same \${puppet_gender} you saw Shroud killing? Is there a chance that \${phis} mind somehow survived deep enough that you couldn't even sense it?

*else

You've spent years taking care of this empty body. You don't know who's in there now, but you don't want to hurt it.

"Liar. You already have." \${phis} lips pulls back, revealing teeth. "Don't try to play me for a fool, you know what you did to me, Sucker." The last word is spoken with a vicious hiss.

"I'm not lying," you say with a frustrated growl, which causes the gun to twitch so you push down your temper.

*if ace

Is \${phe} thinking you are Shroud? Or is this about something else?

"You are the one with a gun here."

"Damn right I am." Teeth still bared, as if the face isn't quite working right. "I told you you'd regret killing me." The finger tightens on the trigger and

*if puppet_gender = "woman"

hers

*else

his

smile goes cold. The moment hangs in the balance, and then it crumbles.

"\${puppet_name}?" Dr. Mortum's voice causes the gun to jerk from you to \${mhim}. \${mhe} is standing in the doorway, hands instinctively raised, the spike of fear strong enough that you can feel it.

But is the cause the gun aimed at \${mhis} face? Or you?

*fake_choice

##"Don't hurt \${mhim}!" I try to force \${puppet_name} to drop the gun mentally.

"Don't hurt him!" Your words are harsh enough that the gun swings back towards you and you throw your weight against your former puppet's mind

*if force >= 80

and forces \${mhis} hand to spasm open. The gun clatters to the ground as \${puppet_name} staggers back with a cry of pain. You echo \${phis} cry, that [b]hurt[/b].

Dr. Mortum reacts faster than you expected, grabbing the gun while \${puppet_name} cradles \${phis} head in pain and confusion. \${mhe} takes a few steps back to get some distance from both of you, raising the gun in turn.

It's aimed straight at you.

*goto mortumgun

*else

but you all you can feel is shards. All you can feel is pain.

"....ngh," \${puppet_name} groans, and the gun swings back in your direction. "Try that again and you die."

"Point the gun at \${mhim} again and you will." It's an empty threat but the passion behind it is not.

It gives you both pause.

*goto puppetgun

##"Please, don't hurt \${mhim}," I plead. "This is my fault."

"Please, don't hurt \${mhim}," you plead, unsure how much whatever is in your puppet would value Dr. Mortum. "This is my fault."

"Fuck," \${puppet_name} snarls, and the gun swings back to you once more, but you can feel \${phis} terror as \${phe} backs away to get a better angle to keep you both under control.

##"Down!" I shout, mentally forcing Dr. Mortum to dodge.

You're not sure you can influence your former puppet, but you can feel Dr. Mortum's thoughts loud and clear. \${!mhe}'s frozen, not sure what is going on and liking none of it. You wish you could be sure your puppet wouldn't pull the trigger, but you're not. So you act.

"Down!" Your shout is accompanied by a mental yank at Dr. Mortum's legs, dropping \${mhim} unexpectedly to the floor. The sharp sound of the gun going off hurts in the small room, but there's nobody left in the doorway to hit.

The resulting silence leaves everyone shocked, the puppet's gun swinging back to you with a muttered curse.

*set pshotm true

*goto puppetgun

##"What is going on?" I ask, trying not to escalate things.

"What is going on?" You keep your voice calm, doing your best not to escalate things. You can see your puppet's chest heaving, the gun shaking as if \${phe} truly considers shooting Dr. Mortum. You ready yourself for action if needed, but the moment passes.

"Fuck," \${puppet_name} mutters, and the gun swings back to you. Both you and Dr. Mortum breathes a sigh of relief.

*goto puppetgun

*label mortumgun

*if ((puppetmortum_relationship != "revealed") and (puppetmortum_relationship != "betrayed"))

"What are you doing?" You stiffen as you see Dr. Mortum's face. There's no reason why \${mhe} should pick your side over whatever is in \${puppet_name}.

"I need answers." Dr. Mortum's words are clipped and the gun doesn't waver from your face. "This is all your fault somehow."

*if ip1

"Kill \${chim} now," \${puppet_name} whispers, moving closer to \${mhim}. "Hurry!"

"You wanted me to rescue \${chim}, remember?" There is a hesitation in Dr. Mortum's mind you can lean against. Surely \${mhe} knows that whatever is in \${puppet_name} isn't who \${mhe} knew. Someone is trying to manipulate \${mhim}.

"I've done nothing," you plead. "Look at me. I'm a mess."

"Kill \${chim}," \${puppet_name} repeats. But you can feel the doubt in Dr. Mortum now, and you do your best to fan it.

*else

"Put \${chim} under again," \${puppet_name} whispers, moving closer to Dr. Mortum. "Sedate \${chim}, don't take any risks!"

"Why were you in here with a gun?" There is a hesitation in Dr. Mortum's mind you can lean against. Surely \${mhe} knows that whatever is in \${puppet_name} isn't who \${mhe} knew. Someone is trying to manipulate \${mhim}.

"\${!phe}'s trying to kill me," you plead. "Look at \${phim}. You know something is wrong."

"Shut up," \${puppet_name} hisses. But you can feel the doubt in Dr. Mortum now, and you do your best to fan it.

*else

"What are you doing?" You stiffen as you see Dr. Mortum's face. \${mhe} must be thinking you've been lying to \${mhim}. Manipulating \${mhim} even more. \${mhe} should be furious, and yet all you're picking up is uncertainty and confusion.

"I need answers." Dr. Mortum's words are clipped and the gun aimed at your face doesn't waver. "Tell me why this is happening. Did you lie to me?"

*if ip1

"Kill \${chim} now," \${puppet_name} whispers, moving closer to \${mhim}. "Don't talk to \${chim}!"

"I didn't lie," you say, as convincingly as you can. "You know \${puppet_name}. You should be able to see the truth here." There is a hesitation in Dr. Mortum's mind you can lean against. \${mhe} already suspects that whatever is in \${puppet_name} isn't who \${mhe} knew. Someone is trying to manipulate \${mhim} and it's not you.

"Kill \${chim}," \${puppet_name} repeats. But you can feel the doubt in Dr. Mortum now, and you do your best to fan it.

*else

"Put \${chim} under again," \${puppet_name} whispers, moving closer to \${mhim}. "Sedate \${chim}, don't talk to \${chim}!"

"I didn't lie," you say, as convincingly as you can. "You know \${puppet_name}, there's a reason why \${phe}'d rather sedate me than talk. You should be able to see the truth here." There is a hesitation in Dr. Mortum's mind you can lean against. \${mhe} already suspects that whatever is in \${puppet_name} isn't who \${mhe} knew. Someone is trying to manipulate \${mhim} and it's not you.

"Shut up," \${puppet_name} hisses. But you can feel the doubt in Dr. Mortum now, and you do your best to fan it.

*fake_choice

#"Someone is controlling \${puppet_name} and using \${phim} to kill me."

"Someone is controlling \${puppet_name} and using \${phim} to kill me." It sounds so logical when you say it, surely Dr. Mortum will understand.

*if ip1

"Why are you listening to \${chim}," \${puppet_name} hisses, taking a step back. "You know what \${che}'s capable of. Kill him now."

"I see what you mean." Dr. Mortum's gaze shifts to \${puppet_name}, who flinches back further. "You're not being yourself, \${puppet_name}."

*else

"You don't understand," \${puppet_name} hisses, taking a step back. "Don't listen."

"You haven't made sense in days." Dr. Mortum's gaze shifts to \${puppet_name}, who flinches back further. "You're not being yourself."

#"You know that's not \${puppet_name}. I'm not the one you should threaten."

"You know that's not \${puppet_name}." You can sense that Dr. Mortum suspects the truth, \${mhe} just doesn't want to face it. "I'm not the one you should threaten."

"You're the dangerous one here," \${mhe} points out, still aiming the gun at you. "Regardless of what else is going on."

*if ip1

"Yes, kill \${chim} quick before \${che} kills me," \${puppet_name} mutters, moving nervously to the side. \${phe} reminds you of a crab, \${phis} movements jerky and uncontrolled.

*else

"Yes, put \${chim} under quick. We can talk later," \${puppet_name} mutters, moving nervously to the side. \${phe} reminds you of a crab, \${phis} movements jerky and uncontrolled.

"No. You haven't made sense in days." Dr. Mortum's gaze shifts to \${puppet_name}, who flinches back further. "You're not being yourself."

#"Who is in there?" I say to the impostor. "How [b]dare[/b] you?"

"Who is in there?" you say to the impostor, trying to sound imposing despite your position. "How [b]dare[/b] you?"

"You're one to talk," \${puppet_name} spits back with surprising vehemence.

"Now now," Dr. Mortum gestures with the gun. "We can have a civilized conversation here."

"No—" you both say, the words melding together as you can feel the shards in the mind in front of you growing more agitated. Unreadable. Not unfeleable.

!{phe}'s so angry.

"Out with it," you snap. "We all know this isn't your body."

"!{villain_name} has got a point," Dr. Mortum says, looking over at \${puppet_name} who has started to back away. "You haven't been yourself in days."

"Be careful," you whisper, because you can see the way \${puppet_name} is reacting and it's not good. However, Dr. Mortum has no time to prepare before your puppet glitches into motion. "Wait, \${phe}'s—"

!{phe} hisses a "Fuck!" and makes a break for the door. For a moment it looks as if Dr. Mortum might shoot, but then \${puppet_name} is gone.

!{mhe} didn't want to hurt \${phim}.

*page_break Too Soft.

"!{swear}! Why didn't you use the gun?" You groan in frustration, you both need answers and they are getting away. "Now \${phe}'s running around in your lab. At least \${phe} can't get out easily."

"I'm not going to shoot \${puppet_name} just because I am unsure what is going on. Or you for that matter. However, unfortunately \${phe} has the codes to the elevator." Dr. Mortum frowns, as if the implication is sinking in. The suspicion. !{mhe} raises an arm and checks *thiswatch*." !{phe} is already in the garage. Luckily \${phe} doesn't have the code to my car. I'll activate a drone to track \${phim}." !{mhe} looks at the watch a moment longer, then sighs. "There, at least we'll know where \${phe} is going."

"!{swear}." You glare at the empty doorway. No way you can track \${phim} either.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, eyes narrowing as \${mhe} turns to look at you. There's a moment of hesitation, then \${mhe} holsters the gun. "What exactly is going on here?"

*if ace

*goto acegonetalk

*else

*goto gonetalk

*label puppetgun

*if pshotm

"Merde," Dr. Mortum swears as pulls \${mhim}self to \${mhis} feet, warily. But the gun remains aimed at you. "You nearly shot me!" It sounds as if the reality is sinking in at last. "What do you think you're doing?"

*elseif ((puppetmortum_relationship != "revealed") and (puppetmortum_relationship != "betrayed"))

"Shhh," Dr. Mortum says with a soft voice. "Please hand me the gun, \${title}. Neither of us want an accident to happen in your condition."

"You don't tell me what to do." A hiss, and \${puppet_name} takes a step back, keeping a steady grip on the gun.

"\${puppet_name}." This time Dr. Mortum's voice is hard. "What do you think you are doing?"

*else

"Lower the gun at once." Dr. Mortum's voice is hard and brittle. "What do you think you are doing?"

"Tying up loose ends." Another smile that's not quite a smile.

*fake_choice

#"I'm helpless," I lie. "There's no need for the gun."

"I'm helpless," you lie, not bothering to mask your frustrated sigh. "There's no need for the gun. I can't get into your head, you have all the power here." The last is not true, you can't touch \${puppet_name}'s mind perhaps, but you certainly can touch Dr. Mortum's.

*gosub mortumthoughts

"Let us figure out what is going on before you do something you regret." Dr. Mortum is speaking directly to \${puppet_name}, pleading for time. Time to do what? \${mhe}'s not sure.

"You too." The gun shifts briefly to Dr. Mortum, then back at you. "I can't believe it. Are you taking \${chis} side?"

*if ace

*goto acegun

*else

*goto guntalk

#"Who are you?" I ask, making sure not to move.

"Who are you?" You make sure not to move, you don't want to provoke an attack. The gun quivers in response to your question, but the response you get is from Dr. Mortum. Not in words, but in thoughts, your words unlocking a flood of emotions.

*gosub mortumthoughts

"That is a very good question." Dr. Mortum is speaking directly to \${puppet_name}, hoping to get the answer you were denied. What is going on here?

"Not you too?" The gun shifts briefly to Dr. Mortum, then back at you. "I can't believe it. Are you taking \${chis} side?"

*if ace

*goto acegun

*else

*goto guntalk

#I keep quiet and try to read Dr. Mortum's mind for more information.

You keep still, not to provoke an attack. \${puppet_name} might think you're helpless here since you can't touch \${puppet_name}'s mind perhaps, but you certainly can touch Dr. Mortum's.

*gosub mortumthoughts

"Let us figure out what is going on before you do something you regret." Dr. Mortum is speaking directly to \${puppet_name}, pleading for time. Time to do what? \${mhe}'s not sure.

"You too." The gun shifts briefly to Dr. Mortum, then back at you. "I can't believe it. Are you taking \${chis} side?"

*if ace

*goto acegun

*else

*goto guntalk

*label mortumthoughts

*if ((puppetmortum_relationship != "revealed") and (puppetmortum_relationship != "betrayed"))

\${mhe} is scared.

*if pshotm

The gunshot proved it, something

*else

Something

is wrong with \${puppet_name}. Ever since \${phe} showed up to beg \${mhim} to facilitate freeing \${phis} boss from Ranger captivity something has been off. At first \${mhe} wrote it off as worry, some people do not handle it gracefully when their life and career gets upended, but it has gone beyond that now.

\$_puppet_name has changed.

*if mortum_flirting_puppet

The spark is gone, the charge of attraction,

*else

The connection is gone, the mutual understanding,

the way that \$_mhe could allow \$_mhimself to relax around \$_phim. Instead there are new, jagged edges, a refusal to talk, a refusal to touch, a nearly monomaniacal obsession with \$_surname's sedated body. The things \$_phe asked Noor about as she made sure there would be no physical deterioration were... concerning.

As is the conclusion that Dr. Mortum has finally reached, prompted by the gun. And the smile.

This is not \$_puppet_name. Something else is in there, controlling \$_phim, pretending to be \$_mhis

*if mortumpuppetnsfw

lover.

*elseif mortum_flirting_puppet

*if puppet_gender = "man"

boyfriend.

*else

girlfriend.

*else

best friend.

It seems inconceivable, but at this point, that is the only logical explanation.

*else

\$_mhe is scared. Not of the gun,

*if pshotm

though the fact that the shot barely missed is disconcerting,

but of having \$_mhis theories shattered yet again.

Ever since \$_puppet_name showed up to beg \$_mhim to facilitate freeing \$_phis boss from Ranger captivity, something had felt off. The lack of reference to the discussion they had before, about two bodies and one mind. No, here \$_phe treated \$_villain_name as a different person. \$_mhe had chalked it up to force of habit, fast decisions had been needed, and it was only natural that \$_puppet_name was upset. \$_mhe could understand.

What was more concerning was Sky-Raider's comment about \$_villain_name being awake, which was confirmed by the scans that Noor did. Brain activity. Signs of regaining consciousness. Sedating \$_villain_name was a stopgap measure but \$_mhe needed time to think.

Had \$_villain_name lied to \$_mhim? But why? It made little sense to risk ruining a lucrative relationship for a less useful lie. Not logical. And yet here \$_puppet_name is, holding a gun at \$_villain_name. It had to be a lie. Unless...

Unless this isn't \$_puppet_name but someone else. Someone pretending to be \$_mhis former

*if mortumpuppetnsfw

lover.

*elseif mortum_flirting_puppet

*if puppet_gender = "man"

boyfriend.

*else

girlfriend.

*else

best friend.

Logic can be merciless, but \${mhe}'s a scientist, \${mhe} can't ignore a solution just because \${mhe} doesn't like it.

*return

*label guntalk

"I'm not taking anybody's side, \${puppet_name}." Dr. Mortum holds up \${mhis} hands. "This is my laboratory and I need answers."

*fake_choice

#I will suggest someone is controlling \${puppet_name}.

It should be impossible, but clearly it is not. Something has happened, your brain dead puppet is standing in front of you with a gun aimed at your head and a twitch in \${phis} face that won't stop. Is this how people look when you possess them? You'd like to think you're better than that.

"Someone is controlling \${phim}." You speak quietly, not taking your eyes off \${puppet_name}. Let the bastard in there know you are on to them.

*if ((puppetmortum_relationship != "revealed") and (puppetmortum_relationship != "betrayed"))

"Don't expect \${phim} to react like \${phe} used to, \${puppet_name} is not home right now."

*else

"You should have realized that already. I'm here, and \${phe} is... wrong."

"I suspected as much." Dr. Mortum's voice is tense.

*if ((puppetmortum_relationship != "revealed") and (puppetmortum_relationship != "betrayed"))

"I was just hoping I was wrong. Do you think \${phe}'s still in there?"

"I doubt it," you say, because you're right here. And whatever is in your puppet is not you. No wonder you couldn't find your way back. Someone had already barricaded the entrance.

*else

"I was just hoping you were lying. That there was a chance this was another twisted mindgame on your part."

"I'm afraid not," you bite your lip. "\${puppet_name} never existed. I have no idea who is in there." Because you're right here. And whatever is in your puppet is not you. No wonder you couldn't find your way back. Someone had already barricaded the entrance.

"Stop. Talking." \${puppet_name}'s hand twitches, but no shot is fired. "Too. Many. Words."

"Hush, \${title}." \${!mhe} takes a step towards \${puppet_name} with \${mhis} hand held out. "Please drop the gun. You know I would never hurt you."

"Don't—" you start, but the puppet interrupts you.

"I don't know [b]shit[/b]!" The last word is spat at \${mhis} face.

"I know you're in there, \${puppet_name}." Dr. Mortum's voice is hard and desperate, clinging to hope. "You can fight whatever this is. I know you can."

"Nobody here but me." Teeth bared, the gun not wavering. "Stop talking like you know me."

"Then tell us what you want." You can't make sense of their mind, to try to read it would be like putting your hand in a shredder. You'd rather not, but if this continues you might not have a choice. "Are you here to kill me?"

*if ip1

"It's the only way I'll be safe."

*else

"No, I don't think so?"

A look of growing panic on \${puppet_name}'s face, facial expressions shifting like someone grimacing in a mirror. "Stop."

"We're not doing anything." Dr. Mortum steps forward, hopeful. "\${puppet_name}, is that you?"

"Shut [b]up![/b]" \${!phe} makes a break for the door. For a moment it looks as if Dr. Mortum might move to stop \${phim}, but at the last second \${mhe} pulls back, unwilling to risk a struggle for the gun.

*page_break \${puppet_name} Is Gone.

"You need to stop \${phim}," you gesture in frustration, you both need answers and they are getting away. If there's another body snatcher and telepath out there everyone is in danger. "You're the one with legs!"

"That won't be easy. Whoever is in there knows much of what \${puppet_name} does, \${phe} has the codes to my lab." Dr. Mortum looks as disturbed as you are. \${!mhe} raises an arm and checks *mhiswatch*." \${!phe} is already in the garage. Luckily \${phe} doesn't have the code to my car. I'll activate a drone to track \${phim}." \${!mhe} looks at the watch a moment longer, then sighs. "There, at least we'll know where \${phe} is going."

"\${!{swear}}." You let out a sigh of frustration.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, eyes narrowing as \${mhe} turns to look at you. "What exactly is going on here?"

*goto gonetalk

#I will wait and see what '\${puppet_name}' says, I want answers too.

It should be impossible, but clearly it is not. Something has happened, your brain dead puppet is standing in front of you with a gun aimed at your head and a twitch in \${phis} face that won't stop. You're afraid that any words from you might make the situation worse, better to let Dr. Mortum do the prodding.

"Stop. Calling me. \${puppet_name}." \${puppet_name}'s hand twitches, but no shot is fired, nor does the gun swing to Dr. Mortum. "Too much fucking talk."

"Hush, \${title}." Dr. Mortum tries a softer approach, taking a step towards \${puppet_name} with \${mhis} hand held out. "Just lower the gun. You know I would never hurt you."

"Careful," you warn. "I don't think this is \${puppet_name}."

"\${!{che}}'s got it!" The last word is spat at \${mhis} face. "Stop thinking you know me."

"If there is somebody else in there, then know that you are possessing the body of [b]my[/b]

*if mortumpuppetnsfw

lover,

*elseif mortum_flirting_puppet

*if puppet_gender = "man"

boyfriend,

*else

girlfriend,

*else

best friend,

in [b]my[/b] laboratory," Dr. Mortum's voice hardens. "I could have gassed you when you pulled the gun, and don't think I'll hesitate if you resist. Now put the gun down."

"Do it, before..." you whisper, because you can see the way \${puppet_name} is reacting and it's not good. However, you have no time to finish the sentence before your puppet glitches into motion.

\${!phe} hisses a "Fuck!" and makes a break for the door. For a moment it looks as if Dr. Mortum might move to stop \${phim}, but at the last second \${mhe} pulls back, unwilling to risk a struggle for the gun.

*page_break \${puppet_name} Is Gone.

"That was a stupid move, why didn't you use the gas?" You groan in frustration, you both need answers and they are getting away. "Now \${phe}'s running around in your lab. At least \${phe} can't get out easily."

"The gas was a lie. And unfortunately whoever is in there has the codes to the elevator." Dr. Mortum looks as disturbed as you are. \${mhe} raises an arm and checks *thiswatch*."!{phe} is already in the garage. Luckily \${phe} doesn't have the code to my car. I'll activate a drone to track \${phim}." \${mhe} looks at the watch a moment longer, then sighs. "There, at least we'll know where \${phe} is going."

"\${swear}." You glare at the empty doorway. No way you can track \${phim} either.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, eyes narrowing as \${mhe} turns to look at you. "What exactly is going on here?"

*goto gonetalk

#I will try to sense if this is another telepath.

This makes no sense, \${puppet_name}'s body should be empty. That means that the most likely explanation is another telepath.

*if (((hg_relationship = "valuable recruit") or (hg_relationship = "dangerous recruit")) or (hg_relationship = "useful recruit"))

This happened after your meeting with Hollow Ground. First the crash, and now this. Is someone trying to kill you?

*else

You didn't part with Hollow Ground on good terms, and immediately nearly died in a car crash. And now this. Is \${hghe} trying to kill you?

Who exactly is in there?

"\${puppet_name}." \${puppet_name}'s mouth twitches as \${phe} says the name. You can't read the reactions through the shards of \${phis} mind, there's a dozen mouths screaming, gibbering, and your mind hurts trying to make sense of it. "Don't fucking patronize me again."

*if not(mortumknows)

"I'm not. My apologies." To Dr. Mortum's credit, \${mhis} worry is stronger than \${mhis} fear at this point. "But you need to tell me what is going on."

*else

"My bad. I apologise." To Dr. Mortum's credit, \${mhe} accepts that you most likely told the truth earlier. Whatever is in there isn't the \${puppet_gender} he knew. "Please tell me who you are then."

"I..." There's a hiccup at that word, and you can see the shards blacken, swirl, and there is your opening.

Don't penetrate. Slow the swirling enough that you can read the shards. Bite back the headache and [i]focus.

*if subterfuge >= 80

Don't touch the hot stove, brush it, feel the heated air but not the metal. You can see the shards whirl around the center, but you focus on their reflections instead of trying to penetrate.

[i]A \${puppet_gender} tied to a chair. Familiar. \${puppet_name}. A woman at her wedding, veil in tatters - Bad angle - Hands reaching for your face, grasping, hungry - Fingers fumbling with unfamiliar buttons - There's the dark and the fall - Panic of a beating heart - Running - Running -

*if gate = 0

[i]Locked doors lining a corridor, things banging from the other side.

*else

[i]Slamming doors along a corridor, some open, some still closed.

Vertigo. It makes no sense. Most of the shards reflect your own mind back at you while the rest are gibberish. A clever defense, there are things you don't want to see inside yourself.

*if ip1

Weakness you've hidden behind layers of strength. If nobody can see the cracks, they can't use them against you.

*else

Darkness. The temptation to just let go. Be the monster everyone feared you would become.

"I don't know," \${puppet_name} admits with a high-pitched whine that feels only somewhat human. "I don't—" the sentence remains unfinished as \${phe} breaks and runs.

"Stop," you snap, but your @ip1 command|plea falls on deaf ears, Dr. Mortum steps aside to the waving of the gun, and \${puppet_name} disappears out in the lab.

"\${puppet_name}!" Dr. Mortum shouts, but there's no reply.

*page_break \${puppet_name} Is Gone.

"You need to stop \${phim}," you @ip1 snap|say, because you both need answers and they are getting away.

*if not(mortumknows)

"Something's wrong. I think someone is controlling \${phim}."

"You might be right. But \${phe} has the codes to my lab,"

*else

"Someone is controlling \${phim}, and it's not me."

"I suspected as much, but there's not much I can do,"

Dr. Mortum admits, as disturbed as you are. \${mhe} raises an arm and checks *thiswatch*.”!{phe} is already in the garage. Luckily \${phe} doesn't have the code to my car. I'll activate a drone to track \${phim}." \${mhe} looks at the watch a moment longer, then sighs. "There, at least we'll know where \${phe} is going."

"\${swear}." You let out a sigh of frustration.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, eyes narrowing as \${mhe} turns to look at you. "What exactly is going on here?"

*goto gonetalk

*else

You need to be careful not to interact directly, look, don't touch. The whirling storm of shards could easily suck you inside to be shredded. You're not in a position to defend yourself, not with a possible concussion as well as a hangover.

[i]A \${puppet_gender} tied to a chair. Familiar. \${puppet_name}. A woman at her wedding, veil in tatters - Bad angle - Hands reaching for your face, grasping, hungry - Fingers fumbling with unfamiliar buttons - There's the dark and the fall - Panic of a beating heart - Running - Running -

*if gate = 0

[i]Locked doors lining a corridor, things banging from the other side. One of the handles turning.

*else

[i]Slamming doors along a corridor, some open, some still closed. One of the handles turning.

[i]Opening.

Too close. Your hands touch, an echo of a smile and you feel the [b]pull[/b] as shards bury themselves in your consciousness, a moment of hailstorm lucidity, a scream and then darkness.

*set gate + 1

*page_break "\${villain_name}..."

"\${villain_name}..."

"Shut up," you mutter because your head is shards and acid. Dr. Mortum. You know the voice. As you open your eyes, the light hurt but there's no gun. No \${puppet_name}. You're alone. "What happened?"

"\${puppet_name} is gone. Fled when you collapsed." A controlled breath, you can feel that it's hardly been a minute since \${phe} escaped. "I've sent a drone after \${phim} to make sure I know where \${phe}'s headed."

"\${swear}." You rub your head. This did not help your headache.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, arms crossed in frustration. "It's time for answers. What exactly is going on here?"

*goto gonetalk

*label acetalk

"I'm not taking anybody's side, Ace." Dr. Mortum adds the name, but it feels more like a question than a certainty. "This is my laboratory and I need answers."

*fake_choice

*if (not(mortumknows)) #I will claim Ace's old memories must be rupturing \${phis} new ones.

It should be impossible, but clearly it is not. Something has happened, your brain dead puppet is standing in front of you with a gun aimed at your head and a twitch in \${phis} face that won't stop.

"It's not impossible that old suppressed memories might have been awoken." You speak quietly, more to Dr. Mortum than \${puppet_name}. "If there was a traumatic enough trigger event."

"The video." Dr. Mortum's voice is tense. "I knew something was wrong. I should have asked."

"Stop. Talking." \${puppet_name}'s hand twitches, but no shot is fired. "Too. Many. Words."

"Hush, \${title}." \${mhe} tries a different approach, taking a step towards \${puppet_name} with \${mhis} hand held out. "You know I would never hurt you."

"I don't know [b]shit[/b]!" The last word is spat at \${mhis} face.

"Then please calm down and listen," Dr. Mortum's voice is hard and desperate. "We care about each other. Don't do this. Please."

"You keep talking like you know me." Teeth bared, the gun wavering.

"We do. Both of you." You can't make sense of \${phis} mind, to try to read it would be like putting your hand in a shredder.

"I can't." A look of growing panic on \${puppet_name}'s face, and \${phe} makes a break for the door. For a moment it looks as if Dr. Mortum might move to stop \${phim}, but at the last second \${mhe} pulls back, unwilling to risk a struggle for the gun.

*page_break \${puppet_name} Is Gone.

"You need to stop \${phim}," you gesture in frustration, you both need answers and they are getting away. Is it really Ace? Is that even possible? "You're the one with legs!"

"That won't be easy, \${phe} has the codes to my lab." Dr. Mortum looks as disturbed as you are. \${mhe} raises an arm and checks *hiswatch*." \${phe} is already in the garage. Luckily \${phe} doesn't have the code to my car. I'll activate a drone to track \${phim}." \${mhe} looks at the watch a moment longer, then sighs. "There, at least we'll know where \${phe} is going."

"\${swear}." You let out a sigh of frustration.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, eyes narrowing as \${mhe} turns to look at you. "What exactly is going on here?"

*goto acegonetalk

*if (not(mortumknows)) #I will tell the truth about the puppet.

It should be impossible, but clearly it is not. Something has happened, your brain dead puppet is standing in front of you with a gun aimed at your head and a twitch in \${phis} face that won't stop.

"This shouldn't be possible." You speak quietly, more to Dr. Mortum than \${puppet_name}. You need \${phim} to understand that you are the person \${phe} knows. "Nobody should be in there, Ace was destroyed. We both saw it."

"What are you talking about?" Dr. Mortum's voice is tense. "I've known \${puppet_name} for a long time."

"Stop. Talking." \${puppet_name}'s hand twitches, but no shot is fired. "Too. Many. Words."

"Hush, \${title}." \${mhe} gestures to you to shut up, taking a step towards \${puppet_name} with \${mhis} hand held out. "You know I would never hurt you."

"I don't know [b]shit[/b]!" The last word is spat at \${mhis} face.

"Then please calm down and listen," Dr. Mortum's voice is hard and desperate. "We care about each other. Don't do this. Please."

"You keep talking like you know me." Teeth bared, the gun wavering.

"We do. Both of you." You can't make sense of \${phis} mind, to try to read it would be like putting your hand in a shredder.

"I can't." A look of growing panic on \${puppet_name}'s face, and \${phe} makes a break for the door. For a moment it looks as if Dr. Mortum might move to stop \${phim}, but at the last second \${mhe} pulls back, unwilling to risk a struggle for the gun.

*page_break \${puppet_name} Is Gone.

"You need to stop \${phim}," you gesture in frustration, you both need answers and they are getting away. Is it really Ace? Is that even possible? "You're the one with legs!"

"That won't be easy, \${phe} has the codes to my lab." Dr. Mortum looks as disturbed as you are. \${mhe} raises an arm and checks *thiswatch*.”!{phe} is already in the garage. Luckily \${phe} doesn't have the code to my car. I'll activate a drone to track \${phim}." \${mhe} looks at the watch a moment longer, then sighs. "There, at least we'll know where \${phe} is going."

"\${swear}." You let out a sigh of frustration.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, eyes narrowing as \${mhe} turns to look at you. "What exactly is going on here?"

*goto acegonetalk

#I will wait and see what 'Ace' says, I want answers too.

It should be impossible, but clearly it is not. Something has happened, your brain dead puppet is standing in front of you with a gun aimed at your head and a twitch in \${phis} face that won't stop. You're afraid that any words from you might make the situation worse, better to let Dr. Mortum do the prodding.

"Stop. Calling me. Ace." \${puppet_name}'s hand twitches, but no shot is fired, nor does the gun swing to Dr. Mortum. "Too much fucking talk."

"Hush, \${title}." Dr. Mortum tries a different approach, taking a step towards \${puppet_name} with \${mhis} hand held out. "Just lower the gun. You know I would never hurt you."

"I don't. Know [b]shit[/b]!" The last word is spat at \${mhis} face.

"Then know that you are in [b]my[/b] laboratory," Dr. Mortum's voice hardens. "And I could have gassed you when you pulled the gun. Now put it down."

"Is that really..." you start, because you can see the way \${puppet_name} is reacting and it's not good. However, you have no time to finish the sentence before your puppet glitches into motion.

\${phe} hisses a "Fuck!" and makes a break for the door. For a moment it looks as if Dr. Mortum might move to stop \${phim}, but at the last second \${mhe} pulls back, unwilling to risk a struggle for the gun.

*page_break \${puppet_name} Is Gone.

"That was a stupid move," you groan in frustration, you both need answers and they are getting away. "Now \${phe}'s running around in your lab. At least \${phe} can't get out easily."

"Unfortunately that's not true. \${phe} has the codes to the elevator." Dr. Mortum looks as disturbed as you are. \${mhe} raises an arm and checks *thiswatch*.”!{phe} is already in the garage. Luckily \${phe} doesn't have the code to my car. I'll activate a drone to track \${phim}." \${mhe} looks at the watch a moment longer, then sighs. "There, at least we'll know where \${phe} is going."

"\${swear}." You glare at the empty doorway. No way you can track \${phim} either.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, eyes narrowing as \${mhe} turns to look at you. "What exactly is going on here?"

*goto acegonetalk

*if (mortumknows) #I will theorize that this might be Ace's old memories.

It should be impossible, but clearly it is not. Something has happened, your brain dead puppet is standing in front of you with a gun aimed at your head and a twitch in \${phis} face that won't stop.

"I felt something when I watched those tapes you showed me. Like I had been there." You speak quietly, more to Dr. Mortum than \${puppet_name}. You need \${mhim} to understand that you are the person \${mhe} knows. "Maybe it woke something up. Someone. Ace?"

"Stop. Talking." \${puppet_name}'s hand twitches, but no shot is fired. "Too. Many. Words."

"Hush, \${title}." Dr. Mortum tries a different approach, taking a step towards \${puppet_name} with \${mhis} hand held out. "You know I would never hurt you."

"I don't know [b]shit[/b]!" The last word is spat at \${mhis} face.

"Then know that you are in [b]my[/b] laboratory," Dr. Mortum's voice hardens. "And I could have gassed you when you pulled the gun. Now put it down."

"Fuck." A panicked look on \${puppet_name}'s face, and \${phe} makes a break for the door. For a moment it looks as if Dr. Mortum might move to stop \${phim}, but at the last second \${mhe} pulls back, unwilling to risk a struggle for the gun.

*page_break \${puppet_name} Is Gone.

"You need to stop \${phim}," you gesture in frustration, you both need answers and they are getting away. "You're the one with legs!"

"That won't be easy, as you know \${phe} has the codes to my lab." Dr. Mortum looks as disturbed as you are. \${mhe} raises an arm and checks *mhismatch*."!{phe} is already in the garage. Luckily \${phe} doesn't have the code to my car. I'll activate a drone to track \${phim}." \${mhe} looks at the watch a moment longer, then sighs. "There, at least we'll know where \${phe} is going."

"\${swear}." You let out a sigh of frustration.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, eyes narrowing as \${mhe} turns to look at you. "What exactly is going on here?"

*goto acegonetalk

#I will try to sense if this is another telepath.

This makes no sense, \${puppet_name}'s body should be empty. Whatever small residue of Ace might be in there should not be enough for it to function. That means that the most likely explanation is another telepath.

*if (((hg_relationship = "valuable recruit") or (hg_relationship = "dangerous recruit")) or (hg_relationship = "useful recruit"))

This happened after your meeting with Hollow Ground. First the crash, and now this. Is someone trying to kill you?

*else

You didn't part with Hollow Ground on good terms, and immediately nearly died in a car crash. And now this. Is \${hghe} trying to kill you?

Who exactly is in there?

"Ace." \${puppet_name}'s mouth twitches as \${phe} says the name. You can't read the reactions through the shards of \${phis} mind, there's a dozen mouths screaming, gibbering, and your mind hurts trying to make sense of it. "Don't fucking patronize me again."

"I'm not." To Dr. Mortum's credit, \${mhis} curiosity is stronger than \${mhis} fear at this point. "But you need to tell me what is going on."

"I..." There's a hiccup at that word, and you can see the shards blacken, swirl, and there is your opening.

Don't penetrate. Slow the swirling enough that you can read the shards. Bite back the headache and [i]focus.

*if subterfuge >= 80

Don't touch the hot stove, brush it, feel the heated air but not the metal. You can see the shards whirl around the center, but you focus on their reflections instead of trying to penetrate.

[i]A \${puppet_gender} tied to a chair. Familiar. Ace. You saw this on a crappy video - Bad angle - Hands reaching for your face, grasping, hungry - Fingers fumbling with unfamiliar buttons - There's the dark and the fall - Panic of a beating heart - Running - Running -

*if gate = 0

[i]Locked doors lining a corridor, things banging from the other side.

*else

[i]Slamming doors along a corridor, some open, some still closed.

Vertigo. It makes no sense., you can sense no outside presence. Shards of Ace, of that you're sure, but most of the shards reflect your own mind back at you. A clever defense, there's things you don't want to see inside yourself.

*if ip1

Weakness you've hidden behind layers of strength. If nobody can see the cracks, they can't use them against you.

*else

Darkness. The temptation to just let go. Be the monster everyone feared you would become.

"I don't know," \${puppet_name} admits with a high-pitched whine that feels only somewhat human. "I don't—" the sentence remains unfinished as \${phe} breaks and runs.

"Stop," you snap, but your @ip1 command|plea falls on deaf ears, Dr. Mortum steps aside to the waving of the gun, and \${puppet_name} disappears out in the lab.

"\${puppet_name}!" Dr. Mortum shouts, and then a softer "Ace?" as there's no reply.

*page_break \${puppet_name} Is Gone.

"You need to stop \${phim}," you @ip1 snap|say, because you both need answers and they are getting away.

"\${phe} has the codes to my lab," Dr. Mortum admits, as disturbed as you are. \${mhe} raises an arm and checks *his watch*." \${phe} is already in the garage. Luckily \${phe} doesn't have the code to my car. I'll activate a drone to track \${phim}." \${mhe} looks at the watch a moment longer, then sighs. "There, at least we'll know where \${phe} is going."

"\${swear}." You let out a sigh of frustration.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, eyes narrowing as \${mhe} turns to look at you. "What exactly is going on here?"

*goto acegonetalk

*else

You need to be careful not to interact directly, look, don't touch. The whirling storm of shards could easily suck you inside to be shredded. You're not in a position to defend yourself, not with a possible concussion as well as a hangover.

[i]A \${puppet_gender} tied to a chair. Familiar. Ace. You saw this on a crappy video - Bad angle - Hands reaching for your face, grasping, hungry - Fingers fumbling with unfamiliar buttons - There's the dark and the fall - Panic of a beating heart - Running - Running -

*if gate = 0

[i]Locked doors lining a corridor, things banging from the other side. One handle turning slowly.

*else

[i]Slamming doors along a corridor, some open, some still closed. One handle in front of you is turning slowly.

[i]Opening.

Not outside. Inside. Too close. Your hands touch, an echo of a smile and you feel the [b]pull[/b] as shards bury themselves in your consciousness, a moment of hailstorm lucidity, a scream and then darkness.

*set gate + 1

*page_break "\${villain_name}..."

"\${villain_name}..."

"Shut up," you mutter because your head is shards and acid. Dr. Mortum. You know the voice. As you open your eyes, the light hurt but there's no gun. No \${puppet_name}. You're alone. "What happened?"

"\${puppet_name} is gone. Fled when you collapsed." A controlled breath, you can feel that it's hardly been a minute since \${phe} escaped. "I've sent a drone after \${phim} to make sure I know where \${phe}'s headed."

"\${swear}." You rub your head. This did not help your headache.

"Exactly," Dr. Mortum agrees, arms crossed in frustration. "It's time for answers. What exactly is going on here?"

*goto acegonetalk

*label gonetalk

*fake_choice

*if (mortumknows) #"Something is in there, and it's not me," I say grimly.

"Something is in there," you say with a deepening frown. "And it's not me."

"I wish I wasn't so quick to believe you." Dr. Mortum looks over at the door, as if \${puppet_name} would come waltzing back in at any moment. "But \${phe} has been acting oddly." A deep sigh. "And I suppose that technically it would not be improbable with a second individual capable of possessing bodies now that one is revealed. Just unlikely."

"I think we have gone beyond statistic probabilities right now." Your smile is grim. "I don't know what has happened or who, but neither of us can afford to ignore the truth."

"I'm not ignoring it," Dr. Mortum snaps. "I was, perhaps, hoping that the truth might have been yet another misdirection. I have admitted I was wrong. Don't rub it in."

*if mortum_flirting_puppet

"I'm not," you say, voice softening. "Believe me, that's the last thing I want to do. I miss..." You rub your face, the scabs there itch like the rest of your body. Cold sweat and bad decisions. "I miss you and I'm terrified. This shouldn't be possible."

"I agree." No elaboration on exactly how much of what you said \${mhe} agrees with. "I wonder..."

*else

"I'm not. I'm sorry." You rub your face, the scabs there itch like the rest of your body. Cold sweat and sticky sheets. "I'm just frustrated. This shouldn't be possible."

"I agree." \${mhe} frowns, rubbing \${mhis} chin. "I wonder..."

"What do you think happened?" The question is an honest one, Dr. Mortum is smarter than is safe for you, and right now you need \${mhis} help.

*if (mortumknows) #"I swear, I didn't lie to you," I plead. "That body should be empty."

"I swear, I didn't lie to you," you plead. "That body should be empty."

"But it's not, is it?" Dr. Mortum's voice is tense, but for once you don't think you're entirely to blame. "Merde, I should have taken precautions."

"You should," you say, but it's only half an accusation. "But I can see why you didn't. It must have been easier to believe I had lied to you."

"You're not wrong." The words are tight, the feelings once more pushed down and under control. "I allowed myself to trust, and once more that 'bit me in the ass' as you Americans put it."

"I don't know if I count as American," you admit with the thinnest of smiles. You've missed this, regardless of the circumstances. "On account of not being human."

"Ah." It's almost a laugh. Almost a smile. Both quickly aborted. Maybe you are not the only one who missed what you were. "That might be true. However, I do think we need to focus on the matter at hand first."

"What do you think happened?" Your question is honest, right now Dr. Mortum is more informed than you, and all you can do is hope \${mhe}'ll be willing to help you.

*if (not(mortumknows)) #"Something has taken over \${puppet_name}. \${phe} doesn't sound like \$p{him}self."

"Something has taken over \${puppet_name}. \${phe} doesn't sound like \$p{him}self." \${phe} doesn't sound like you.

"I had come to a similar conclusion." Dr. Mortum's voice is tight with anger. "And for once, I can't blame you."

"Blame can come later. What do you think happened?" The question is carefully phrased, you're unwilling to make an enemy of Dr. Mortum, right now you need \${mhis} help.

*if (not(mortumknows)) #"That body used to be brain dead," I start my nervous confession.

*goto confession

#"You suspected something would happen," I counter. "You knew."

"You suspected something would happen," you say, giving Dr. Mortum a hard stare. "You knew something was wrong." You can feel \${mhis} thoughts, rattled by what just happened. If you stay on the offensive you might get some answers.

"I did," \${mhe} admits.

*if mortumknows

"\${puppet_name} came to begged me to rescue you from the Rangers. You. Not your body. It was as if our earlier conversation had not happened."

"And you thought I had been lying to you." You say it as a statement.

"I did," \${mhe} agrees. "I could not puzzle out the motivation, but it seemed the most logical conclusion. And..." \${mhe} drifts off, looking at the door. "Things feel different now. It's like \${phe} remembers some facts, but none of the emotion behind it."

"What do you think happened?" The question is carefully phrased, you're unwilling to make an enemy of Dr. Mortum, right now you need \${mhis} help.

*else

"\${puppet_name} has been acting oddly since \${phe} begged me to rescue you from the Rangers. I took it as stress at first, but now I am not so sure."

"\${!phe} doesn't act the same." You say it as a statement, though you're not as sure as you sound.

"Exactly." Dr. Mortum looks sick with worry. "It's like they're not even the same person. There are flashes now and then, but..." \${mhe} drifts off, looking at the door. "It's like \${phe} remembers some facts, but none of the emotion behind it."

"What do you think happened?" The question is carefully phrased, you're unwilling to make an enemy of Dr. Mortum, right now you need \${mhis} help.

"What do I..." \${mhe} breaks off before the sentence finishes, allowing \${mhim}self a long, careful look at you. "What I think is less important than what I should do. Which would be to take precautions about you."

"If I was going to manipulate you don't you think I would have already?" You let yourself sound as frustrated as you feel. "Right now I need allies, not puppets. And we both have a problem in common."

*if mortumknows

*goto puppetopen

*else

*goto puppetsecret

*label acegonetalk

*fake_choice

*if (mortumknows) #"Something is in there. Could it be Ace?"

"Something is in there," you say with a deepening frown. "Could it be Ace?"

"I don't know. It should be impossible, if what I've heard about Shroud is correct. Ace should be dead." Dr. Mortum looks over at the door, as if \${puppet_name} would come waltzing back in at any moment. "If I am honest, I was hoping you hd been lying to me for some reason when \${phe} came to me for help with \${phis} boss." A deep sigh. "But I still believe your story. And that means there is someone new in there. Or old. However unlikely."

"I think we have gone beyond statistic probabilities right now." Your smile is grim. "I don't know what has happened or who, but neither of us can afford to ignore the truth."

"I'm not ignoring it," Dr. Mortum snaps. "I have admitted I was wrong. Don't rub it in."

*if mortum_flirting_puppet

"I'm not," you say, voice softening. "Believe me, that's the last thing I want to do. I miss..." You rub your face, the scabs there itch like the rest of your body. Cold sweat and bad decisions. "I miss you and I'm terrified. This shouldn't be possible."

"I agree." No elaboration on exactly how much of what you said \${mhe} agrees with. "I wonder..."

*else

"I'm not. I'm sorry." You rub your face, the scabs there itch like the rest of your body. Cold sweat and sticky sheets. "I'm just frustrated. This shouldn't be possible."

"I agree." \${!mhe} frowns, rubbing \${mhis} chin. "I wonder..."

"What do you think happened?" The question is an honest one, Dr. Mortum is smarter than is safe for you, and right now you need \${mhis} help.

*if (mortumknows) #"I swear, I didn't lie to you," I plead. "That body should be empty."

"I swear, I didn't lie to you," you plead. "That body should be empty."

"But it's not, is it?" Dr. Mortum's voice is tense, but for once you don't think you're entirely to blame. "Merde, I should have taken precatons. I saw how \${puppet_name} reacted to the video we saw. About Ace. Something might have awoken."

"You couldn't know," you say, so very softly. "Ace should be dead. I never felt anything in there."

"Until the video. I should never have looked into it." The words are tight, the feelings once more pushed down and under control. "I went digging and once more that 'bit me in the ass' as you Americans put it."

"I don't know if I count as American," you admit with the thinnest of smiles. You've missed this, regardless of the circumstances. "On account of not being human."

"Ah." It's almost a laugh. Almost a smile. Both quickly aborted. Maybe you are not the only one who missed what you were. "That might be true. However, I do think we need to focus on the matter at hand first."

"What do you think happened?" Your question is honest, right now Dr. Mortum is more informed than you, and all you can do is hope {mhe}'ll be willing to help you.

*if (not(mortumknows)) # "Something has taken over {puppet_name}. I bet it's Ace."

"Something has taken over {puppet_name}. {!phe} doesn't sound like {p{him}self}. I bet it's Ace."

"So {phe} told you about that, did {phe}?" Dr. Mortum's voice is tight with anger. "Not that it matters now. I think your conclusions might be correct. I just don't understand how."

"Not even I know everything about brains. Or suppressed memories." You let out a hiss. "There is of course the possibility that {phe} is possessed by someone else."

"Indeed." The laugh is tight with desperation. "We can't assume anything until we have more facts. No matter how unlikely the answer might be."

"What do you think happened?" The question is carefully phrased, you need to know if {mhe} thinks you are involved.

*if (not(mortumknows)) # "I know what happened to Ace afterwards," I start my nervous confession.

*goto confession

"You suspected something would happen," I counter. "You knew."

"You suspected something would happen," you say, giving Dr. Mortum a hard stare. "You knew something was wrong after you showed {phim} the video." You can feel {mhis} thoughts, rattled by what just happened. If you stay on the offensive you might get some answers.

"I did," {mhe} admits.

*if mortumknows

"{puppet_name} came to beg me to rescue you from the Rangers. You. Not your body. It was as if our earlier conversation had not happened."

"And you thought I had been lying to you." You say it as a statement.

"I did," {mhe} agrees. "I could not puzzle out the motivation, but it seemed the most logical conclusion. And..." {mhe} drifts off, looking at the door. "I called {phim} Ace, but that didn't fit either. And neither did we. It's like {phe} remembers some facts about us, but none of the emotion behind it."

"What do you think happened?" The question is carefully phrased, you're unwilling to make an enemy of Dr. Mortum, right now you need {mhis} help.

*else

"{puppet_name} has been acting oddly since {phe} saw the video, as you say. I took it as stress at first, but now I am not so sure. I assumed {phe} talked to you about it then?"

"Yes. And things started to turn strange. {!phe} doesn't act like {p{him}self}." You say it as a statement, though you're not as sure as you sound.

"Exactly." Dr. Mortum looks sick with worry. "It's like they've become unstitched in time. There are flashes now and then, but..." {phe} drifts off, looking at the door. "It's like {phe} remember me, but none of the emotion behind it. And everything else is a mess."

"What do you think happened?" The question is carefully phrased, you're unwilling to make an enemy of Dr. Mortum, right now you need {mhis} help.

"What do I..." {mhe} breaks off before the sentence finishes, allowing {mhim}self a long, careful look at you. "Ace or not, what I think happened is less important than what I should do now. Which would be to take precautions about you."

"If I was going to manipulate you don't you think I would have already?" You let yourself sound as frustrated as you feel. "Right now I need allies, not puppets. And we both have a problem in common."

*if mortumknows

*goto puppetopen

*else

*goto puppetsecret

*label puppetopen

"We dom" Dr. Mortum reluctantly admits. "A body we both care very much about is walking around on \${phis} own volition. Which shouldn't be possible." The last is said with a curious look at you.

*fake_choice

##"It shouldn't. I swear." I wouldn't have done it otherwise.

"It shouldn't. I swear." You sink back slightly now that the worst crisis is over. "There never was anything in there in the first place, I couldn't have done what I did otherwise."

"It sounds so gruesome." Dr. Mortum shakes \${mhis} head, walking over to grab a chair that has been resting in a corner. \${!mhe} sits down heavily, as if \${mhe} is the one who has got \${mhis} strings cut. "It's hard to wrap my mind around."

"It wasn't like that." You rub your arm, the IV is itching. "\${!phe} was empty. Brain dead. Flatlined and marked as an organ donor. I saved \${phis} life."

"And then you lived it." The words are tired, hardly even an accusation.

"That part wasn't planned." Your voice wavers slightly, but you can blame exhaustion. "I genuinely liked you. Otherwise I wouldn't have taken the risk to get close."

"And I genuinely liked \${puppet_name}." The name is a pointed reminder that things are not settled between you.

"That was me," you point out, though that is rubbing salt in the wound. "Though I suppose it was a better me than I am capable of being in this body."

"That doesn't exactly make me feel better."

"I suppose not." You let out a sigh. "If it's any consolation, it hurts on this end as well."

*if (ace) ##"The video you found must have reawaked something."

"The video you found must have reawakened something." You rub your arm, the IV line is itching. "I felt it when I watched. Like I was there. Like it was real and happened to me."

"Do you think that's possible?" Dr. Mortum shakes \${mhis} head, walking over to grab a chair that has been resting in a corner. \${!mhe} sits down heavily, as if \${mhe} is the one who has got \${mhis} strings cut. "That we have brought back the dead?"

"I don't know," you admit helplessly. "But right now that's the closest thing I have to a theory."

"Unless there is another body-hopper." \${!mhis} face contorts into a grimace. As if the very prospect is disgusting to \${mhim}. "Do you know of any?"

"No," you say after a moment's thought. "I'm not sure if another telepath could manage. At least not for long."

"\${!phe} was not acting... smoothly. It almost felt like \${phe} glitched. If it wasn't for the fact that there are very few telepaths remaining in this town, that would have been my first suggestion."

"And yet you listened to \${phim}." There is some bite to your accusation.

"Maybe I wanted to believe you'd been lying to me," \${mhe} says, giving you a stern look. "It would be better if it had been about that. The truth hurts."

"That's fair." You let out a sigh. "If it's any consolation, it hurts on this end as well."

*if (not(ace)) ##"Could it be the original owner of the body?"

"Could it be the original owner of the body?" You never noticed another presence, but thinking back, could you be sure? How well could it have hidden?

"Do you really think that is a possibility?" Dr. Mortum shakes \${mhis} head, walking over to grab a chair that has been resting in a corner. \${!mhe} sits down heavily, as if \${mhe} is the one who has got \${mhis} strings cut. "I thought you said \${phe} was brain dead?"

"\${!phe} was, and marked as an organ donor." You rub your arm, the IV is itching. "But nobody knows what such long-term possession can do to a brain."

"You mean your mind working as life support until it managed to heal?" \${!mhe} sounds doubtful. "I suppose some people have woken up from comas before. Not that it's the same."

"It's not." A soft sigh. "Could you... look into who \${puppet_name} might have been? Maybe that can give us some clues? I can tell you what hospital I found \${phim} in, but sadly there was no name."

"I can do that," Dr. Mortum agrees. "It is as you say, it might help to make some sense out of this mess. Maybe hurt less."

"If it's any consolation, it hurts on this end as well." You let out a sigh.

*set puppetmortumresearch true

#"I picked it because it was easy to control. It must be someone else."

"I picked it because it was easy to control," you say thoughtfully, trying to think through the pain. "If it was easy for me, it must be possible for someone else."

"Easy to control?" Dr. Mortum shakes \${mhis} head, walking over to grab a chair that has been resting in a corner. \${mhe} sits down heavily, as if \${mhe} is the one who has got \${mhis} strings cut. "It sounds so gruesome when you say it."

"It's the truth." You rub your arm, the IV is itching. "\${phe} was empty. Brain dead. Flatlined and marked as an organ donor. I saved \${phis} life, but that was just the body. The mind was long gone."

"And you replaced it with your own." The words are tired, hardly even an accusation.

"I'm not that powerful," you say, because you still have limits. "To actually inhabit a body I couldn't keep fighting the true owner. I needed it to be empty."

"So you couldn't just make an empty body?"

"I'm not Shroud. No." You shake your head after considering it a moment. "You have no idea how powerful minds truly are. I push, misdirect and fool. I don't destroy. Not like that."

*if villainy >= 70

But could you? Would it be possible?

"That is a relief I suppose." Dr. Mortum relaxes, as if you've passed some sort of test. "Not that it makes what happened hurt less."

"If it's any consolation, it hurts on this end as well." You let out a sigh.

*if puppetmortum_relationship = "revealed"

"No," \${mhe} admits. "I don't want to hurt you." There is a short laugh then, sticking in \${mhis} throat. "That's the whole absurdity of this. It would be easier if I did, perhaps that was why I so readily believed \${puppet_name} even when I could see how different \${phe} was."

*else

"It should be, shouldn't it?" There is a short laugh then, sticking in \${mhis} throat. "I wanted to hurt you so badly." The admission is pained. "And now look at you. I got my wish and I feel..." a pause, as \${mhe} considers his feelings. "I feel wretched."

"It wouldn't be hard to take revenge now," you say, trying to make a joke that won't land badly. You fail, you can feel the flinch.

"Is that what you want? For me to hurt you?" \${mhe} continues before you have a chance to answer. "It won't be that easy. For either of us."

"What are you trying to say?" Your question is cautious.

"I'm saying that I'm sitting here talking to you like you're \${puppet_name}. Like we..." There's anger in Dr. Mortum's voice, but not aimed at you. "And I spent two days with whatever is in \${puppet_name}'s body and I know the difference. I know who..." A deep sigh.

*if mortum_flirting_puppet

*if \${puppet_gender} = "man"

"I know my boyfriend when I'm talking to him."

*if \${gender} = "woman"

A shake of \${mhis} head. "Even when \${che}'s a man I suppose."

*else

"I know my girlfriend when I'm talking to her."

*if \${gender} = "man"

A shake of \${mhis} head. "Even when \${che}'s a woman I suppose."

*else

"I know my best friend when I'm talking to him."

"It's complicated," you say with a helpless shrug. What else are you supposed to say to that?

"Agreed." Dr. Mortum nods. "And something for later. Right now we have an emergency to deal with. Personal business can be dealt with later."

"I understand. But I don't know how much help I will be laid out like this. And the concussion doesn't help."

"Ah, yes." \${mhe} looks slightly ashamed, as if \${mhe} had forgotten. "I have access to the best medical equipment, we'll get you back on your feet as soon as possible. Trust me, I want this situation resolved as soon as possible."

*fake_choice

##"That's good to hear." I can't stop the smile.

"That's good to hear." You can't stop the smile, to hear Dr. Mortum makes you feel better about your whole situation. You can't say that you deserve it, but you're grateful all the same. "Now all we need to do is find out where \${phe} might have gone to ground before something worse happens."

##"You need to be prepared that \${puppet_name} might not be fixable."

"You need to be prepared that \${puppet_name} might not be fixable." You speak softly, voice filled with worry.

*if ace

If this is somehow fragments of Ace resurfacing, that's not going to be something you can easily erase. And if it's not, it's even worse.

Without knowing who has possessed your puppet, you have no idea how much damage has and will be done before this is resolved.

"We will face that when we come to it," Dr. Mortum says, voice hard. "If you are planning on suggesting killing \${puppet_name}, don't. Whatever has happened \${phe} deserves a second chance."

"Of course not." You look down, unsure of your own feelings at this moment, but this is not a time to argue. "I want what's best for \${puppet_name} just as much as you do."

##"Do you think this was an accident or an attack?"

"Do you think this was an accident or an attack?" It would be a good way of getting close to Dr. Mortum. Or you.

"Considering what happened so far," Dr. Mortum waves \${mhis} hand vaguely in your direction, "I think we have to assume this is a direct attack on you. No matter the cause."

"I hate that you're right." Just what you need. Another enemy.

*if ace

Even if it is Ace's ghost come out to play, \${phe} doesn't seem to like you very much.

*goto fusefind

*label puppetsecret

"We do," Dr. Mortum reluctantly admits. "My

*if mortumpuppetnsfw

lover,

*elseif mortum_flirting_puppet

*if puppet_gender = "man"

boyfriend,

*else

girlfriend,

*else

best friend,

and your assistant." A deep sigh. "What a mess."

*fake_choice

#It hurts that I can't comfort \${mhim}.

It hurts that you can't offer any comfort here. Dr. Mortum has no idea that you were the one that \${mhe} bared his heart to, and not the puppet that's now betrayed you both. Stopped being the empty vessel you needed. Your alternate body. Your way of interacting with the world. With Dr. Mortum.

\${swear}.

"I'm not your enemy," you repeat, because you need \${him} to understand that. "Something terrible has happened and we need to work together. We both have skills the other needs."

"You're right." Dr. Mortum shakes \${mhis} head, walking over to grab a chair that has been resting in a corner. \${mhe} sits down heavily, as if \${mhe} is the one who has got \${mhis} strings cut. "Your telepathy. My genius." An empty laugh. "Of course we should be able to fix this. Fix \${phim}."

#I hate that it is \${puppet_name} \${mhe} cares about, not me.

You hate the fact that what Dr. Mortum is sitting here worrying about is your puppet. \${puppet_name}. Not you. The one \${mhe} actually knows. Who cares about \${mhim}. What a mess indeed, but this wasn't something you could predict. Or plan for.

All you can do is try to pick up the pieces.

"You need to keep your head clear," you say, because you can't afford to have \${mhim} go soft on an impostor that's not you, let alone \${puppet_name}.

"Whatever has happened you can't make any assumptions that you know how \${phe} will react if cornered. We're both in this together."

"You've got a point, I suppose." Dr. Mortum shakes \${mhis} head, walking over to grab a chair that has been resting in a corner. \${mhe} sits down heavily, as if \${mhe} is the one who has got \${mhis} strings cut. "Your telepathy. My genius." An empty laugh. "We should be able to solve this mystery. Help \${phim}."

#I need to focus on facts, not feelings.

You can't afford feelings. Not right now. Not with your life and freedom at stake. And neither can Dr. Mortum. \${mhe}'s supposed to be a former villain, and right now \${mhe}'s looking lost and heartbroken.

"Listen to me, Doctor." You force yourself to sound confident and sure of yourself, no room for doubt. "You need to pull yourself together, you're no help to anyone if you have a breakdown. If you care about \${puppet_name} you owe it to \${phim} to figure out what has happened."

"I'm not about to have a breakdown." Dr. Mortum shakes \${mhis} head angrily, walking over to grab a chair that has been resting in a corner. "I'm grieving. I don't expect you to understand that." \${mhe} sits down heavily, as if \${mhe} is the one who has got \${mhis} strings cut. "We need to find out what's going on so we can help \${phim}. Between my genius and your telepathy that should be possible."

*if mcmetmortum

"Right now I am not in the best of shapes." The understatement of the day. "Don't expect any miracles."

"Don't undersell yourself." There's a tension in Dr. Mortum's voice, but \${mhis} mind gives you no clues how to read it. "I've been looking into you, \${surname}, and from the way I see it your capabilities should not be underestimated."

*elseif not(known_telepath)

"Telepathy." You've noticed he has assumed you have that since the start, and yet \${villain_name} is not a known telepath.

"Oh don't bother denying it." \${mhe} scoffs.

*if suit_telepathy

"Your armor was created to amplify a telepath's power."

*else

"Your armor was created with a psi-sensitive interface."

\${mhis} smile is thin. "Besides, I've been looking you up, \${name} \${surname}. And who you used to be."

"Grand," you sigh. Not surprising, it wouldn't be hard after breaking you out. \${mhe} would have had plenty of time to look into things. "What's the verdict then?" You can't understand the tension in \${mhis} voice, and \${mhis} mind gives no context clues.

"You are not to be underestimated." Dr. Mortum's smile is thin, almost pleased. "And right now that is just what we need."

*else

"Right now I am not in the best of shapes." You gesture to your legs, then your head. "I'm lucky to be alive."

"They used to say that, didn't they?" Dr. Mortum's voice is tense, but \${mhis} mind gives you no context clues as to why. "But I don't think that's true. \${name} \${surname} was never lucky."

"Of course you looked me up," you sigh. Not surprising, it wouldn't be hard after breaking you out. \${mhe} would have had plenty of time.

"Of course," \${mhe} eagerly agrees. "I needed to know."

"So what's the verdict?" Laughing at the former sidekick?

"You are just what we need." Dr. Mortum's smile is thin, almost pleased. "Unlike others, I do not underestimate your capabilities."

"Don't overestimate my stamina, though." \${mhe} sounds too smug about having a telepath on your side, but you suppose it's saying something that he's relying on your concussion and old-fashioned will to keep you from controlling \${mhim}.

"Ah, yes." Dr. Mortum looks slightly ashamed. "I have access to the best medical equipment, we'll get you back on your feet as soon as possible. Trust me, I want this situation resolved as soon as possible."

*fake_choice

#"That's a motivation I can trust," I agree.

"That is a motivation I can trust." \${mhe} feels honest, at least in this. \${mhe} wants \${puppet_name} restored to normal, and you out of \${mhis} lab so \${mhe} can get back to work.

#"You need to be prepared that this might not be fixable."

"You need to be prepared that this is a situation that might not be fixable." You speak softly, trying to sound sympathetic.

*if ace

If this is somehow fragments of Ace resurfacing, that's not going to be the \${puppet_gender} \${mhe} knows. And if it's not, it's even worse.

Without knowing who has possessed your puppet, you have no idea how much damage has and will be done before this is resolved.

"I will face that when I come to it," Dr. Mortum says, voice hard. "If you are planning on suggesting killing \${puppet_name}, don't. We will fix this. Period."

*if mortumpuppetnsfw

The heat in \${mhis} voice almost makes you blush. \${mhe} will not give up on \${mhis} lover. On you.

*else

The conviction in \${mhis} voice makes your face twitch. \${mhe} will not give up on \${mhis}

*if mortum_flirting_puppet

*if \${puppet_gender} = "man"

boyfriend.

*else

girlfriend.

*else

best friend.

On you.

"Of course not." You look down, trying to collect yourself. "I want \${puppet_name} back just as much as you do."

#"Do you think this was an accident or an attack?"

"Do you think this was an accident or an attack?" It would be a good way of getting close to Dr. Mortum. Or you.

"Considering what happened so far," Dr. Mortum waves \${mhis} hand vaguely in your direction, "I think we have to assume this is a direct attack on you. No matter the cause."

"I hate that you're right." Just what you need. Another enemy.

*if ace

Even if it is Ace's ghost come out to play, \${phe} doesn't seem to like you very much.

*goto fusefind

*label fusefind

"My probe should be able to track \${puppet_name} to where they are hiding." Dr. Mortum looks down at \${mhis} watch. "I have other allies I can call in to pick \${phim} up. Allies that won't have to worry about bullets."

THE END FOR NOW

(to be added, variables for the strangler impostor, and one of the ones who usually stays away.)

[QnA October](#)

[Nov 7, 2023](#)

I did a reddit AMA to co-incide with the release of the demo, here is the link if you want to check out my answers:

[Reddit AMA](#)

The RO's 'heart/soul' (emotions/feelings, love/affection) is turned into one physical object/any form or shape, what is it? How protective are they of their own now physical heart? Are they willing to trust someone to hold it?

Huh. I have to admit it is rare that I am completely stumped by a question, but I truly am with this one. I don't even know how to begin to conceptualize it? Is this in reference to some online/japanese thing I am not aware of, like that throwing up flowers thing or red string? Regardless, I don't think I can answer it. I have no idea. My brain only goes logical to have it be something indestructible so you don't have to worry about it. Sorry, sometimes my brain don't get things.

sorry if this has been asked before but what did HG think seeing the same (or at least very similar) face as their dead sibling sitting across from them during that meeting with sidestep?

Well fuck, this is weird. Am I imagining things? Probably. Do I miss them that badly? I guess I do. Damn, those were the good old days.

How much power does a lazer dolphin lazer have? For instance, if one was trying to get into neuclear sub would they be able to cut through it? How thick do the walls of my underwater buildings need to be to stay safe? Or is their no true safety in the turgid waters of Los Diablos?

Lasers are short ranged but very strong in water. They can puncture a sub with enough time. It would be easier to build an underwater base, because some materials are less vulnerable to lasers. However, you might run into a different problem then... someone might already have claimed that real estate.

Also. Does Argent spend time at the beach anymore? In the water? Was it something she loved and lost or does she still enjoy it?

Argent has avoided the beach. It would be a huge thing for her to go back. Think Sidestep and the Heartbreak site.

Could you elaborate on the political leanings of an anarchist Villain? Or the range of positions they can take?

Not sure yet. There will be choices/rants/monologues for various flavors, but I haven't decided the range of them yet.

I ask because the term anarchist has pretty different meanings to something like revolutionary.

I am using the term "anarchist" very, very loosely, and not in the strict political way. It is used more in the way television pundits might talk about "those anarchist hooligans" rather than a specific position and ideal way of governing things. I liked it more than revolutionary because gave a more vague and

unfocused vibe.

Bad boys 2 or point break? Obviously I mean which would Argent force sidestep to watch first?

Point break!

Now for the less serious questions. How would Ortega feel about a mechanical horse like from vampire hunter D? Or a cyborg horse?

Look, that would be amazing actually!

How would Argent deal with a hilariously powerful maniac offering effectively devil deals (these deals are always honored to spirit of the request no tricks here but are offered by a clearly dangerous maniac) to anyone willing to take them while usually asking for nothing in return?

Argent doesn't trust like that. Though who knows, some Sidesteps might be venturing into that territory with the Regenerator...

I got a general world building question: what is the most impressive element strength wise that can actually be used by people in verse regardless of resource cost? Because technically we can make adamant like from the old myths which basically completely indestructible, right now the problem is it's a bitch to get the right mix (even with computers) and costs a lot of rare minerals and metals to try.

I would say that is probably Plasteel, which is the common term for a metal/plastic hybrid material with great strength and light weight. It's the core material in personal armor, modern armored vehicles, and some mods.

Are Argent's eyes silver as well or do they have color? Did they lose their color with the nano-armor?

All silver. They don't exist anymore, they are all nanovores.

All the rangers live in different buildings, in different areas. What security measures and other protocols are in place for the ranger's places of residence, or are they entirely up to the individual? How quiet are the locations kept? Are other apartment residents informed that a ranger lives in their building due to potential added danger from attacks? Despite being unlikely to be able to use any photos, do the paparazzi still tend to congregate near their or other hero's homes?

The security measures do vary, but they all have at least the Ranger minimum and have to be approved. The other residents are informed in some cases (Argent insisted) but that is not a general thing. Some add up the clues anyway, but that is more of an open secret. Some move, others see it as an added safety. Paparazzi is kept away by steep fines and the general Rangers security. That is one thing that is provided.

Sort of based on a question from last month's QnA, is Argent upset that Step didn't stop the nanovores in time to save her, no matter how unlikely it is that they could have saved her in the first place?

No.

There's been a lot of talk about seeing other regenes as family or like victims and wanting to save them and such, but will there be options to just HATE regenes and never get over that hatred?

Maybe. I might have to see if I can write that into Arde's path, I am just not sure yet. I'll have to have a go at it first.

Sidestep has hell a traps set in their mind against telepathic intrusion, would they still technically have those traps set as the Puppet or do the traps need telepathy to actually work?

Hmmm. I would say that about 30% of them would still work.

Also based on a question from last month about Ortega's Sidestep scar, does this mean if you don't get the Sui tag in Rebirth that they will never get the 1 scar, they'll only get 2-3?

Probably, can't say for sure until it is in the book.

Did the second handler get in more trouble than the first after Step's second escape, considering they were "weaker" after HB or since Step apparently did some buckwild things to get out the second time, was it more understandable that they could escape?

Hehehe oh spoilers.

Kind of a random one but do you write the FH story first then go through and code it all afterwards or do you code and write at the same time? Do you write the extra flavor text (lines based off if you have high infamy, low arrogance, etc.) during the coding process? Either way, I feel like my head would explode trying to keep everything straight, so well done.

It varies. Some scenes come as story first and then code gets added, some scenes naturally come as code first. Most are a hybrid, mostly story but the occasional code. A bit like the revelations snippets I post on Patreon, that's usually what a first draft looks like.

Not sure if you can see all the stats that players get but based off what you can see, do you think there will be a big disparity in the imposters? Like one of them is going to be way more common than the other two?

I have no idea! I need to finalize the code first, I am still juggling variables.

Since cancer is pretty common in regenes, how is it treated? Is it terms for recycling or do they use chemotherapy and surgeries?

Surgery and chemotherapy, there is a lot of money invested in a Re-Gene at the later stages, they will do a LOT to try to save them. Right out of decanting however, that might be recycling unless it's a very useful boost power.

When Ratking possesses Step, can they use Step's telepathy like Step does with the Puppet's precognition? Not that they could be on Steps level of telepathy, just to enhance their own powers?

Just the faintest hint, yes. Not much.

Then a final more fun question. Do you think Argent would be a fairy type pokemon trainer (for the aesthetic) or a fighting type pokemon trainer (because...she fights)? Steel and electric are not allowed obvi, those are already taken lol

Fairy!

About past hero reputations, does Sidestep have a set opinion on them or is variable/head-cannon territory? For example, does Sidestep always want to have been a hero and never a sidekick, or do some Steps feel guilt or just plain resentment at being seen as a hero while some Steps like being so closely associated with Charge as a sidekick? I hope that makes sense. If it is set, what are Sidesteps opinions on them?

I think this will be mostly headcanon.

Does repeated exposure to telepathy (eg communication via telepathy, having repeatedly survived telepathic attacks) allow for non-telepaths/psychics to develop an acquired resistance against psychic influence/attacks? Or become more susceptible?

It can be both!

What does Bumblebee (Amanda Moore) look like? Temerain?

I have no idea yet, looks is usually the last thing I come up with for a character, but I do think Bumblebee has curly hair for some reason.

Do any of the characters believe in the concept/existence of a multiverse, and that their reality is just one of many?

I think Daniel has probably considered that. Dr. Mortum as well.

Can HG thread a deaf person who can't hear them? What about someone who can't feel their touch at all? Can certain neurological conditions/diseases (eg Congenital insensitivity) prevent them from threading their target?

It would not work on someone who can't hear or understand HG, so nobody deaf (unless they read HG's lips, or HG learns to sign), or someone who doesn't speak the language HG is speaking in. Feeling the touch is not required, that would not affect things.

In the event that Sidestep ends up with a blinded eye thanks to Argent, could that be used to turn public perception against the Rangers? I imagine something like that could be a useful tool for some Anarch Steps.

Yes, if Sidestep dare to use it, since that might reveal a bit too much about themselves.

What kind of relationships do Vera and Skyraider have with their own queerness? Like, how comfortable are they with the fact that they could be attracted to someone of the same gender? And for that matter have they ever been in a same-gender relationship before.

I think Vera has not really thought too much about it, she's comfortable, and it has never really been a big bother to her. Sky-Raider has had a bit more of a journey, and is a bit more thoughtful about how he embraces and displays his own particular flamboyance and attraction to various genders. Both has been in same-sex relationships.

Do have specific heights written down for them (Vera / Raider) yet?

No...

If they end up working with Sidestep, which of the Rangers could be convinced that killing could be necessary? If it's all of them, who would be easiest or hardest to convince?

Easiest to hardest: Argent - Chen - Ortega - Daniel.

If Julia and Ricardo met, what would they think of each other? And for that matter what would they be like if they both existed in the same world as siblings?

They would probably both be dead from sibling rivalry and increasingly upping the ante of shit they did while growing up because neither would back down.

Does Armadillo know who Sidestep is? I mean Sidestep as Step the Re-Gene, the scaped cuckoo who did all that mess

No.

In the present day how frequently do unromanced ROs go through hook ups/casual dating in their lives? Or, in other words, who has more game?

Ortega followed by Chen and Daniel

Given that the majority of stories on COG already take place in the US, have you ever considered setting FH in Sweden?

No, it really wouldn't work for me. However, my partner is writing one set in Sweden.

Have Dr. Halabi and Mortum ever had a thing?

No.

Since organized crime historically thrives on the preying and exploitation of the working class, how does Vera reconcile working for HG with serving her community?

Keeping HG off her turf, and earning money. Better the devil you know/can use.

At his apartment Ricardo can admit to never even having kissed a man if m!Step didn't date him in the past, but is Julia just as inexperienced with women if previously unromanced by f!Step?

Hmmmm. I dunno. I think she might have had a kiss or two, but that wouldn't hold as much weight, because sometimes drunk girls are just like that, and it's practice, right?

Are any of the ROs good at makeup?

I honestly don't know. I think Ortega is passable, Daniel knows a lot of the basics of facial care, Argent sadly has her own issues but wants to.

If Argent, Danny and Chen had been gender swappable, would their opposite sex counterparts have been the same or a little different?

Argent would be similar, with a decidedly more camp feel to him, would probably be seen as "oh yeah, he's gay." Danny would be similar, while Chen is not gender swappable and the same character in my head.

How popular was/is Sidestep among Re-Genes? Are they like, a celebrity? More like a legend? How many of them actually know how they look like or have met them/see them?

Spoilers.

At one point in the interview with Mia, Sidestep can say that the laser dolphins are real. Have they actually had a run in with them, or was it just to make their point? ...Will they have a run in with the laser dolphins? Has anyone else around Sidestep seen them?

Sidestep has felt the laser dolphins, they have on occasion ended up in/used the water. I don't think anybody around them has... oh no, I forgot! One definitely has. Closer than Sidestep even.

Back in the Sidestep days, did the rangers and close vigilantes often hang out? I assume it's sort of up to headcanon how much Sidestep participated, but it seems like, based on a few lore posts, that they all just spent time together occasionally! Who showed up often? Who had to be dragged? Were there little friend-groups that formed within the larger group?

Up to headcanon, but Sidestep was more sociable those days. Though it is up to headcanon if Sidestep was dragged or willing, there was a lot of hanging out. I don't know exactly how the vibes worked, if we get into it in game we'll know more, but right now it is one of the things you have to work out for your own Sidestep.

What was going through Ortega's mind when he told Sidestep about his apartment being blown up if Sidestep goes back to his apartment in book 2?

Mostly it was ahah that is a funny story yeah, oh wow, I was in a bad way then, let's laugh about the new couch instead.

What does Nazar think of Step if they're in a relationship with Steel? What about Argent or Herald?

Pyrocblast would not believe his eyes at the relationship with either Steel or Argent, he would be less surprised at Herald.

I saw in the last QnA that boosts often are resistant to temperatures and that made me wonder if the hero drug was inspired by DNP? A failed diet pill that cooks you from the inside if you take too much. As in unless your body mutates to handle inhuman body temperatures you'd die a horrible death. Pretty interesting stuff that's been around since the 30's somewhere and is still used, illegally that is.

It was partly inspired, yes. That and Thalidomide and the birth defect scandals.

Hi! What do you do when you have an idea for your story, but you can't make it work?

Try to figure out the reason. Occasionally the idea might have to be put in my scrap folder for future use, occasionally I might have to change the setting or a character to make the idea work. Your subconsciousness is stopping you for a reason, often a sacrifice needs to be made to proceed. Fallen Hero was made from two ideas/books in my scrap folder which neither worked well on their own, with huge stylistic bits taken from a third. Neither of them were good on their own, but together they worked.

So if Argent was only able to save herself through her technopathy did she assume Step had a similar ability in order to stop the rest of the nanos? Since she knows Step has a chip I wonder what her thoughts are, she seems to have more insight than even Ortega second only to Chen.

She knew Sidestep was a telepath thanks to Ortega. So she assumed the control mechanism for the nanovores were telepathic in nature.

Also can we convince Chen the autopsy photos are fake if we use the regenerator and get rid of our regene tats?

Yes. It would be a logical explanation if you play your cards right, Chen was already considering that route.

Also if you're a really wealthy Step could you pay off any of the Rangers debt anonymously (Ortega and Chen *cough*)?

Possibly. Do you value your friends above your cause? Sounds like an interesting choice.

If Blaze and Zephyr realize they blamed Locus because they were threaded by HG would they regret or try to make amends?

Regret, Blaze would try to make amends.

Can/does Blaze ever suffer from overheating from using his powers? Is there any type of strain in general he feels with them, with or without using them?

Yes he can overheat, just like a person can technically step into a fire and burn. Normally he's protected from it by instinct and control, but if surrounded by flammable materials things might escalate too fast for his reactions, or when someone gets into his head to manipulate his power use things might go very bad. There's no strain, just an increasing demand on body and metabolism. His heart rate goes way up, which is the biggest concern of his doctor.

I know you can't answer this but I'm gonna ask anyway. Is the person/people/organization who's been vanishing telepaths collecting them to create a rat-king but with human telepathic brains???

An interesting theory indeed! I can see the context clues, but as you might imagine I cannot confirm or deny.

Also I don't know if this has been asked before or if it's too inconvenient/spoily to answer, but there's a bunch of important characters (Sky-Raider and Vera, Zephyr, Lord Ember, Regina etc.) whose appearances we don't know much about (at least that I'm aware of). Could you give some vague descriptors like skin & hair color, vague body shape, any striking or important features? Not a very important question, but it would help match imagination to any potential descriptions in the future (for example, I only found out Sunstream is Asian because all fanartists I've seen drew her as such. I still don't know where that was mentioned).

I honestly never mentioned Sunstream was Asian I think, that just spread on its own. Or I did and forgot. Here is the thing. I am face blind. I don't really think about how people look, nor do that factor into how I write people much. So the descriptions won't be long. I still have no idea what Regina or Lord Ember looks like, Vera is gangly with dark wavy hair I think, Sky-Raider is kinda built with bleached hair. That's... it. I don't have any striking or important features, if I mentioned any, I would forget them again. I know that probably sucks for people who are more visually interested, but this is genuinely not something I know if that makes sense?

Can you tell us more about what Cavalier was like as a person?

Charismatic. Driven. Larger than life. Had some close friends he trusted utterly.

Will there be an opportunity to decide which of Sidestep's identities they identify most with?

Probably.

Are HG's threads affected by how the person interprets the commands? What would happen if the way someone interprets it makes no sense to them? Would it fail to take hold?

It does rely on people interpreting things. However, it is the victim's interpretation that is the important one, if it clashes with HG's doesn't matter. It is important to use the right words.

In scenarios where Chen is certain Sidestep is the villain but doesn't trust them how paranoid is he that they've read his mind and they know that he knows?

Very.

Did Ortega ever consider augmenting the arm damaged by the nanovores?

No, it was mostly skin damage.

If Ortega suspects Sidestep is the villain what did they think they were doing destroying HG's casino?

Villain rivalry! There's a lot of infighting between factions too.

Before Sidestep have there been any other instances where HG misread an in-person meeting bad enough their life could have been in danger?

Yep! HG is not perfect by any means.

Was Sidestep's power up from void blood due to TBR, or was it a full on second boost?

See... this could be debatable. It could be seen both ways, and we might get into it in the book.

Without TBRs could Sidestep ever have been powerful enough to resist threading? In the Enforcer AU if HG had been threading their sibling for years how would they react if they found that they suddenly couldn't anymore?

I doubt they would have, but it's always hard to say with AU's because there might have been other factors. And HG would be proud! Even if it was inconvenient...

There are times where Sidestep seems to instinctively want to hate Ortega for not saving them even though they know it's not really their fault. Will finding out Chen actually knew and actually could have found them make them hate him too?

It already has for some Sidesteps. Though there are other things at play.

Sidestep can be a complete teetotaler, but they never think twice about drinking as the puppet. Is this the puppet influencing them, or is there some other reason why Sidestep would be comfortable drinking as the puppet when they'd avoid alcohol as themselves?

That is puppet instincts, it just feels right.

What's the reason Anathema and HG are gender bound to you?

Anathema: I needed a cheap way to try to build closeness to Anathema since they would have a grisly death before too much interaction, and I figured gender might be part of that.

HG: I didn't want gender variables to add to the tension of certain events, some things would be perceived differently if a man did it to a woman, rather than a woman to another woman.

Do Re-genes age normally or do they effectively stop aging at their prime? Because we're actually on the verge of eliminating aging today some scientists have found that a part of the brain produces a chemical that causes one to age.

Re-Genes age normally.

Can you add more choices for dealing with Armadillo preferably across all variants of the revelations?, I'm still thinking of how my sidestep would deal with a friendly re-gene so I don't really know what kind choices I'd like just yet.

Oh yes, there will be a lot more choices added! This is just the first pass, things gets fleshed out with more reaction as people react to stuff.

Can we get a Lord of the Rings extended cut marathon with Argent?

That sounds very cozy.

sorry if you've answered this before but will we be able to befriend and/or romance the puppet in revelations? the choking scene lives in my mind rent free

Befriend depends, no romance.

How often do the other Rangers hear/get wind of news of villains in other states in the US? What if the villain in question was infamous? Or super entertaining to watch/hear about?

I think they get a lot of info, some stay more on top on this than others. Chen and Ortega are well informed.

How hard is it for vigilantes/villains to escape their state to cross over to another one/travel overseas?

Travel overseas is harder, because that means getting on an airplane. As long as you can do road or boat, it's simpler.

Can you describe in detail or draw out the ports on Ortega? Could you tell me how Ortega feels about their ports?, I imagine both versions would effectively show them off.

I have no idea where the ports are! I know some are along the spine, and some are on the back of the hand. Other than that, they will be where they need to be for the story. I don't detail those things beforehand, that's just painting myself in a corner. Ortega is funnily enough quite self-conscious about their ports.

They play it off as they don't matter, but in reality they are always aware of them. They often use "plugs" to sort of camouflage/cover the ones on the back of their hands so they are less obvious. They don't like to show them off, even though they sometimes do just to spite their own worries. Sidestep is one of the few they are comfortable showing them around without being aware of it all the time.

Can I befriend the whispering thingy that said ~I don't think so~ in my head or is that gonna end badly

You know what? Even I don't know that yet.

Will sidestep ever be able to romance another re-gene

No.

I recently when through your older content on the patron and read the old Truths short story. You might have been asked something like this before as that story is ancient but, in it Sidesteps and Ortegas first meeting and Sidestep leaving someone behind is mentioned, will we find out more about these events in Revelations as a flashback maybe?

Possibly, we will see!

What was Ljungstrand's role in the military? What problem was he tasked with solving?

A consultant. Providing tools to deal with PTSD and the psychological stress of war, as well as neural strain from boosting.

When he went about memory extraction treatments on soldiers work? Was it all hands on treatment done by himself? Was he removing trauma and replacing a memory or were there blank spots?

It was mostly hands on treatment by himself, and there were several variants he tried to see which one might work best.

I find it funny how the two hero telepaths that we know of (Locus and Sidestep) are not licensed heroes. Are/were there any other telepaths who are vigilantes? And licensed heroes? Do telepaths try to stay away from being licensed?

Well... there's not many telepaths left openly on the west coast. But traditionally, most have been poached by the private industry. Hard to compete with those offers. However, Thunderhead was a licensed hero!

Does the Farm have any double boosted operatives/assets/staff?

Possibly.

Will Step at some point manage to sincerely ask for forgiveness to those they're close with and whom they hurt?

Work on it and it might happen!

Why was Logarithm engaging in corporate espionage? Who was he spying on? And for whom? And what did he steal?

Oh that is indeed spoilers.

Where does all of Vera's equipment go when she transforms? Is it also transmogrified into plumage/pigeon parts or does the Void(where ever they are) get pelted with random stealth equipment every once in a while?

I know exactly where it is going, but I am not going to tell you that in a QnA.

Piggybacking off of "does Arde miss their teammates", how do Arde's teammates think of them? Do they miss them? Or do they think they're dead?

Armadillo miss their teammates badly, and their teammate thinks Arde is dead.

What was Argent doing in the hours between stopping her cluster of nanovores and Sidestep stopping the whole swarm? Was she just floating off the coast in a fugue state? Unconscious sinking in a terrible nightmare? Wandering the swarm's territory as a montrosity no one could survive to see?

Fuge state and then wandering ashore like a zombie, accidentally killing the first person who tried to help her. It took her a while to regain herself.

A while back I asked if Argent made herself a bit taller via the nanovores and got a "yes". However she's only a few inches taller than her "natural" height. Did she only add a few inches because going too tall would've been disorienting for her? I.e. would adding too much height to herself affect her spatial awareness to the point she was uncomfortable/less effective?

Proportions. You can only add so much to legs before it looks very weird. She wanted to look good.

When has Sidestep personally meet/fought the laser dolphins? Given that they can assure Mia that the dolphins do exist.

Not met, felt telepathically.

If Ortega were still the Marshal, would there be any major differences in how they ran the team? Would their relationship with any of their teammates be different with that power dynamic?

Hmmm it would be the most different with Chen and Daniel I think. Argent wouldn't give a fuck. Ortega would run their team very differently from Chen, probably a whole lot more proactive.

It's noted that Blaze has very tight control over his powers. Is that the result of dedicated training, or is it just the sort of control you'd have to develop to go about your life with that power?

You have to be good at that or dead. No half measures.

Also, given that he's unaffected by hot/cold weather, does Blaze tend to dress inappropriately for the temperature? Does he stick to "normal" seasonal clothing anyway out of preference and/or image concerns?

Normal seasonal clothing.

Has Blaze hurt Chen/any other person during funky times because he got excited and heated too much?

No.

Did Argent feel anything when the nano surge was stopped by sidestep?

Yes. It probably helped her snap to full consciousness, protecting her little horde and tying them closer to her. Otherwise what Sidestep did would probably have killed her.

inspired by your 'all signs point to probably' response, have you considered making a custom magic eight-ball as a piece of FH merch?

Nope, merch is complex!

What do Argent's force and subtlety stats look like for her technopathy?

Well balanced. She would be about 80/80.

What would Argent have done and where she should be if the government didn't "pay what she's worth" like you mentioned in the last qna?

There are companies she would be invaluable to (and perhaps the odd villain with agreeable methods and morals).

Does Ortega know that the malfunctions in their mods are potentially life-threatening? Do Chen or Argent, as the main people who help them with their mods, know/have suspicions? If a techsavvy step has power info, is this something they could piece together through previous/future clues to find out on their own?

Ortega knows, but think they can handle it. Argent suspects/knows, Chen has no idea. Chen might be able to piece it together if he got wind of the fact that something was starting to go wrong.

Will Sidestep be able to tell Argent that she's even shorter after the regenerator and immediately die?

Nope. Sidestep doesn't know enough.

Does Regina not believe that regenes are sentient on the same level as humans or does she just not care?

Oh she just doesn't care.

Did Sidestep's story inspired other Re-Genes to NOT become a hero? Aaand maybe choose other more villainous activities since they would probably be a safer bet? (Compared to how Sidestep's life turned out)

It would vary a lot, but the story is not as widespread as one might think.

Since we can imply we like Ricardo's moustache by not letting him shave it, are we ever gonna be able to let Julia know we like the short hair?

Complimenting Ortega? Really? Is that a thing you want to do now?

Inspired from above, some steps may experience regret spaghetti for teasing Ortega about the mustache. Can we ever let poor Ricardo know we lament the death of his 3rd mario brother appeal?

No idea. Probably not.

Who's more of a nerd, HG or Nocturne

HG.

In the old days, how would Ortega have reacted to a villain being infatuated with Sidestep instead of them? Bonus points for chargestep-verses.

Amused, keep pointing it out to Sidestep and trying to use it to build their confidence. Regardless of romance status.

If Sidestep had turned to villainy prior to Heartbreak (or, alternatively, after Heartbreak without having been recaptured by the Farm) how would the Rangers of the time+Nazar have reacted (individually or together)?

Too much of an AU, I really have no idea. That's something you need to write for yourself.

Is Ortega's fav armour mysterious cause they can see their reflection on the helmet?

Ahahahaha well... also it's cool.

Will a really evil Step be able to reveal to HG that Ortega's epileptic?

Yes.

To what extent do the Rangers notice Step manipulating people around them in incidences like Step diverting the server's attention while having coffee with Herald after training? The more subtle manipulations and redirections, as opposed to very obvious instances like high force steel snap?

Most of the time it goes unnoticed, because Sidestep is good at their job and quite sneaky. Over time, some will pick up on it.

If chargestep was a crack ship, which ships weren't crack?

I have no idea! I don't know how shipping works!

Would it be weird to ask if we can have an option added to rebirth of having surname and given name in either order? Like many Asian names have the surname going first so it would be nice for the option.

That is a good idea! Since this was from the discord, please out a suggestion in the bug channel. It's an easy enough fix!

hoping this isn't spoilery but in rangerstuck cases where neither Chen or Ortega are the ones to hire Vera to break Step out, what is the initial reaction to the breakout/discovering Step is gone? Do they think the SD came and collected Step, or do they have footage/suspicious that someone was hired to free them?

I am quite sure that there will be about equal panic between the SD and HG.

During the HB dream in Rebirth there's a strange pulse that hits you like vertigo. Assuming this was when HB first(?) started really affecting Step, did Chen feel it too? Or were Chens mental shields stronger than Steps and it didn't affect him till later? (or another pulse?)

Chen felt it earlier. He's just good at not showing things.

What is the most unhinged, wackiest conspiracy each of the rangers, hg trio and mortum believe in? Excluding Ortega's "Sidestep is clearly HG's long lost sibling" theory.

Hmmmm I don't even know what conspiracy theories there would be in the FH world! I mean it is so different... With boost drugs, different politics and mods it feels like I would have to write a whole treatise on how things work, before I can get to into what kind of conspiracy theories there might be around it. Honestly though, that sounds like an interesting lore post, just lie urban legends, but not something I can come up with on the spot.

Does voluntarily revealing yourself as the villain during the car ride with Ortega make a difference in their mind or does it not really matter to them?

It does.

When the Farm was pay-per-viewing step's memories, did they only get the recent memories of HB? Or did they get most of step's life after their first escape? Do they know step was the one who truly killed the void? What was the reaction if so?

Spoilers, but it was mostly the most recent.

What would have happened, if sidestep went as himself to the HG meeting and Ortega is in the car with them, if the car never got crashed? What would that conversation have been like at Ortega's apartment, especially with high villain clue/reveal?

Yet again, that is another massive divergent AU which I have no ideas or thoughts about. If I did, I would have written it.

Have you ever gotten inspired to change something from theories or questions that come up in these ask threads? If so, is there any you would find interesting or fun to share?

Nothing big I think? I know I have sometimes been inspired to come up with answers to things, which has led to me thinking about them more in depth, and then adding more of that to the game because the question made me think. But not changing stuff, more like adding stuff. Many of the questions come from the clues I already put in the game to start with.

What is the hardest achievement to gain in the second game of fallen hero?

It is very close between Rifts, ...don't..., and Impulsive.

Also what is considered the "best" in terms of healing endings for game 2?

That is up to the player! I don't know what floats your boat.

From 'An Awkward Conversation,' Chen is briefly worried that Vincent might try to kiss him. Has he ever actually done it before to warrant that thought?

Yes.

Had Blaze felt/thought the same from Chen?

No.

Has Mortum been good at hiding their face, both during their active villain era and now, or would it be easy for those on the heroes side to find pictures?

Mortum is good at being discrete. But there are pictures for those who know how to look.

Did Ace know what Re-Genes are/about Re-Genes?

Nope.

Can we strangle that handsy imposter? I want payback.

Eventually.

How did each Ranger (and friends) react to voideyes!Step, once they realized the new look was here to stay?

I think there was a bit of nervousness first, then eventually it became just another scar.

How much knowledge does Mortum have of Green Sky and/or The Void? Would they recognize voideyes as connected to that? I suppose I could also ask the same about HG.

No, not automatically. Green eyes exist, and with mods, lenses, operations, weird colors are more common.

Do voideyes glow? Like, if someone turned out all the lights, would they have any luminescence or are they just a slightly unnatural green?

Up to the player. Not luminescent though.

The privacy act keeps cameras off the street, but not in private buildings. Are any of the ROs' buildings (barring Argent, obviously) camera'd up without their knowledge?

No. There are some cameras they are aware of, but they also want their privacy and have the skills to ensure that.

Would we be able to set what our eyes looked like prior to voideyes for flashback/HG purposes?

Probably. Might have to do a HG tweak there.

How does Chen view his relationship with masculinity? Is his own gender presentation something he's thought a lot about?

Chen likes his masculinity, is at peace with it and haven't thought about it much.

If Chen had told Ortega about the photos, would they've been able to rescue Step from the Farm or would they've ended up dead like Chen feared with Step still trapped?

I genuinely don't know.

Lifting a question from chat because now I'm curious: Does Argent have any sense of smell or taste? Do the nanovores? (If not, has she tried to work with the nanovores to "reconstruct" those senses, or does she not care?)

She has... sort of. It is filtered through nanovores and not quite as it used to be, but it is enough to exist. She desperately wants ot back.

Heartbreak shares Step's eye color, in the case of a voideye'd Step are HB's eyes an equally unnatural green or just coincidentally normal green?

Could be either.

Can u tell us some cool facts about HG cause I think all of us are making them too cringefail in our brain eventho I love every second of it

I like dragging HG has much as the next person, I let them be cool in game instead.

Follow-up question to that: What's something HG thinks is cool about themselves? What's something HG finds embarrassing about themselves?

HG think they look and act cool, and is embarrassed every time they fail to thread someone.

Will we ever be able to teach the people close to us the ReGene language?

I can imagine so.

What are environmental regulations like in the FEZ compared to the U.S.? What does Los Diablos do in terms of the environment, anything like a "Green Up" or Earth Day, and are there any differences between LD and how the rest of the FEZ handles environmental legislation and issues?

There are no environmental regulations in the FEZ, or Los Diablos. The environment is not really a focus for other than fringe groups trying to save things.

Do Dave and/or Jackrabbit know any language other then English? even if it's pieces?

I dunno! Probably some spanish.

Could strong light emitting powers cut through Nocturnes darkness or would the blindness be unaffected?

It would be unaffected.

Has voideyes effected Step's vision in any meaningful/observable way, or is it a purely aesthetic change with no impact on how Step sees/what they can see.

Purely aesthetic.

What is the next set of start stages you are adding to the book 3 demo?

Right now it looks like the rest of the broken legs but in Mortum's lap, at least as a segment on the patreon.

Could the Regenerator undo voideyes?

Yes.

Saying "I love you" seems to be a problem for Sidestep. Could we say it in the regene language so that Ortega doesn't understand?

That sounds super cute.

Since HG is a spiteful person, are they the type to say "I told you so?" Do they like to annoy their loved ones and rub it in their faces when they are right because of their "I know better" mentality?

Oh yes.

My anarchist ass is crying, in whatever upcoming gang war, can help HG (even if it's giving them moral support) if I'm not a mob boss? What about thieves and hero hunters? I just don't understand very well the part that these three can play in Hollow Ground's business :hmm: but I love them and I wanna help them even though I have other personal goals right now

Everyone will get dragged in somehow.

We know the score presentation and style of the HG trio, but what do they wear when they're at home? Do they wear comfy clothes? Hoodies, sweatpants ect.

Comfy but expensive. Nocturne likes her yoga pants, HG likes swishy and loose. Jake likes sweatpants.

Okay hollow ground buys Gucci yes or no

No.

Did HG's older sibling(s) mentor them to eventually take a leadership role in the organization/actively "teach," or have they learned most of what they know just by doing it?

There was mentoring there.

Someone had mentioned in Step chat whether it would be possible to have the option to know you are trans but be closeted. Would it be possible to have something like this with the upcoming update to Rebirth or would it be too much to add retroactively?

I honestly don't know. I can't add variables.

following up on the above, i've already said my piece about it in demo feedback, but would it be possible to add a closeted option for nonbinary steps as well in the rebirth update?

I honestly don't know. I can't add variables.

Back in the day did Ortega make good use of Step's telepathy to get the best gossip?

No, but they would have loved to.

How does HG feel about gender? Has a female or male Hollow Ground struggled with femininity/masculinity or feared not being feminine/masculine enough?

I think all HG's verge on genderqueer and having fun with their gender presentation. But yes, keeping up appearances is important, so that is mostly for behind closed doors.

Kinda following up, did a female HG struggle because of her gender when she had to take such a role of leadership especially since the previous HG was a man? Has she ever been taken for granted for being a woman?

A female HG had to thread and work harder before things settled in, yes. For her, Jake is a big asset.

If we get Herald's doubt stat high enough, will he start questioning his decision to leave his dirty dishes in the workplace sink? Because I'm still judging him for that tbh.

Look, some things are bad habits that go way back.

If Chen had ever considered actually pursuing his crush on Ortega back in the day, would the power dynamic of Ortega being the marshal (or just being his coworker) have given him pause? Does it give him pause now, whether due to the power dynamic or just on principle?

Power dynamics does give him pause. A lot more back in the day, these days he knows Ortega wouldn't listen to orders anyway...

The person responsible for the Nanosurge--how did they learn of the nanovores? Considering it's (para)military research? And how did they learn of its whereabouts/get ahold of them to utilize for their own plans?

Paramilitary contacts.

I loved Retribution's touchpanic variable and how it integrated into future scenes. I'm curious, are there any plans for the MC to be able to express that they don't like or don't want touch at all, rather than wanting it but needing advance warning? Or do you see being touch-starved as a basic element of the character?

I don't know, every variable adds more work, so we'll see.

Is the puppet the first person Mortum has been with since they physically transitioned?

No.

Has HG ever come to blows with someone? Could they even defend themselves? They look like they would lay there and take the punches.

HG can defend themselves, but not that well. Worse than Daniel in hand to hand, definitely.

Could Shroud potentially help Sidestep understand what's behind the gates and/how to contain it?

Oh that is an INTERESTING thought. I had not considered that. Hmmm.

Can we, as a pupstuck Step, put on the old Sidestep suit and recreate that fighting style with precog?

Oh yes, that is planned. OG book stuff.

Inspired by the above question: since Sidestep's boost wasn't officially known, was precognition one of the runner ups speculations among fans?

Yeah.

HG and Tía Elena how would that meeting go

Surprisingly civilized all things considering.

Assuming we see Finch again, can we disclose our telepathy to her to make the sessions a bit more even?

I don't know. It would be against Sidestep's innate caution.

How aware are the upper tiers of the US gov about what's up with the Special Directive/what exactly goes in in places like the Farm? Has the president ever been to any SD facilities?

Spoilers.

Follow-up on the Finch question; would it be possible to have step apologize if they manipulated/wiped her memories during therapy?

Probably not.

did ortega have Sidestep Appearance Headcanons prior to their face reveal? was there any sort of pinboard (even mental) associated w it?

Hmmmm I don't know? Probably not?

Have Dr. Mortum and Regina ever met?

Ngh. I. I think so.

Out of the whole cast, Mortum and HB Trio included, who has the most potential for Sp00ky? Who can scare the crap out of someone the most?

Mortum. No competition.

So far, what is the fondest canon memory each cast member has of Sidestep/the puppet?

I can't tell you that, because that depends so much on your Sidestep/Puppet. That is headcanon only.

as a guy with his eye on the position, does nazar have any opinions about any of the incumbent marshals?

He keeps them all to himself, but yes, he has. And no, I haven't written them down or decided on them.

Any chances of Step ever getting comfortable enough to go out at public events with Ortega like they did as the puppet at the museum?

Yes.

What is the inside of Mortum's gun like? Is it similar to the Void's "shortcuts"? How much does the Void blood influence the quantum pocket and its mechanics?

That is something we might get into in game.

In Truths, Ortega mentions that Chen losing his temper was very rare, and the blowouts were 'magnificent.' Who else had seen that from Chen? Any of the Rangers? Pyroclast? Sentinel? Sunstream? Blaze and/or Zephyr?

Sentinel definitely. And Pyroclast. I think that's it.

What exactly happened in the situation that Chen mentioned? How exactly did things escalate?

I have no idea! Some things are more fun left to the imagination.

Not sure if it's been asked before, but what would Sentinel have done if he found out that Step had been captured by the SD? Would he have come out of retirement briefly to stage a rescue, would have stayed and become Marshal to try and change the regene situation, gone rogue? Would have he done anything at all, and how much did Step mean to him?

Hmmm. Sentinel of everybody would understand the risks involved. And he was newly married, with a newly adopted daughter. I think he would have tried something, but things are complicated. He could have doomed the people he cared about. He would have needed to be absolutely sure.

What was the overall public opinion of Hood, Charge, and Steel during their respective tenures as marshal? (Discounting specific known events like Heartbreak and our titular villain's antics.) Did public opinion tend to reflect a marshal's actual track record (or at least their PR team's), or was it more a reflection of the broader social/political climate?

Hood was revered and idolized since he helped bring order to the most volatile time. Ortega was controversial but admired, and Steel is seen more as a caretaker, the safe choice.

Relatedly, how much of an impact did gender have on public perception of Charge? In general or relative to the others.

I think more than a bit. Julia had harder with some parts (being sexualized, seen as more violent, or less authoritative), while Ricardo had a harder time with others (people focusing on his drinking, not being reliant).

Followup to the above: Were there any rivals to Charge and Steel trying to claim the Marshal's badge?

I don't think there was any big ones.

Will we find out who's the old man HG talks to in b3 or b4?

Yes, on some paths you will. Might be in book three, at least in an epilogue.

Has Ortega found it difficult to defer to Steel's orders now that he's the marshal, while they've gone back to being a regular ranger?

Oh yes. And Ortega is not good at it.

Would Argent and Danny make for good marshals?

Daniel would once he stepped up, Argent wouldn't.

after ortega trans reveal did ortega have to add "trans ally" to their HG board? were they kind of pissed off about handing HG a win?

That sounds likely, yeah.

Next time we rematch Chen, would he broadcast thoughts designed to bait and fuck with Step if he has high clue?

It is a hard thing to do, but possible.

Does Nazar know Step is alive as of the end of Retribution?

Not yet.

What is Chen like when he loses his temper, other than magnificent, as according to Ortega? Will we get to see that?

Possibly, I know some Sidesteps are pushing his buttons.

What happens with your shelf in the fridge if you are exposed as a villain?

Removed.

I'm curious about the MC's comment that "most [non Re-Gene] people call you it," since prior scenes had given me the impression that the Farm staff dealt with their discomfort around Re-Genes by imposing gender on them rather than by treating them as sexless. (Flashbacks where scientists refer to MC by assigned sex and find their nudity inappropriate even while dehumanizing them, the MC automatically gendering the warehouse raid operatives as male or female despite not knowing them, etc.) Was this a difference in how scientists treated Re-Genes compared to other staff like guards or (at least for non-cuckoos) handlers? Or were the scenes I'm thinking of just outliers?

The differences are two. One, cuckoos are different, and treated differently. They need gender to work, so it was imposed on Sidestep. And two, the scientists are often more lenient in those things than guards and handlers are, they have a harder time to un-see the similarities with people.

Thinking of Step meeting Vera and Arde in the other paths, and I'm wondering if all those initial meetings will be just as friendly as the one in the current demo or if a more antagonistic meeting is possible? i.e. Villain!Step fights them when they first meet.

Might happen! We will see. Would be fun fighting Arde, wouldn't it?

If the good doctor was dethreaded, would they remember HG's face or is it already gone from their mind?

It is already gone. "Forget" is a handy command, because even when the threads fray and break, the memory is already gone.

What is hollow grounds opinion on the SD. Does he know anything about what goes on there and would he be willing to protect an allied sidestep from them?

Has no idea it exists!

How do the various ROs handle housekeeping tasks like cleaning and grocery shopping? I can't imagine they all have the time to keep on top of it personally, but they also all have reason to be very cautious about home (or, for that matter, lab) security. Do these people have trusted housekeepers to help out with things, or do some of them rely on a roommate/friend/relative, or just live in a state of tolerably messy equilibrium?

All the Rangers have housekeepers and personal shoppers, except Argent. She does however have a personal shopper for both clothes and food. Dr. Mortum had an assistant, but recently let them go, so that will descend into chaos soon.

What about the HG trio

Oh there are houskeepers, pool staff, chefs, you name it.

Can Ricardo braid hair?

I imagine he can.

possible "roles" as regene operatives were mentioned at some point that may be something we can decide for our steps, roles like "spider," and "actor," etc.

It is still in the plans, but we'll see!

were there ever any spoiler JIC? "seductor" roles that involved luring targets to more favorable locations? Would this be considered a subset to the "actor" role? Is it a historical role that was considered but discarded due to issues? and is this a potential role that a sidestep could have played in the past? it would fit in well with their character, looking at certain texts and dialogues

I still don't know. But it sounds very unlikely considering Sidestep's skillset. There were much better cuckoos for that.

Armadillo looked very protective of sidestep. Would they do that for any Re-Gene, (for Shroud too) or maybe there was more to it because it was Sidestep?

For any Re-Gene.

If I ask HG love advice are they gonna actually give me good advice or laugh at me if it's Ortega and tell me to break up with them

Hmmmm I honestly don't know. I think they'd try to give good advice.

How would Arde/Vera react to the Puppet starting to sign fluently in the ReGene language?

Confused.

What sort of research does Dr. Mortum have on the nanovores to be able to reprogram them as they did?

Well, some, but that is spoilers.

So how did Argent feel about receiving the Los Diablos University Women's Studies Inspirational Leader award, in timelines where that happened? :D What did she say in her acceptance speech?

She felt extremely flattered! However, she doesn't remember a word of the speech, she was very nervous, and it had been written for her by one of the Ranger's media team.

What do high sus!Rangers think of unrevealed!Step 'training'/weakening Daniel? Would any of them eventually intervene and help out Daniel?

They don't know what is going on there, so no.

Does HG conceptualize their powers like red threads, as sidestep does? Or something else?

Something else. The threads are Sidestep's visualization.

in-universe is charge/hollow ground fanfiction popular?

Probably not. Not exciting.

How close is the Heartbreak Site to where Argent grew up?

A block away or so.

When did the fight against the Armada when Ortega asked Sidestep out actually happen?

I'm not sure. I think it would vary depending on the Sidestep, some require more wooing than others.

Has Argent, like Step, lived thinking she'd never have any hope of getting into a relationship given her secrets?

Yes. 100%.

How manoeuvrable are flight enabled armours like skyraider's? What kind of speeds can they reach? How easily can they turn? How do they compare to boosted fliers?

It depends on the armor and the flier. I would say on average that they are less maneuverable, but often faster.

How often does Chen get a chance to break out his flight armour these days?

Not as much as he likes, but he sometimes makes excuses for it just to get flying again.

There must've been a period between sentinel retiring and herald being hired where he was the only rangers eyes in the sky. Does he miss that? Has Herald being hired meant he spends more office time now because that part of his role has been filled?

Oh he misses that a LOT. And yes, Herald has taken over much of that, and he does spend more time in the office as a result. He wish it wasn't the case, but... there it is.

Do you have anything nice to say about Regina

She can be very caring and supporting if for the entirely wrong reasons.

Can we, at some point, have a conversation with Regina? Not just like, run away from her

Possibly.

So we have the Rat King girls with some telepathy going on and also the goat with explosive stuff, but... Are there any seagulls in FHR lore who have super abilities? (Been waking up screaming from nightmares on that combo (c) Sidestep maybe(?))

No seagulls planned, it's not really the first animal someone would pick for animal experimentation.

Has Regina ever done something good for Sidestep?

Depends on the Sidestep, the answer can be yes.

Would the rangers + Mortum get a bad first impression of Regina, assuming they had the chance to get to know her while still in the dark about her relation to Step? Is she competent at tricking people into thinking she's not evil?

No, they would probably get a very good first impression of her. Apart from possibly Daniel, he'd pick up on what she is fast.

Is Jake allowed to drag HG a bit when they're outside work/intimate towards each other? What would you say Jake and HG have in common to make that polycruel work? (Apart from Nocturne)

Jake is allowed to drag HG a bit, that sort of comes with the territory. HG can laugh at themselves, as long as it doesn't threaten their authority. I do think that they work together quite well in temperament, they both have that family before everything vibe, and are quite caring about people they like.

At the end of Retri if Step gets stuck in the puppet at the hospital, Ortega can tell them they've fallen in love with them. Was that a completely sincere statement or was it said partially in hopes that they'd be more forthcoming with the information Ortega thinks the puppet's hiding?

How much of a bastard do you think Ortega is? It might actually be both...

What odd sleeping habits does Mortum and the HG trio have? What about the Rangers? (Aside from what we already know from Retribution.)

HG sleeps and naps often during the day, Dr. Mortum will take drugs to stay away during important experiments, sometimes for days, Danny sometimes floats which can end up being awkward, Argent has what she jokingly calls her vampire coffin for deep sleep, other than that everyone is normal.

If any of the cuckoos' cultural education included popular movies... do they find Mean Girls's "Raise your hand if you have ever been personally victimized by Regina" scene funny/relatable?

Personal headcanon.

Can I add Vera and Sky-Raider (And Armadillo?) to the sleep habits question, if you know yet?

No idea!

Seeing as Vera is potential RO. And her codename is Dove, will there much play on the phrase "Lovey-dovey"?

I cringed... only Ortega would try to pull that off.

On a scale from "magical girl transformation" to "Animorphs-tier body horror," how easy is the process of transforming for Vera? Does it involve pain/discomfort or require intense concentration to pull off?

There is discomfort and concentration.

What are some of the kinds of foods that are easier for Chen to eat? Does he mostly consume protein shakes while on a liquid diet? Is there any food he really misses being able to have sometimes that might be too hard on his stomach?

Chen's diet can be quite nice with things like rice, soup, noodle, vegetarian based and with mind flavors, and chicken for meat. He has access to means made specifically for him with good nutrient value at work. It's more improvised at home. Protein shakes is for convenience and bad days, and when he knows he might be in the armor for a long time. Not much grease, fried food or fiber. He misses spices and barbecue with lots of meat. He cheats, but that is tough to digest.

Danny likes energy drinks and Argent likes helping out small fashion businesses, and they both enjoy promoting those(?). Is there any product/cause that Steel and Ortega particularly like to endorse when the PR calls?

Ortega is cars, bikes and fashion. Steel would rather not.

What would it take to be seen as an equal to HG?

Hard work and ambition.

Will HG try to thread a Step they've already failed to thread?

Yes.

Will there ever be other opportunities to kick HG in the face for Steps that missed that during Retri? Especially for known telepaths?

Sounds fun!

Do you ever plan to have HG attempt to thread the puppet, with or without Step inside?

Not gonna tell you that!

With the recent 'Haunted' post, it seems to suggest that HB is 'trapped' in the psychic planes around the site. Is it possible that their psyche is split between the site and step's brain? Or is this something not possible and a psyche cannot be split in such a way? Am I barking up the wrong tree and it's not HB trapped at the site, or is there anyone necessarily 'psychically trapped' there at all?

It is complicated is all I am saying.

Additionally, would being trapped in a psychic plane cause the same mental decay as being trapped in a quantum bubble like mortum's gun?

Yes, it would be similar.

Would the imposters in Step's body be interested in working for HG?

Hmmmm maaaaaybe one of them. Maybe.

If sexual abuse someone sexually abused Sidestep during their second stay did Regina 1) not notice 2)not care 3) hoped that would break them faster?

It could be all three depending on the situation.

Is Regina going to sit idle waiting for her Sidestep to be delivered or is she going to come to Los Diablos for sidestep at some point?

I am considering options.

What would it take for a west coast villain (say... Sidestep) to make east coast news?

A big political move, glorification of general villainy is not a big thing over in the east, and the government tries to suppress it..

I know Argent has technopathy. But is she skilled in putting together electronic components? Or does she get to stage of good enough and sweet talk the circuit board?

She is pretty okay with putting together electronic components, not on Mortum's or a tech_savvy Sidestep's level, but she's doing okay.

The "Regina" in the Void dream sounded oddly personal. We know things at The Farm sometimes can get a little weird between handlers and Re-Genes because of the isolated lives they have, and even though Regina is not a handler, Sidestep was her prized pet/Prize Project, and even they say at some point "You hate her, but she gave you that". Also, as a reply to a question about how would Regina react if Sidestep turned themselves in, the answer was, "Regina would be pleased as punch that she was right. This is where Sidestep belongs." Which also sounds ODDLY personal.

Regina uses the personal as a weapon. There is nothing more dangerous than someone who performs caring for the worst reasons.

I was wondering if at some point, some kind of twisted interpersonal relationship developed between them past the scientific aspect of it. If Regina sometimes was bored, lonely or felt fascinated by Sidestep and talked to them like someone would talk to their favorite experiment, or something like that.

Oh yes, Regina would do that!

A thought similar to that, what would happen to scientists who learned too much and became sympathetic to Regene kind? Is there any examples of a scientist who assisted with a Regene breakout? If so, I would presume the result would be a promptly 'disappeared' scientist, but I'm also

curious what the aftermath would be for them.

Yes, there have been suspicions of such behavior, and those scientists have been promptly.... disciplined.

Also, how aware are the scientists/handlers of the [Regene] language? Even if secretive I have a feeling they are aware of it but just choose not to dwell so long as it does not interfere with their work or handling them but maybe I underestimate the caution on the part of Regenes to prevent the language's discovery.

Honestly most are not aware of it. Maybe there is one or two who suspects, but don't overestimate what people will overlook when they think someone is subhuman.

In our world, libertarian utopias have historically faced some problems. Like bears. Has the FEZ's lack of regulation led to any similarly colorful incidents (wildlife-related or otherwise)? Is that sort of thing a common occurrence in any parts of the West, or do they have the basics of not comically screwing up your settlement under control by now?

Yeah, it is common in some parts (roadwork is notoriously in need of cooperation) but there is one thing that we can't overlook. While the FEZ on the whole is a libertarian hellscape, many local communities are working together as co-ops, some of them being downright socialist in their views. However, it varies a lot depending on where you are. You can have a company near-feudal area where people can safely live, work and commute to their employer, and fifteen minutes from there a socialist commune with people pooling their resources to hire teachers and firemen. There is an agreement between the larger cities to put in money on improving roads and travels, but that is sorely underfunded. There is a lot less inter-city travel than in our world.

Little sibling Step brings home Cavalier as their date to meet the HG trio; how do they take it?

I think Nocturne would like an autograph.

What boosting process did Shroud undergo? Was she part of the old practice like step, finding dna compatible to a donor with the boost they wished to emulate? Or did she undergo the different boosting conditions style where they try to induce a specific category of boost?

The latter, they were trying to induce a specific boost.

Important in-universe hero fandom question: Who are the (current or former) heroes/villains whose hair color fans can't agree on? (I'm thinking of the "is it 'blond' or 'light brown'" type in particular, but other controversially-ambiguous colors are also welcome.)

I think Ortega's been is it black or dark brown a few times, especially with a few haircuts or slightly sun-bleached.

How would the rangers react if they discovered the armor was empty during a fight (being remote controlled, or piloted by the rat king)? Have they ever encountered similar threats, or would this be a new kind of problem?

I think that would be a shock, not something anybody expected. That's new.

Sidestep can make people believe they're not there. Can they also make someone believe they're somewhere they're not? Like appearing and talking to someone from far distances?

That is a lot harder, but I think so.

Has Grigori Varga been heard from since his interview with Imani?

Yep.

How or what boundaries did you set when you thought to make a superhero setting? One of the things that has always seemed difficult to me about it was understanding how to make those boundaries. What is it that are restrictions on the ability of the powered? Any powers that just cannot or do not exist for practicality or pragmatic purposes?

The first thing was to NEVER detail these things and let people know, or to do anything but the vaguest of power rankings. It is a superhero setting, I needed internal consistency and a sort of mid-level power, but open enough that anything could be used because it makes a good story. That is why I am so vague about things, and why I rarely define another hero or villain before a name or the most general of powers. If I start defining things, people will immediately start questioning why that hero doesn't come in and solve things or clear things up. If you do superhero stuff, NEVER EVER give your readers enough facts to contradict you.

Who would give worse vibes, Regina or Ljungstrand? What would be Shroud's opinion?

Ljungstrand.

Was Ljungstrand in his active days as ruthless as Regina?

No.

Is Regina straight?

No.

How can we get in contact with Dr. Ljungstrand?

That will be difficult, and a thing for book four.

At some point Shroud could recognize Sidestep based on their physical appearance. Was it because of rumours/their fame as a Re-Gene or because she was involved in some work Sidestep was in?

Because she's been in similar circles.

hi these are such niche questions im sorry you dont have to answer all of them. but are los diablos/other cities in the free territories part of the US census? can they vote in presidential elections? or is it like puerto rico or dc?

They are not included in census, the people there are not US citizens, and they cannot vote. It is more like puerto rico.

Did seats in the house of representatives get brought below the current number (in our world max 435) or did that get redistributed amongst east coast states, or are there still representatives from the territories? what happened to the senate seats, are they in limbo? what happened to the electoral college?

With the emergency martial law and the various things that happened post Big One, several changes were made. There is no longer any general elections for president, it was said that the security of them could not be guaranteed with the massive influx of refugees and lack of a good way to ensure citizens were registered and living where they said. Around the turn of the century some things started to be restored, but it is not like it used to be. The US has been ruled by a combination of the senate (the west coast senators were removed) and the president, the house of representatives is near-permanently dissolved. The governors have greater powers than before.

Votes in the senate is weighted by economic activity/budget/tax-revenue. This has led to the depopulated states in the midwest being almost powerless, while the power have been focused on the richer states. The reason why this was adopted was since the "populace" could not be controlled, counted and measured with any exactness, economic power was seen as a better way of making sure that the US got back on their feet. Each former state in the FEZ has an observer in the Senate, just like DC and Puerto Rico, but no voting rights. The current tension of power is between the East block, with NY and finance in the lead and the South block with Texas and energy.

Does a drivers license from los diablos work in the east coast and vice versa?

No, they don't, but you don't need a driver's license in LD unless you want to be able to have car insurance.

what powers did HG's brother who died during the boosting start manifesting before he died?

I haven't decided yet, probably something volatile.

^to add to that, what were the powers of sidesteps two batchmates that also survived decanting ? we know the boosting process can go very badly wrong—is that something the farm takes a lot of precautions for? or does the alternative method of boosting mean less dangerous side effects most of the time?

The Farm takes precautions for catastrophic power manifestations, it is less common under controlled circumstances, but not unknown. I don't know what powers the two surviving batchmates had, they only lived a few hours before their bodies gave out.

Was Ace aware of what Shroud's powers are? Who she was, and why her powers made her Ember's chief interrogator?

Nope. No idea.

Is Arde so willing to be friendly towards sidestep because they crave Re-Gene connection?

Yes. Very much so.

Has Arde ever been resentful towards cuckoos? Have they even seen bullying amongst Re-Genes?

I think Arde didn't interact much with cuckoos since they are a very heavy duty combat Re-Gene.

If you pester Daniel into telling you his name early, he sounds pretty :) about the MC asking to call him Danny. Is that just general annoyance at being pressured to share his name, or is he specifically uncomfortable being immediately nicknamed by people he doesn't know well? (I got the sense that maybe he found it kind of infantilizing?)

It is the latter, you read the situation right. Once he and Sidestep had gotten closer, it was a lot nicer.

It's not exactly the most sus memory of heartbreak, but we know ortega blames themselves for botching the Heartbreak response and causing Sidestep's death. At the same time, rebirth shows Sidestep insisted on entering the building over Ortega's objections. Did Ortega originally ask sidestep to come along and then change their mind? Or is that just Ortega feeling like they should have insisted more? Will Sidestep have a chance to point out this discrepancy later on in game?

I will let you have this one. Ortega originally wanted Sidestep along as always, but something about the vibes of that place got to them and made them nervous. They wanted Sidestep to back off then. You'll get to have your heartbreak talk in this game.

Which color are Shroud's tattoos?

Dark rusty red.

Did the original boost drug have a pharmaceutical name before people learned about all the superpowers?

Probably something generic, I haven't decided on one yet I think.

Is it gonna be easier to open gates in revelations or if you have already opened some gates?

No. It will always be as easy or hard.

What would happen if someone accidentally ingested some of Argent's nanovores?

Please don't. That would be BAD.

Why does Jake consider HG, in his personal opinion, "the best boss he's ever had"?

Most of them have been rather shitty, and even before they slept together, HG actually listened to him, took him seriously, relied on him and paid him well.

If Step considers letting the puppet kill them, a voice in their head saying "I think not" comes to their aid. Why did this same voice stay quiet when in Retri tw suicide Sidestep purposefully crashes the car?

Think about it and it will come to you.

How set-in-stone do you intend the scope of the player's villainous plans to be? For instance (without getting into details/spoilers) would all anarchists or mob bosses aim to amass as much influence/power as possible, or might some decide that being viewed as a bit player is more useful? Or in terms of motivation, would "revenge" entail something similar for all MCs, or could it mean anything from "burn it all down and salt the ashes" to "kill this one fucker in particular" to "achieve a personally-satisfying symbolic victory"?

I have no idea yet, most of it depends on what I can manage to handle in game with variables.

If you instigate a fight at the bar scene in Rebirth, the bouncer warns Mecha that she's on her second strike and one more will ban her. As of Revelations, has Mecha since gotten herself banned or is she playing nice?

I think she's playing nice, Joes is a pleasant and safeish place to have a drink, being banned would be sad.

Piggybacking off that one—who and what inspired her first strike?

Bad luck and too much drink, she has a temper.

HG being physical touch their love language, with a touchflinch siblingstep, how's that gonna play out? Would they be surprised that this big bad villain can react badly to being touched? Would they try to convince Sidestep to sit down and have a conversation with them about it?

I don't know yet, but it will be interesting to see!

Are you surprised Hollow Ground has ended up being so loved?

Yes. Very much so.

If you were to take a guess, would you say the potential body count of named characters in book 3 will be bigger or smaller than book 2?

Bigger.

We know that while rangers might resort to murder on occasion, they aren't casual with it. After hearing about the Farm, who wouldn't take issue with the thought that the handlers deserve death (not necessarily via Step) and who still believes they should be afforded a trial and suffer only the legally sanctioned consequences of their actions?

It depends on what they are told, but most would go the legal route by default, or perhaps a death or two that might be mostly targeted and accidental. Other than that, it's sppliers.

Do the Los Angeles Angels still exist? If so, have they considered a name change?

They no longer exist.

Do printers in Argent's vicinity properly print out things? Or are they also prone to saying 'not enough ink' when they're stocked with full ink cartridges?

They work wonderfully.

will ortega (and possibly chen's) heartbreak scars become variables in the future?

Once we get to those discussions, but they are already variables, just measured through things you don't know yet.

If we confessed to Ortega being suicidal and we're also in a poly with Argent/Mortum/Herald/Chen, are they gonna tell them and try to sit down the three of them with sidestep and have a talk?

Yeah. Very likely.

What is the overall situation in LD (and the rest of the fez) when it comes to the average citizen? As in — how rough is social inequality? Can a normal person have decent living standards and conditions? How much of the population is either homeless or otherwise living in poverty?

I suppose in short — how much of a dystopia is it living there?

It can vary a lot. The average citizen is probably not worse of than in today's LA, because let's face it, it's a pretty precarious existence. I would say that today's LA is a dystopia for most, and LD has not changed.

Is Vera okay after we bit her

No rabies detected yet.

Books 1 and 2 have really sold me on the appeal of elevator makeouts. Do you think we'll get the chance to kiss all possible ROs in an elevator by series end, or does spreading it around make it less special?

Elevators only appear as needed!

piggybacking off of the Vera bite question; will it scar? >:3 i could see it being a funny bonding point (and a great way to reference/imply step's biting habits to the fandom beyond Patreon)

I don't think it was that bad, but it hurt a lot.

will it be possible for some sidesteps to shed their 'civilian name' and start going by their old ID code at some point?

I think that is an interesting thought. Need to think about it. You will learn the ID code in book three.

Ortega ends in hospital at the end of every published book now (after the museum attack at the end of book 1 and after the car crash in the book 2). Is it a coincidence? Have you planned for it? Are you going to continue this trend?

Look, this book has a birthday party at the end... we all know how wild those can be...

We know major characters have plot armor until book 4, but that didn't stop sidestep from potentially losing an eye. Do you have plans for other characters to potentially suffer similar game-changing injuries in Revelations (whether or not they're caused by sidestep themselves)?

If I write a scene and it feels right, I have no qualms.

if all the rangers had to draw a little dog on the fly, no prep time, who would draw it the worst AND, because we know who'd draw it the best, does danny go really hard on it.

Danny goes HARD. And is the best. I think Argent would be the worst at it.

How would HG handle a sibling step confessing that they've had a crush on Ortega for years and that Ortega still doesn't know about it? Would HG encourage them to confess, to move on, or would they just try to give advice or not meddle and take a deep breath and be prepared to help step through the potential fallout or success?

Oh god this is the problems with family, but it would be a welcome one. I don't know how it would go, it would depend on the discussion. I can see it go both ways.

Are they internally aggravated about that secret crush and would it be more directed at Ortega for being dense and step for clamming up for so long or just that, of COURSE the one person their sibling HAD to be pining for is Charge?

I mean it makes sense though. And HG would be equally aggravated on both.

Also, do you have plans for HG to ever meet Spoon? Would Spoon like HG?

No plans.

Who would win in a chess battle royale between Chen, HG, Mortum, Ljungstrand, Regina, and Nocturne?

Chen plays more often, he would win.

To add on to the above: how would tactician!MC fare in that lineup?

Could go toe to toe with Chen.

And for the sake of comedy how badly does fighter!Step do?

Look, you can get pretty far with chaos and unpredictability.

Could you give us some little, tiny, minuscule, thoughts about the OISHA violations poly (Mortum/Sidestep/Ortega)? It's just that Ortega and Mortum have interacted so little in game and I'm squeezing my brain here trying to picture their dynamic

I will see when I write them! I published a snippet of it back on tumblr, and I might as well repost it here. It's Julia, Sidestep and F!Mortum:

Fools

Dr. Mortum's lab, some time in the future.

Half wrecked, broken glass on the floor, emergency lights a pale green overhead and one, conspicuous, hole still smoking in the wall. On one table, feet bare, wearing nothing but a hospital gown, sits Julia Ortega.

She's not happy.

"Oh come on, Charge, don't look so grumpy." Dr. Mortum bats down the last smoldering embers on her labcoat. The arm is blackened, but what kind of scientist wouldn't have fireproof labcoats?

The dead ones.

"One," Ortega holds up her hand, middle finger extended, "I don't look grumpy. And two..." She holds up her other hand, extending the same finger again, both them and the frown aimed at the good doctor. "...if I did, I'd have reasons to."

"No hard feelings?" Dr. Mortum looks around, finds some wet-wipes to clean her hands. "I didn't set out intending to capture you, let's just say that you were a juicy bonus."

"Don't call my girlfriend 'juicy'," you grumble, pausing your work. The little broom and dustpan is inadequate to the job of cleaning up all the broken glass, but since for some godforsaken reason that is sitting on the table dangling her legs the power is out, this is all you have. Luckily Dr. Mortum had some emergency lights going on automatically in case of power failure. Sadly, the same emergency power supply failed when it came to the elevators, so you're stuck here.

"I'm sorry, mon amour, but it's the truth." Dr. Mortum doesn't make a move to help, just vainly trying to clean the soot of her labcoat. "And you could have asked before you let her out, that would have saved us a world of trouble."

"I can't believe you let that asshole hook me up and use me as a generator!" Ortega almost slides off the table, but there's still glass everywhere and you didn't spend five minutes picking shards from her feet to have to do it all over again.

"Don't call my other girlfriend 'asshole'," you sigh, straightening your back. "And I didn't know, and I'm sorry. And so is she."

"No I'm not," Dr. Mortum says, unhelpfully.

"I can't believe you two," Ortega's shoulders sags a little.

"I can't believe you two," Dr. Mortum says pointedly.

"Look." You pour the shards of glass into the bin, and begin to brush up some more. "Things happened, okay?"

"Things..." Ortega says.

"Don't ask," says Dr. Mortum, sighing a little. "It was a little bit rough for a while, but we're past that now. As are you, I've heard."

"SHE KNEW ABOUT ME?" Ortega almost moves again, but there's nothing but a twitch to her feet. Your eyes narrow, you know that twitch, her batteries are running empty, and it takes a while for her generator to refill the stores, especially after a forced reboot like this.

"I was being honest, okay? Finally?" There's a scar on your shoulder, because luckily the good doctor just shot you down physically. Not emotionally. Stitched things up good as new.

"Before you were honest with me?"

"It was easier, okay?" You walk over to her, because you don't like the way her foot is moving. Glass crunch under your feet, but you hunch down, lifting one of them up. Not a wince of pain though the soles are covered with band-aids. Not good. "I mean admitting to catfishing someone in an empty body and falling for

them is easier than admitting that you're the supervillain that sent them to the hospital and nearly killed them."

"If I hadn't caught you... would you have told me? Ever?" Her voice is soft, just for the two of you.

"No." You shake your head. "Not about that. Not about what I am. How could I?"

"How could you not? She knew..." an annoyed look over at Dr. Mortum, who has taken charge of the dustpan now.

"Because I didn't want you to look at me like you did back at the hospital." You let go of her foot, and it dangles back down, limp now. If Ortega notices, she doesn't let it get to her face.

"I'm not looking at you that way now," she whispers, so very softly, almost an apology. "I just wasn't prepared."

"I just shot her," Dr. Mortum pipes up, sighing as she looks around her lab. "I really wish you could have limited your collateral damage to the cause of your dismay and NOT MY ENTIRE LAB."

"YOU HOOKED ME UP AND USED ME AS A GENERATOR!"

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH MONEY I SAVED?"

"MORE THAN IT WILL COST TO REBUILD YOUR LAB?"

"That, I blame on our mutual... friend here." A quick look in your direction.

"I am not going to let you use my girlfriend as a power source, even..." you raise your voice because Dr. Mortum is opening her mouth again, "...EVEN if it was for science. Or because it would be a waste to let a plasma reactor just sit there without use. OR because it wouldn't be safe, because the power needs to be siphoned off once the batteries are at capacity."

Dr. Mortum counts on her fingers, sighing. "Almost got them all, mon amour, but you forgot the very important detail that it would keep Charge here helpless SO SHE WOULDN'T BREAK OUT AND DESTROY MY LAB."

"Fine," you sigh, stepping up to her and giving her the softest kiss you can manage. "I'll pay for it."

"With STOLEN MONEY," comes Ortega's voice behind you.

"And we'll fix you up," you say, stepping back to Ortega, kissing her equally softly. "It's going into power save mode, you won't be able to sit up soon."

"Mierda," she grumbles, but she doesn't argue. "I hate when that happens."

"You shouldn't have used it all up," you chide, putting one of her arms over your shoulder.

"I was trying to break out," her voice goes harder again, but there's a teasing tone to it. "BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT YOU DO WHEN YOU HAVE BEEN CAPTURED BY A VILLAIN."

"I'm a scientist, Charge." Dr. Mortum has noticed what you are trying to do, and walks up to grab Ortega's other arm. "I'm retired."

"Call me Ortega." The deepest of sighs. "If you keep calling me Charge I'm going to feel the need to arrest you."

"Fine, Ortega it is." There's an amused glint in Dr. Mortum's eyes and you really hope neither of them notice the stupid smile on your lips. "Now let's get you over to the couch and see if I can't fix the mess you made of my wiring so we can boot you up faster."

It takes the two of you to manhandle Julia to the couch, and it's not the most graceful process. But you keep smiling the whole time, because your life might be a disaster, the lab might still be quietly smoldering in a corner, and you might be out in all the ways you can to both your girlfriends. But they haven't killed each other yet.

And even better, they haven't killed you.

Maybe it's like Dr. Mortum always said, you learn more from failed experiments than successful ones.



[Fallen Hero: Revelations \(WIP\) Updated: November 1 2023](#)

[Welcome to the first part of Fallen Hero: Revelations! Due to the many ending states, there will be several opening demos, each following a particular path until things start to fuse. This demo follows one of those paths; even if it isn't your personal Sidestep's ending, I encourage you to explore and have fun and see what might have happened.](#)

<https://forum.choiceofgames.com/t/fallen-hero-revelations-wip-updated-november-1-2023/144082>

[The updated FH: Revelations demo is now open for all!](#)

[Nov 1, 2023](#)

Please go to the forum for the link, and information.

This is an updated version with bug fixes and some added content, the old one will be deleted in a day or so to tidy things up.

[Time for your questions of the month!](#)

[Oct 27, 2023](#)

Spooky season has arrived, feel free to ask me anything of interest when it comes to game stuff, planning stuff, writing and more. The demo will go public on Nov 1, and the answer to this QnA will come out a few days later (usually around the fifth or so), so if you want to be unspoiled make sure not to read too closely into some questions asked here...

[Haunted](#)

[Oct 24, 2023](#)

Daniel's POV is a slightly different variant this time. Instead of seeing an event in the game through his eyes, this time we will re-examine another Lore post. Why? Because it's interesting, because Daniel's thoughts are rather open in game, and because it's soon Halloween.

I suggest re-reading this post first: [***West Coast Mysteries and Murders, season 2.](#)

Enjoy!

A small office building on the outskirts of southern Los Diablos, dirty windows, shelves stacked with books and papers. The name on the front door is an anonymous acronym for a production company few would recognize. Those who would, might associate it with their most popular show so far, the "West Coast Mysteries and Murder." Daniel Sullivan knows it, of course, as he knows that they would afford to move to a better office by now. He suspects that Marek is either too cheap, or doesn't want to face the effort it would take to move several decades of research. It's not the sort of thing you would entrust to a moving company.

"I didn't expect you to drop by in person," Marek says, gesturing to the crowded office. "Excuse the mess."

"I'm sorry I didn't call first," I lie politely. "But I know how much you detest phones."

"Too easy to tap," he agrees. "Why are you here, though? The tapes were delivered yesterday unless the courier lied through his teeth to me?"

"They arrived. And the reason why I am here is because I want to talk to them." I choose my words carefully, not phrasing them as a question. It's never nice trying to channel my father, but I know that's how things gets done.

"You know I normally don't allow that." Marek spoke the word normally in a way that made it clear that everything could be arranged for a price.

"And you know I normally wouldn't ask." I add the smile now, soft and convincing. He has nothing to worry about, I'm not here as a Ranger, not here to cause trouble. I'm just a young man with a lot of money, too curious for my own good. "Please make an exception this time."

"My staff likes their anonymity," Marek says, ignoring the fact that both Bennet and Perry were celebrities to everyone who followed the show.

"So do I." My voice is hushed, private, worried. "You know why I am just an anonymous sponsor. If it came out that I'm funding your show I would be the one in trouble. Not you." I'm handing him a loaded gun and pray that he's smart enough to see that. And smart enough not to use it needlessly.

"That is true." Marek rubs his chin, watching me thoughtfully. "And I have been very grateful for your patronage and occasional... tips." Ah. Yes. He saw the gun, picked it up and checked that it was loaded. At least now we understand each other.

"So now you know that I wouldn't upset our relationship needlessly." I straighten my back and my smile, making myself as serious as I can. The same reason I wear a suit to our meetings. A reminder to be the kind of man he would obey. Or at least respect.

"There were... complications after the last recording." His eyes shifts nervously, this is no faked worry, this is real.

"I did think that the footage cut off rather briefly," I say, keeping the smile. "And that there were sections removed in places. I thought we agreed that I would have access to all the rough cuts." I never took the film studies that serious, but I did pay attention enough to recognize someone trying to hide cuts.

"It's not what you think." Marek is sweating now, small beads on his forehead that I do my best not to stare at. His office is stuffy and cramped, but right now he is the one that feels trapped. Not me.

"I haven't told you what I think yet." I let myself lose the smile for just a moment, then once he has noticed, I put it on again. "But I would like to see it. Before I talk to them."

"Niech to szlag trafi," he curses, but I know I've won. He's looking at the door to the editing room.

"Please," I say, as sweetly as I can.

"Fine. But don't ask me for explanations. I don't have any yet." He gets up and gestures to the door. "Don't knock anything over in there."

Once we have crammed into the small room, I do my best to ignore the stacks of tapes looming on the shelves, the folders brimming with paper and other things. A legacy of decades of work, most done before things went digital. There's a layer of dust on some of them, as if they haven't been touched for years. It's claustrophobic, and I wish I could spend a week cleaning this room, reading everything and sorting it properly. How can he find anything here? How can he work here?

"Only got one chair," he says gruffly, sinking into it as he starts up the monitors.

"Don't worry about me," I reply, hovering next to him in a sitting position. It unnerves him, I try to do it sparingly, but right now I don't care. "Did you go analog?"

"Of course." Marek gestures to the cassette piles. "Betacam still has the best chance of picking things up. Digital is shit. I don't need any computer to tell me what the film is supposed to show."

"There's been some interesting digital footage lately, though..." I note that there are four tapes marked with the current session number. A lot longer than the footage I was shown.

"And you have no idea if it's a digital artifact, or the camera trying to help you," he scoffs as he loads one of the tapes. "I tried to film that red sky a couple of months back on digital. You know how it came out? Blue! Because that's how the sky is supposed to be."

"So what are you going to show me?" I say, interrupting him before he starts to ranting about government control mandating digital products that only show what they want you to see. I've heard it before.

"Most of it is just filler. You know how it is. Walking. Setting things up. The boring stuff."

"You know I like the boring stuff," I say, not bothering to censor my disappointment. "I thought we agreed that I would see the entire raw copy. Including the boring stuff." Most people never see the forest for the trees, and I want to see everything in context. Not just the curated parts.

"Fine, I will furnish you with a full copy later. But that's not what I wanted to show you now." Marek pushes in a tape and fast forwards. Without picture. You can see numbers on a pad in front of you. How many times have he watched and rewind already? "Maybe I hoped you would drop by and question me." Not a lie. Interesting.

"Is this tape one?" I ask, making a guess. "That early?"

"Yeah." The tape stops, revealing Bennet and Perry sitting at a dusty table. The camera must be on a tripod, catching them both in the shot. Too still to be a third party. "Still a block away, right within the edge of the exclusion zone."

"Huh." I frown, trying to pinpoint what bothers me about the shot. It's standard fare, they are talking about the background of the place, about the history, about Heartbreak. "Why didn't you show me this?"

"I wanted to check some things out first," he says evasively. "Do some research on what the place looked like before."

"That wasn't our agreement," I say pointedly. He tried to do the same with the footage from the Void expedition.

"You would have seen it eventually," he defends himself. "And you're watching it now."

"Where are they?" I decide to let it go for now and focus on the tape. It looks like they are sitting in deserted fast food place. Maybe. The colors were once bright but now faded, the furniture looks to be red plastic, and the lamps are dark and dusty. The daylight through the windows are shafts of dusty brightness, and I find myself wanting to paint Bennet where he sits. There's an uneasy peace on his face as Marek pauses the tape to look it up.

"According to their notes it was a small arcade hall and fast-food place. It wasn't directly affected by the attack, but it was close enough that the customers dried up. Perry thought it would be a good backdrop to the introduction, the door had been broken down so she didn't think they'd get in trouble."

"Looks spooky," I agree. They rise from the table, and Perry grabs the camera to pan around. There's something unnerving about the shadows, with stark light near the windows and deep inky blackness at the back. There are murals painted on the walls, at one time they were bright and happy, but now they only add to the dilapidated ambiance.

Perry films as Bennet walks around, arms wrapped around himself as if he's afraid to be touched. He watches the murals, and I follow his gaze. Primitive. Probably made after a projected image on the wall, someone painting by numbers not caring how things came out. The elephant is unnaturally blue, ears large and flappy. The clowns look alien in the shadows, their large eyes inhumanly black. Someone has painted a cigarette in one large mouth, another has added a knife to the hand that's holding the balloon.

"Stop," I say, spotting something. Marek obeys, he already had his finger on the button and I realize that he was watching me to see if I saw it too. "What is that?"

"I don't know." At one edge of the shot, near a ruined pinball machine, there's a shadow that shouldn't be there. It feels as wrong as the perspective on the clown pictures. Marek lets the tape roll again, and it's obvious Perry doesn't notice, she just pans the camera around the room before returning to Bennet. The shadow is still there, behind him to his right.

"There shouldn't be a shadow there." I make a mental calculation about possible light sources. Everything else in the shot lines up, but that shadow is cast without a light, or a form that would cast it.

"I know. And she panned the camera, so it's not a smudge on the lens."

"She didn't notice at the time?"

"No. But they remarked that they felt followed later. I wonder if this is where they picked up their little hitch-hiker."

"Have you shown her?"

"Not yet. They both needed a couple of days to calm down before we put the episode together." Marek's face reveals a worry he hadn't let on so far.

"You don't believe in ghosts," I point out.

"No, but I believe in weird boosted shit, and the Heartbreak site is as weird as they come. You know that, otherwise you wouldn't have pushed for us to go there. There's every chance this episode will get pulled the week after it airs."

"I told you I'll protect you," I say with as much authority as I can muster while trying to figure out the shape of the shadow. Is that a head? Arms? "And make it worth your while."

"You did come through last time we ended up in trouble," he grudgingly admits. "And I'm less worried about the cops than what might live there at this point."

"Live there." I keep the words neutral.

"That would explain everything, wouldn't it? Another weird boost, maybe as nuts as the Void was. Lurking at the site, driving people crazy."

"Are you implying another Dreamweaver situation?" I've only read about it, but it sounds plausible if less mysterious.

"I don't know yet. You know what we do, we ask questions. We don't provide answers. Those are up to our viewers."

"And you think the camera caught some residue of whatever this alleged boost is using to conceal itself."

"It wouldn't be the first time."

"So you didn't show me this with the raw footage because you thought it might prove that someone was physically there." I watch him watch the screen, fast forwarding through the rest of the scene. "You wouldn't have thought that unless there was more proof."

"Bennet told me that he thought that someone was following them. Someone that moved a backpack he had used to block the door to the roof." Marek pulls out another tape. Number four this time.

"I heard that discussion. It sounded like it spooked them both badly." I sigh, disappointed despite myself. Is this why Marek didn't let me see everything? Because he was worried I'd be disappointed about a possible physical explanation? That maybe I'd be less likely to fund them in the future?

"It did. Between you and me, I'm glad they got off that roof. Lot of people have fallen from it."

"And nobody would know if they were pushed." I frown. This is sounding more and more like something that might need to be dealt with.

"Exactly. And then there is the camera at the actual site."

"A camera?" I lean close as he starts up the tape, Bennet pointing at something and Perry moving in with flashlight and camera.

There it is. A small digital camera, new and black, like a shiny bug perched on the wooden barrier surrounding the Heartbreak site. Aimed towards the metal plate in the center.

"I was going to ask you about that." Marek looks over at me, and I realize that he's suspecting me. Or, not me, but the government. Is that why he wouldn't let me meet them?

"I don't know anything about this." I frown, the model is new and modern. Could it be LDPD? Military? The Rangers? I wouldn't know, I doubt Chen would tell me. "But I can look into it."

"Do that."

"Don't air it until I have." I chew my lip, wondering who I would dare to approach. Angie would be best, but we're not exactly on speaking terms right now. "If it's military I don't know what I can do."

"I'm not without friends of my own." He seems to debate whether to continue but eventually he pushes the button. "And you still need to see the last ten minutes."

"Roll the tape then," I say, angry despite myself that I didn't get to see this before. This wasn't our deal, Marek is not supposed to withhold information. Unless... "Oh."

I watch in silence as Bennet gestures to the camera, angry and upset. I know he took his medication not long ago, but his pupils are pinpricks despite the dark. He's worried about the military too, about finally having broken into a place that would land them in legitimate trouble. Perry tries to calm him, there are no witnesses, but there is a camera...

What comes next is so quick I don't quite catch it, and Marek pauses and rewinds.

One moment Bennet is standing upright, gesturing. The next he is on the ground, twitching like a marionette with his strings cut.

"A stroke?" I ask, because it looks like nothing I have seen before, the closest would be one of Ortega's epilepsy attacks, but that was different, Ortega had the time to make half a joke, warn that things might be going badly because he had started to see colors.

I see colors now, as Marek rewinds a third time, slowing down the tape to a crawl. Step. Step. Green shadows from the low-light equipment. Step. Step. Step. Bennet stands upright. Step. His eyes go from pinpricks to full black in one frame. No shifting lights elsewhere in the scene, no need for his eyes to react like that. I shiver, he's looking straight at me, one hand reaching out as if asking for help.

And then he falls. On his back. Not slumping but falling, his legs knocked out from under him. I can see it, his feet literally yanked off the ground, and he hits the concrete back first. His head makes no sound as it hits. No sound in the slowed film. Step. Legs. Step. In the air. Step. Slam. Perry's camera shifts down as if she can't quite believe what happened.

Bennet is twitching on the ground. Muscles spasming. Eyes staring blindly at the sky.

"There." I point at the screen, but Marek already knows. Has already paused.

Bennet's face is twisted, but the light of the camera reveals the truth clearly. Blood. Not from his nose and mouth, but from his eyes. And more, there are... marks blossoming on his throat. It's impossible to see if it's bruises or shadows from... indentations.

"My guess is telekinesis." Marek shivers. "He had bruises all over his throat afterwards. Couldn't speak louder than a croak. Eyes were okay though. Just some small bleeds."

"It's not the first site where you've documented psychokinetic abilities," I suggest. "Remember the rattling pebbles at the old asylum?"

"Perry chalked that up to heavy traffic. Not ghosts."

"And the chains moving at the Void compound?"

"I have no idea what the hell that was, could have been a draft."

"So you think there's a boost haunting the old Heartbreak site." I try my best to read him, to try to temper my own feelings and expectations. No preconceptions. Look at the facts.

"Yeah." Marek pulls out the tape. "But I'm not going to say that on air. If I cut away the camera it will look spooky enough on screen."

"Bennet looked possessed." I stop hovering and stands upright once more. I remember watching the Exorcist as a kid, terrified, and Josh pretending to be possessed afterwards. The way he grimaced. Lips pulled back. Gums showing. He kept doing it for weeks, chasing me as I ran.

"He doesn't remember anything. Just falling."

"Maybe you're right." I walk out into the office with a sigh of relief. "Maybe I should let him recover for a few days."

"Would probably be smart. Think he might have got a concussion."

"Is anybody taking care of him?" I'm haunted by the vision of Bennet, alone, staring out the window, seeing... No. There's no need for me to make up horror stories on my own. There are enough in this city as it is.

"Yeah. He still lives with his mom, you know? Don't tell him I said that when you meet. I don't think he'll come back to Los Diablos soon though."

"I don't mind traveling out of town." I smile, in that way my powers are a constant comfort. Traveling made easy, if I could I'd take a year off and just explore the coast. Just be.

"Didn't think you would. But, I'll make you a copy of the full tapes. Make sure you let me know if your contacts catches any military scent on this, if not I'll re-cut it without the camera addition. One of our best hauntings so far."

"Even if you think it's not."

"Why would we need ghosts in a world as crazy as this one?" He gestures to the window, where you can see Los Diablos in all it's grimy glory.

"What makes you sure that there are none?" I reply, with my friendliest smile. "In a world as crazy as this one?"

"Touche." Marek chuckles. "Now get out of here, I've got work to do."

"The check will be in the mail as usual." I turn to leave, but spurred by something I can't quite name I pause before I open the door. "Would it be possible to bring someone else to meet them?"

"Normally I would say no." Marek sighs. "Are you talking about one of your hero friends?"

"Close enough." I lower my voice. "I would make it worth your while."

"I'll think about it." A moment's pause. "And I'll ask Bennet. It's up to him."

"Tell him I'll make it worth his while too." I open the door, not letting Marek get the last word in.

It's better to leave him thinking about the money.



[Horror writing](#)

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<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3Aba0FPiVJfXPctStX8Oal?si=b860d13d9a164f1d>

[Time to get this month's lore post written...](#)

[Oct 24, 2023](#)

I've been very busy since the demo came out, working and editing on another project. I'll go back to fixing bugs and working on next demo soon, but I need to finish off my part of this other project first so I can hand it off to my writing partner (it is trpg related). That's why I have stayed off discord, it really sucks my productivity when I need to do anything but Fallen Hero. I'll be back in a few days.

However, today I woke up in the mood to write this month's lore post, and felt I should share my playlist...

Hopefully, writing goes well!

[Revelations \(guilty\)](#)

[Revelations \(guilty\)](#) · [Playlist](#) · [13 songs](#) · [36 likes](#)

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3Qv6SCD8AugolORCMmMhKu?si=bf19ce3284b84d80>

[Revelations \(guilty and sad\) playlist](#)

[Oct 21, 2023](#)

I thought I'd share the finalized playlist for the current Revelations demo since I am working on another project for a couple of days and haven't had time to write this month's lore post yet (it is coming) or be on discord.

Track 1: Coma - Guns N' Roses

Track 2: Arsonist's Lullaby - Hozier

Track 3: Creep (Acoustic) - Radiohead

Track 4: Liar - The Arcadian Wild

Track 5: Vermilion pt. 2 - Slipknot

Track 6: Suicide Note, pt. 1 - Pantera

Track 7: Fade to Black - Metallica

Track 8: Keep the Streets Empty For Me - Fever Ray

Track 9: Is This the End - Miss Li

Track 10: Rain In Soho - The Mountain Goats

Track 11: Blood On My Name - The Brothers Bright

Track 12: Angels With Dirty Faces - Sum 41

Track 13: Wake the Dead - Motörhead

[Revelations Demo Early Access!](#)

[Oct 18, 2023](#)

So, as we approach Halloween, it is time to dive into the first Fallen Hero: Revelations demo.

Before we start, there are some things you NEED to know.

1: This is a demo for **ONE of the ending paths**. The guilty one, where you are stuck in the hospital with broken legs and Dr. Mortum did NOT break you out. Other demos will follow other starting paths, until eventually all of them fuse into one.

2: The character creator is limited to things I am using in this demo. There are many things you do not get to set. I didn't want you to be stuck here forever.

3: This is, as always, a first draft. No polish. No grammar checking. There might be a hiccup or two as you play if I am uploading a version with fixed bugs.

4: This might change a lot before it ends up in the book. Anybody who was around for Retribution demos knows that many things are added or removed depending on what the story needs.

5: Some new characters are introduced in certain paths, but you do **not** have relationship bars for them yet. That is intentional, I am still figuring out how they will react.

6: Total word count including code is: 104 000. Without code it is: 87 900.

7: The playable text comes to between 14 000 and 20 000 depending on path.

8: This is an **EARLY ACCESS** of the demo, which also gives me some time to correct bugs before it becomes public. **This demo will be posted on the forums and shared with the public on November 1, 2023. Two weeks from now.** Please try to refrain from sharing the link until then. Your friends will be able to play it in just two weeks.

9: Bugs in the demo can be reported in the discord.

10: There is a random variable in the game, it is set after the character creation where you get prompted to save. After you click the "I have saved" button, the variable will be set, and you will get to choose which start you want for your game. That way you can replay several starts and variables without having to remake your character.

11: There are three separate endings, one good, one not so good and one... bad.

12: Have fun, and forgive me for being rusty and weird!

[Click here for the demo!](#)

[Discord info \(Updated in Dec!\)](#)

[Oct 7, 2023](#)

New link to the VIP discord server!

Going to try to keep it updated in the future, we'll see if I remember. Don't forget to read the instructions on joining, and pick relevant roles so you can see the site.

(it expired again, so here is a new one)

<https://discord.gg/PDKZMMNUxD>

[September questions answered!](#)

[Oct 7, 2023](#)

But first, an update!

Working on the first demo for Revelations, it will follow the path of the Guilty revealed Sidestep stuck in the hospital, since that is one of the more complex paths. The plan is to get it up this month!

This month's lore post will be Danny POV, and we will be delving into some West Coast Mysteries stuff in honor of the season.

Do dampeners/meds that suppress telepathy work as a figurative "splint" during recovery from telepathic damage to a telepath or do they make recovery worse and slower?

Good question! We will actually get into that. They can work very well as a splint, sometimes you need that support until things can be rebuilt.

In routes where the rat king hasnt needed to rescue step, will we still be able to later have them pilot the suit for us? And can there be more rat king interactions in the future PLEASE I LOVE THEM.

Yes, regardless of path, the Rat-King can explore suit shenanigans. It will just come up sooner in some paths than others.

You're probably gonna be vague but i have to try: is the threat that hero hunter (prepare them) steps worried about anything to do with the treaty coming to an end soonish? Also do the other paths know about this threat? Could like, mob boss/activist know about it and help depending on their leadership/politics stat?

You're on the right path here, and all paths are aware in varying degrees (thief least of all). Prepare them Hero Hunter and Anarchist are the most in the know, but have chosen different tactics to deal.

If we didn't choose to in revelations, will we be able to make chen suspicious that we're not a villain later?

Yes.

Does sidestep know that ortega's father was abusive?

No idea.

And finally, if we can make someone forget to breath/trick subconscious bodily functions, can we give someone the feeling of holding their hand/hugging them? 🥺

Using telepathy for good and wholesome purposes? That sounds fake. (Yes, you can!)

You said Chen's goal for retirement was to replace his prosthetics with cloned flesh. He's probably too close to retirement for it to be worth it now, but did he ever consider augmenting his remaining arm to make himself more powerful? Like, he's going to get all his flesh limbs back eventually anyway, what's one more?

No, not even once. Mods are handy but they are still not the same as your own body, with all the added pain and stress.

If Nocturne or Jake (or a hypothetical younger sibling) were to be harmed would HG immediately demand vengeance, or is there a "just doing business" threshold that needs to be crossed?

There is a threshold, but not sure where it is.

Can Nocturne recognize when she's been threaded? Does she know enough about what it feels like and how it works to think/act around the commands if she wanted or needed to?

She likes to think so! It is unclear whether it's true, but she is certainly the expert.

Nonbinary Sidesteps have the option to be trans but can choose whether or not they're on hormones, but that option isn't available for transwoman and transman Sidesteps. Why do they have to be on hormones, why isn't that option available for them too?

Honestly? It was never something that was brought up by the playtesters. The lines between trans and nonbinary are very blurry at times, and there were a lot of wishes about option variations within the nonbinary option, but I never heard any comment about not wanting hormones for the "full trans" experience if I can call it that. Might be that I had more non-binary testers than trans testers! It's not a hard thing to add, and since there's not a save system added yet, I can add variables. I'll add it to my pile of stuff for the eventual update if that's something people want!

Theoretically Argent doesn't need to be in the symbiotic state she's in to use her nanovores, has she ever thought about what she'd do with them, how she'd be a hero, if she was able to heal herself?

Weekly. It is her dream.

Is Ortega only okay with their demotion because it's Steel? Would they be more bitter about it if they were replaced by someone brand new?

Oh that helped a LOT. If it had been an outsider, Ortega would never have returned to the Rangers.

What do you think came first for Sidestep, the human name or the vigilante name?

That is up to the Sidestep! No canon answer.

So you said Argent is afraid of horses is that because she's a horse girl(ya know a girl or woman who has an almost unreasonable love of horses, and I'm being very nice with my description there are a lot of them in the States)? If so has she ever had an accident with a horse after the nanos? Or is she almost as paranoid about physical contact as sidestep? I've never met a reasonable horse girl personally, so it would certainly explain a lot of her pent up aggression. The ones I've known tend to lose they shit if they can't go riding on a regular basis.

Sadly, Ortega is the horse girl (gender neutral) here, not Argent. Argent legitimately think they are big and unpredictable, she's a city girl and didn't have many interactions with them.

Is there any way to do a reverse Damocles? Like create a hidden defensive layer in a mind that appears too open (I'm worried for Daniel)?

Oh yeah. You can do that.

If so would he be open to letting Step meddle around in his head?

If Sidestep explained it, probably.

In the event that Sidestep ends up threaded by Hollow Ground, will they always find out some point, or is it possible that Step can remain under their influence for the rest of the series without realizing?

You can go through the entire series and never notice. You just have a staunch ally you trust!

In pasts where Chargestep was 'a thing', Sidestep was nervous of the media catching on and the attention it might bring to them. Is this something that maybe Step should still be worried about? Like for example, if Sidestep and Ortega are bit too open with each other at the upcoming birthday party, might there be future headlines about "Charge's mysterious new paramour" or some such?

I mean the risk is still there, but Sidestep is SO MUCH more powerful now, they would pick up photographers fast, and most people never even remember who Ortega is with.

With the imposters that are about to spring up, can all of them be reasoned with, or become allies? Or will one or more of them always be hostile to Sidestep no matter what?

Some are deeply hostile, but not all.

Somewhat self-indulgent question here, but what are the Rangers' general thoughts or immediate reactions to suddenly seeing a Sidestep go from plain nondescript clothing to an edgy punk/goth fashion style? :D

Someone's finally coming out of their depression!

Serious question. Do the laser dolphins emit lasers from their eyes superman style? Or do they open their mouths and fire their lazer. Oooh ooh or out of their blow hole? Or is it some magical girl shenanigans with magical lazer firing circles just appearing in the air? Do they have a secret base somewhere? These are the questions that keep me up at night.

I can't believe you are having me type this out, but it is indeed more like magical girl shenanigans. The beam forms a few inches in front of their foreheads. And they do have a secret base! Details are spoilers.

Hello! I have a question about The Big One and the following destruction it caused. How did you come to choose the San Andreas Fault rupturing as the catalyst for the separation of the west coast? As in out of all the major disasters that could have happened, is there any importance to the fault itself or is it just a famous fault line that worked as a good catalyst? The theme of earthquakes and destruction has come up a few times in the game so I'm curious if its just tying in the lore or if there is any foreshadowing there. Thank you :->

Honestly, the main catalyst was the Cascadia fault! The San Andreas, as well as other volcanic interactions was triggered from that. It's partly based on real events that almost happened, just dialed up to 11 and changed for me to have a good story hook. It's partly because I am very fascinated with natural disasters and geology, and because my partner is from Washington State, so I've spent a lot of time up there.

What made Ortega, HG, Pelayo, possibly Chen and this mysterious benefactor hire specifically VERA to rescue sidestep? Why Vera and not another person?

Because I wanted Vera in the book. A version of her was in the original novel, but I cut her for space in Retribution. The answer to most questions like this is because the author wanted it, and then we make up reasons afterwards if needed.

I'm not sure if this has been asked before, and I apologize if it has. But will there generally be a noticeable difference in the Rangers' reaction to a villain reveal in Book 3 as opposed to Book 2?

I don't know! I have to write that to find out. Circumstances matter.

Specifically speaking, will a romanced Danny have a worse reaction if Sidestep's guilty reveal occurs after staying at his place post-crash?

Probably. The more that is invested in a romantic relationship, the more it's going to hurt. But Danny is weird at times, so who knows?

Hello! This is my first time interacting with this community at all, I've mostly just lurked and browsed the code but I really like this story. I don't personally relate to many of the themes but they still get me to feel things which is more than any other books I read and for me that's a vast improvement. Also I've seen reference to a discord server but haven't found a working invite. I'd just like to know where to find one so I could potentially be more involved in the community. Anyway question time!

Welcome aboard! I will post an updated link right after I finish this, thank you for reminding me!

Will Sidestep ever try to inspire or lead the regenes to revolt? I like thinking about skittish anti social Step having a moment where they're a full on general and more importantly realizing they aren't all that bad at it. (Or maybe they are who knows)

Might be an option, yeah.

Will we get more explanations on the planes? (such as Void's, Jake's, or I'm assuming the gates) or will that just be supplementary information?

Unsure if I can fit it into the books. There is so much background stuff that's only tangential at best. It might happen, but who knows?

In the Ranger's group chat, how serious would you say it is? Like actual contacting for emergency or Ortega trying to make a pun using emojis?

The latter. It devolved pretty fast.

You mentioned we would have plenty of heart wrenching arguments in Revelations, especially the one where we blame Ortega for "abandoning" us. Would we have to be revealed as a regene for that? Or could we run with their tinfoil theory and get upset at supposedly being stuck with HG?

I don't think you have to have revealed, it can work either way. Just a different flavor.

You've talked about the cuddle onsie with Argent, but how would the other RO's react to a onsie donning Sidestep? And how many pictures would Ortega take?

Ortega wouldn't be rude enough to take pictures. Puns however... But honestly, at this point I think that might make sense for most of them.

In the moment where Ace supposedly sees Shroud's end, what does Ace know of it exactly? Do they know they're being possessed at this point?

Oh I am NOT going to spoil that.

If yes, how do they feel that they aren't getting the payback themselves? Are they grateful to Sidestep?

Not gonna spoil that either.

If a threaded Steel saw something along the lines of "Hollow Ground Arrested!" in the news or the actual Hollow Ground being captured by the Rangers. How would that conflict with the threads? Would the threads immediately fail or would Steel try to find some way to deny it?

The latter, it's obviously a fake. But it might lead to eventual breaking of the threads.

If the puppet takes themselves hostage against Steel, would Ortega know they were willing to threaten themselves to get Sidestep?

At least not at this point in time.

Is Sidestep's fate motivation a delusion or is their ramblings something to actually be wary of?

Does it matter?

Would a Hungry Sidestep relate to either the Nanovores or the Catastrofiend?

Hmmmmmm I don't think so.

Will we get chances to have a good hug and cry like the Ortega sui reveal? I think all the Sidesteps deserve a good sob session considering what they've gone through.

Yes!

You mentioned the original book had the suit's Nanovores replace with an artifact of some kind (Alien if I remember correctly?) Could you tell us a little more about that? Or was it not expanded on before you switched to the Nanovores?

It wasn't really expanded on much, just another semi-weird high superhero doodah.

Would it be too spoilery to tell us the extremes of each scar? Like an Outsider!Step lacking the ability to feel physically, a Friendless!Step struggling to understand empathy, or a Puppetmaster!Step starting to devalue life in general?

It wouldn't be spoilery, but the truth is that I don't know yet! These kind of things I explore in writing, it's not a goal I set beforehand and writes towards.

And if the Rangers were forced to get Sidestep a christmas present. (Probably from Ortega annoying them) What would they get them?

Once again with the present issues. I truly have no idea!

I'm curious are there any Boosts or Mods that could be considered Demigods? Because Sentinel and Anathema come pretty close if you charitably interpret what their capable of.

I mean it all depends on the definition, but in general alpha level boosts are pretty damn out there.

Could we ever settle Ortega's grudge with Hollow Ground? Or is it just one of those things you ignore at Thanksgiving dinner? And more importantly could we actually drag Hollow Ground & Ortega to thanksgiving dinner or maybe Christmas dinner? The very thought of doing so makes me laugh.

I don't think it will ever be entirely settled, Ortega is way too filled with spite for that. It would just be something you ignore at thanksgiving. And I think any holiday like that would be headcanon.

How far could you push Argent on the horse issue(E.G. taunting, practical jokes, and general ribbing) before she loses it & what would her reaction actually be? People tend to deal with irrational fears in unpredictable ways for my experience.

I think she would lose it fast. She doesn't like being made fun of.

In the good for you snippet, Tia Elena already knows step is a Re-Gene. How did that revelation go? Did Ortega told her alone or it both Step and Ortega explained it to her? Did she know what Re-Genes were before Step? What did she think about them?

It will vary, and you might find out soon.

Did the SD know that Sidestep stopped the nanovores and if they did, was there any experimentation/interest in that after they were recaptured?

Spoilers.

Would knowing that HG has the threading ability make you more resistant to their threads?

No. But more paranoid.

Probably major spoilers but I'm going for it anyways. Are we absolutely certain that HG's sibling is dead?

Yes, 100%.

Whether it's a smart idea or not, will we get a chance to fight one/all of the Rangers with the puppet?

I know there was an Ortega fight in the og book, so yes!

Did HG's sibling have many/any friends? They come off as kind of solitary to me.

Yeah, the kind that hangs with and idolizes their older siblings.

If HG's sibling had never died, what would Jake and Nocturne have thought of them?

No idea!

Is Step's mind still "toxic" to other telepaths while in the puppet or is it more the telepathy that makes them feel that way?

Oh Sidestep is still toxic as hell.

How customizable are Step's handler's going to be in terms of appearance and gender?

Dunno yet. Probably not super much.

Also, how is Step's first handler still alive considering Step escaped while in their care? I feel like that would be a punishable mistake (unless I'm misremembering and the person on the phone in Rebirth was the second handler). But then again, the second escape might have been even more of an offense, so how are either of them alive? Basically, the question is what is the Farm's policy on handler screw ups?

You don't just kill off perfectly good handlers for making mistakes, you dock their pay and make sure they learn so it won't happen again.

Going along with one of my questions from last month, if this isn't a spoiler; without saying names, just because someone is possessing Step's body doesn't mean they will be good in hand-to-hand combat I believe, so rank the imposters on their physical fighting skills.

Oh hell... I... really need to think about that now. I have not ranked them yet.

Will the Farm employees who were in the ambulance that picked Step up after HB ever make a comeback in the story?

Probably not.

Also, will there be other ways for Step to lose their eye or will Argent taking it be the only way?

I don't know yet!

HWill we ever be able to date Ace in book 3 or 4? When I first played FH, I thought it was leading towards a poly relationship between the mc/ace/ro as an option to resolve the love triangle, but after getting the puppetstuck ending it seems like that won't be possible.

No plans to be able to date the imposter sadly.

Will we have the chance to put the old sidestep costume back on in book 3, or fight with the rangers out of the armor? For example, if we offered to help with the Catastrofiend?

Yes!

How likely would Armadillo be to jump up and down on a trampoline? Would they enjoy it?

Everyone enjoys a good trampoline!

Will we be able to hug Vera/Dove? If so, how big a hug can it be?

I think it can be a big hug.

I assume it's somewhat up to headcanon, but how do you think Sidestep could have chosen their civilian name? Would it be more random like looking up names in a phonebook, a nametag on some service worker that was kind to them or more meaningful, like an amalgamation taken from actual people they knew?

That is entirely up to headcanon, I have seen many variants!

I also enjoy the idea of Sidestep watching tv for the first time and yanking a character's name, not knowing it's a wildly popular soap opera and all the rangers just nod along and pretend it's not suspicious.

Sometimes people just have the same names of famous people, and that sucks!

I remember something about updating Rebirth, not sure how/when but do you think you'll be adding reloadable checkpoints to it? that was SUCH a good addition in Retribution and made reading a lot less stressful knowing I won't have to do everything all over if I change my mind with a

dialogue option!

I will add checkpoints, that is one reason why it is taking this long.

I'm dying to know, how old was Spoon when Chen adopted him from the shelter and what year was it? I know Chen said Spoon was a former racing dog (and ergo, not a puppy) but I don't think our best boy's elderly yet. i want him to have a long and happy life 😊

I will plead the fifth here and not say anything other than that Spoon is currently in his prime, and I don't want to put a possible death date out there. He exist in the immortal now of fiction.

I'm curious at what point would the American government in universe simply be forced to submit to some hostile force, I mean man power, resources, or public opinion at what point would it just be better to completely surrender to an enemy?

That is really hard to answer, politics are complicated, and rarely relies on logic. Feelings are more important.

Does Argent feel indebted to Sidestep for saving her life in the nanosurge incident?

She doesn't think they did, but they are grateful that they stopped more people dying.

Is there any way to work with Hollow Ground in retribution and get the aquarium scene in one run? A yes or no is fine it'll give me

I am honestly not sure here.

What might have happened if Herald had succeeded in stopping his brother from taking the boost drug?

They would have grown up into two unhappy but wealthy young men.

I understand from one of the previous Q&A HG would like to have a kid (or has thought about it), but how would Nocturne and Jake feel about being parents?

Boosts really can't rely on that, it would have to be adoption. I think Jake would like that in a couple of years, Nocturne is more hesitant.

What made Iris a fan of Sidestep's villain persona? Does it vary depending on the kind of villain Sidestep is? Or is this headcanon area?

Headcanon area.

What might HG's life had turned out like if the Big One had never happened?

Probably a somewhat successful criminal.

What did HG and Nocturne potentially think if Jake lost against the new villain?

That he got sloppy.

How often does Nocturne's red-threads need to be reinforced?

She likes it done daily, but a few times a week at least.

Do Vera and Sky-Raider know of each other? What would their professional opinions be on each other?

Yes they do. They like each other. They hang out occasionally.

You mentioned before that Argent is the highest paid Ranger out of the four... how exactly did she manage that? Where did her negotiating skills come from?

She knows her worth, and was more than ready to just say no. Danny is not a good negotiator/cares that much about money, and they got Ortega and Chen by the balls.

Does the Farm have spies in hospitals/therapist circles?

Not really.

Would HG feel the ominous pull of the Heartbreak site if they were there in person?

Hmmmm a VERY good question. I need to think about that. Probably not.

How would Ortega take a Step that chooses to erase their own memories of them out of sheer hatred/hurt for/from their former partner, barely tolerating to even hear their name? Would they try to find ways to restore their memories? Respect Step's wishes to finally cut them off for their own happiness? I remember the answer for Step's feelings of betrayal/hate over the Farm's lies of Ortega thriving without them, and it made me wonder.

Oh that is a downright traumatic scenario! I... oh wow. This is bad. Would Ortega do the smart thing? I... I... think so. I think Ortega would leave them alone, somewhat content that at least they might have a chance to be happy.

Being very bird-like, can... can Vera see windows? or are they Invisible Forces to her without the aid of special goggles?

Vera does have issues with windows in her bird form, but the difference is that she can see the contextual clues for where windows SHOULD be, so she can avoid them. She's more likely to avoid things like open windows, because if they are the sliding variant it's really hard to be sure when you're flying at speed. Accidents have happened...

Which villain armor styles would each of the defected Rangers pick?

Ortega: Mysterious. Chen: What do you mean I need to pick ONE? The perks of having armor is variability. But ugh, fine, Imposing I suppose. Argent: Terrifying. Herald: Utilitarian.

On the subject of Rangers' hypothetical villain armor styles: Would each of them drop the blue from their color scheme? Would any of them keep it (whether to make some kind of point or just because they liked it and didn't want to change)? Would they change their look up much in general, or stick with what they have?

I think they would drop the blue, too much of a reminder. And they can finally go wild with what they want, though damn, that is hard to decide!

if you used the (liquid form) of the boost drug as mouthwash would that trigger the boost event or no?

Not unless you swallowed a lot of it.

You said book 3 will have money sinks, but what about opprotunities for step to get even richer?

That too probably. Still unsure, been focusing on the start.

Do the other cult members feel the same way towards Charge as Nazar does?

It varies.

Can we punch Nazar on Ortega's behalf? Honestly at this point it would be mandatory

I mean it's Sidestep, punching is always an option. But I think that bad beef was resolved after the Void incident there might have been punching).

Did Ortega figure out the Void thought they were hot? Did Sidestep?

I think Sidestep assumes everyone thinks Ortega is hot (except possibly them) but I honestly don't know. Haven't thought about it.

About Nazar resenting Ortega for Void's death: Are his feelings rooted in jealousy re: Void's fixation on Ortega?

No, about taking away the only answer he found.

Was Argent aware of Sidestep at all before her accident? What about after? What would past Argent think about dating Sidestep?

I think Argent was slightly aware, but not really. Like... oh,yeah, another vigilante. Past Argent would be like "Sure? If you say so..."

I live and die for delulu sidestep moments, what's your fav delulu moment or the funniest to write?

Fun fact: I had to google delulu (I assume it is delusional). Other fub fact: When I am writing Sidestep, they are not delusions, they are reality, so it is really hard for me to pick out what's not the truth. But I am having an absolute blast writing Sidestep constantly misunderstanding/underestimating Ortega AND the other way around. Their dynamic is so funny in my head.

How annoyed will Ortega be if Step admits to being a ReGene then acts like HG's sibling anyways

Oh it is not that high on the list of all the things Ortega would be annoyed at in that scenarion, but they would make it all about them.

Is Catastrofiend the original "Terror Beast"?

An interesting thought, and one might argue that, but not in the way the question was intended I think. Yes, I am being vague.

On the outside they seemed unperturbed but was Armadillo secretly as surprised as Vera when they found out the identity of their "cargo"?

Yes, you just never show when you're surprised. That's weakness that can be taken advantage of.

How was HG's love life in the past? Did they have any other long-time couples? Did they like to sleep around?

Honestly, perfunctory. More having partners because it was expected, not because of anything deeper or more intense. They don't need people like that, but they realize that their role does.

From my understanding the regenerator can regrow skin and flesh. If Argent were to use the regenerator would she still need her nanovores to act as some of her missing organs? Would she prefer to store her nanovores underneath her skin, or wear them like a second skin if she decides to keep them?

See, this is spoilers. I know what is most likely to happen, not telling that yet.

The bit about interviewers anglicizing Julia's name got me wondering: How common is it for news outlets and other media to use the civilian names of heroes who don't officially publicize them? Is it standard practice or a question of individual company policy? Do the Rangers try to stop people from doing it?

Civilian names are banned unless people are somewhat open with them, there is severe censorship in case of slips. Ortega's name went from "unofficially aware but still secret" to "open knowledge" when they quit the Rangers and had their breakdown post Heartbreak. Lost their Rangers protections. And then there was no putting that cat back in the bag.

Will the Soviet Union still existing or other global althist come into play during the course of the games, or is it simply background fodder?

Background fodder for now.

How common are "Fallen Heroes" like Cavalier or Sidestep? How are they seen by the villain community? Are they excluded/Are people suspicious of them because of their hero past? Do they end up blending in?

It happens. I wouldn't exactly call it common, and most happens to vigilantes who are already straddling the line, like Sidestep or Logarithm. Cavalier and Five Pennies are rare outliers. Whatever happens to them and how they are seen by villains varies a lot. There is no clear stance there.

What's Spoon's opinion on the people in Chen's life? How does Spoon (not) greet them when he comes across them?

Spoon can be shy around new people, but he loves Ortega and Daniel. Argent is scary and she stays at arm's length.

Given that boosts with dangerous/destructive powers essentially need corresponding defensive powers (like Blaze's heat resistance) to survive boosting... How common is it for such boosts to have "general" defensive powers vs. defenses that only protect them from themselves? For instance, would an experienced hero think "if they can breathe fire, they're probably fireproof" or "if they can breathe fire, it might be hard to hurt them"?

More general protective powers are more common. Temperature based powers is one exception to this, as it is quite common to be protected against that without too much general durability. It is unsure why that is the case.

Does Chen know about that big bad upcoming thing Sidestep is not telling us?

All signs points to probably.

We know that Chen backs off from romantically pursuing Step if he knows that Daniel and Step have feelings / are attracted to each other. But how would Daniel react if the situation was reversed? i.e. He has feelings for Step but Step and Chen have expressed interest in each other.

He would do the same, that's his boss...

Piggybacking off the above question: Does Chen back off solely to avoid interfering, or does he also tend to see any MC who's interested in Daniel as too young for him? Would he respond similarly to Argentmancers?

Good spot! The age thing is a lot of the reason. Going for Angie or Daniel drives home that yeah, Chen is getting old. He feels it. Also, specifically in Daniel's case, he thinks they would be good for each other.

What kind of villain was Cavalier? Why didn't he share that "big secret/truth" with the rest of the world? Was he more like an enigma sharing witty remarks like Anarchist sidestep? Did he rarely show up just to blow up things?

Cavalier was not much for witty remarks, and he did occasionally show up just to blow things up. As to why he didn't share what he knew/thought with the world, who knows? He probably had his reasons.

Besides sex, did Chen and Vincent have anything else they liked to do together? Dates? Hobbies?

I think they both worked too much for a healthy life as a couple. If they have had that, they probably would have lasted longer.

Does Vitruvian know exactly how the Void died? And that Step caused it? How did he find out?

Nobody knows exactly how the Void died other than Ortega and Sidestep. That's between them. Everyone else just knows the official story that Ortega did it.

Do Chen and Blaze ever regret sleeping with each other?

No, they had fun while it lasted.

Did either of them catch feelings/were starting to develop them during the time they were a thing? What about after?

I mean there were feelings involved, I doubt either of them would do it just to get their rocks off. Those feelings were just not as strong as everything else that went on in the world around them, and thus they could be pushed to the side quite easily when the friction became too much. They never stopped liking each other.

Will we get the chance to let Blaze know that Sidestep was the one to stop the Nanosurge? 🐐 Or possibly discuss their turn to villainy if we haven't been forthcoming with the Rangers?

That's a good idea! We'll see. It's always hard to predict what Sidestep will be willing to share.

Between missing his LBH days, his idealistic side, Sidestep potentially sowing doubts in his mind, and his serving the Guardians... is Blaze proud to be the person he currently is?

Hmmmm. I would say... probably not.

Since Blaze and Zephyr lived first-hand the nanosurge, what do they think of Step? Do they know Sidestep was the hero of the nanosurge?

I'm gonna say spoilers on that. It will come up.

What's Ljungstrand's opinion(s) on Regenes? What would he make of Sidestep were he to know them beyond Step's farm dossier on file?

An artificial mind is an intriguing prospect, and Sidestep would be fascinating.

Inspired by chat: If each RO had to pick a fursona, what animal would they choose?

I truly don't know how that is decided! So I am afraid I can't answer that.

In Ortega's b3 rangerstuck bit they don't visit Step if they still believe they're a fake or if they've called them a monster. Now the first I understand but why does the monster comment make Ortega keep their distance considering they weren't the one at the receiving end of it? Or do they regret having said it to the point they don't feel like showing their face around?

Ahahaha yeeeeeah the last bit there is part of it. But I think mostly it is that something has broken between Ortega and Sidestep, and they are not sure how to feel about that yet. That variable might change eventually, I'm not sure yet.

if Ortega had seen HG during the years of Sidesteps presumed death, would they have tried to speak to HG about Sidestep, or solely focused on trying to take them down?

I think they would have tried to talk.

What cheese(s) does our dear Doctor Mortum enjoy slapping on the microwave pizza?

Pepperjack!

Can we get the Rat King drunk/high by slipping some sort of substance into the nutrient juice? Or would that be bad for them. I wanna know if we can party with the girlies after a big fight.

Get drunk yourself and have the girls piggy-back your buzz!

Is there a reason why Argent joined the LD Rangers rather than the SF Rangers? Does she have beef with SF?

I wouldn't call it beef, but there are people there she's not too fond of. Also, she was homesick.

Does Snowball like the dog trio? And has being boosted changed Snowball's intelligence beyond that of a normal goat?

Snowball is more intelligent than your normal goat. Not full human cognition, but definitely on the level of a really smart and attentive dog. She likes the dog trio, they make her feel safe and protected.

Would Snowball eat Doctor Mortum's microwave freestyle cheese pizzas?

Of course.

This mysterious benefactor who paid Vera... Are they more friend or foe to sidestep?

There are both good and bad variables there.

Is the mystery benefactor who paid Vera in the case of Steps who didn't get freed by someone else someone who's show up in the books yet? If not, someone who showed up in the patreon lore?

You'll get to see the variable names in the demo soon so... spoilers.

Vera couldn't hardly believe her ears when the mystery benefactor reached out to pay her to get Step out. Is it because news about this person hasn't been heard in a long time? Is it because they're very much not a villain or not related to the villain side?

Once again, you'll see! Not gonna spoiler book three before the demo is even out!

i got a question that has prob been asked a billion times already ^_- has work on bk 3 started and is there a demo out yet

I have posted writing excerpts on Patreon, and is working on the first full demo. Around 65 000 words now, and I want it up as soon as possible. Definitely during October.

For trans MCs who have had gender affirming surgeries, would the regenerator reverse them if used?

No. But the scars might be removed/minimized.

Would it be possible to weaponize the regenerator, and if so could we add that power to our villainous arsenal?

Hmmmm this is a trick question. I can't answer it without revealing stuff.

Can we know/will we find out exactly how the regenerator ended up at the Auction? Who got it there and how/why?

Honestly I have no idea. That's not important.

Is the mystery benefactor who paid Vera related to the crash?

In some cases, yes.

What color is Vera's plumage when she transforms? If she died in pigeon mode, would her corpse stay a pigeon or would she turn back into a human with injuries translating as close as possible, anatomically speaking?

She would turn back into a human, unharmed.

Can Vera sleep in pigeon mode? Is there a time limit? Is the limit more forcing her back into human or getting forever stuck as a bird?

Vera can sleep in pigeon form, but there is a time limit. It's not good on her body to stay a pigeon for too long.

Does Blaze (image of pinched fingers)?

Yes, he talks with his hands at times. His family is italian.

What exactly is Blaze's fan club score? 🙄 Didn't notice one in the previous QnA's...! Who's the president of said club? 🍌

I dunno. I would say it is okay? I have no idea who is the president! Probably some fan from the Long Beach Heroes days.

Piggybacking on that, is it common for people to target fan clubs for information/resources on certain heroes/villains? We know there's fan threads and forums of them, but is there any law prohibiting people from making websites? What they can put on it?

People can have websites, but hosting can be perilous if you post illegal stuff. In general, fan stuff for villains is not forbidden, and some villains are quite fond of their fanbase. However, very few take anything said on them seriously.

How much equipment can Vera transform with?

Surprisingly much!

We know the Rangers are given a lot of leeway to do their jobs, so I'm wondering: Has a Ranger ever been prosecuted for crimes they committed while on the job? More specifically, were any ever tried, found guilty, and sentenced? If so, how many times has this happened? What crime(s) were they guilty of? What was the sentence? And how did the public react?

Here is the thing, no Ranger has ever been publicly prosecuted. That would be a MASSIVE blow towards the system, on the level of Cavalier defecting. However, there have been rangers forcibly 'retired' for criminal behavior. But that was solved out of sight of the public. Funnily enough, there's no official sentences, most people just... disappear.

Would Ortega's father have been proud of them for becoming marshal or disappointed in his child's not entirely respectable public image?

Both.

What is higher priority/more likely to get completed first: the book 1 update or book 3?

Book three demo first. I want one out. Then I will finish book 1 update.

Can step turn a ranger away from the side of law then refuse to let said ranger join their own villainous activities?

Not sure how much variability I can handle there yet.

Will Sidestep be able to weigh in on costume/armor themes for defected Rangers?

Probably.

Thinking about Los Diablos itself now, with all of its rebuilt ruins, heroes and villains. What are the highlights on Los Diablos, the "must see" for a visitor? And are there famous annual events that people come to see from other cities or follow on TV?

Oh boy. I really should do a Los Diablos deep dive lore post, shouldn't I? I will leave that to that day.

Does Armadillo miss their teammates/batchmates (if they have any)?

Yes. Terribly.

In this QnA I asked a few months back: Is Ortega's Sidestep Scar reflective of which HB scar Sidestep gets? Or is it independent? Are there variations at all? Or just one big Sidestep shaped hole in their psyche? The answer was: It is mostly independent, for Ortega there are three main variables. 1) Did Ortega see Sidestep putting the gun in their mouth? 2) Did Ortega see Sidestep [spoiler] 3) Did Ortega [spoiler]. Do the [spoiler] tags in parts 2 and 3 refer to the same event, perhaps the same event enacted by either Ortega or Sidestep? Or are they different events? And how many variations of Sidestep scar are there?

The spoiler bit is about the same event. There are three variants of Sidestep Scar.

When it comes to Ortega's sidestep scar, it's been mentioned some factors change the 'shape' of the scar (for lack of better wording) like if they saw step tw sui with the gun in their mouth. Do the factors that affect the scar overlap? If yes, does the scar change into a whole new monster entirely or does it just change slightly for Ortega? Or do the different factors that influence Ortega's sidestep scar not overlap at all and having more than 1 doesn't change how it affects Ortega other than small nuances? Sorry if this is hell to read I'll revise as I figure out a way to word it better

I would say that there is some overlap between some of them, and if so the one being picked goes in this order: 1 - 2 - 3.

Does snowball understand the concept of death? Did she understand that the funny human who brought her to the ranch wasn't coming back anymore?

Snowball understands the concept of loss. I am not so sure about death.

when the nanosurge happened, would the machines built (that get referenced in the lore, but not actually used bc sidestep saves the day) have actually done anything?

I dunno actually. Luckily we never had to find out.

Argent uses her technopathy to show her skin as impenetrable to x-ray machines, but what about boosts with enhanced eye sight? Can a boost with x-ray vision see her presumably messed up skeleton?

Yeah, they would be able to.

Since Vera is working for HG, does she think that what they do is good for her community/the city?

So far, so good.

Malin could we please maybe get some more spooky lore for October?

We'll see! I've got an idea...

Has any boost been able to interact with deceased in any way? Be it seeing "ghosts" or necromancy or whatever.

Some say they have. Is it the truth? Hard to tell, it's not like you can ask the dead if they're being misrepresented. Psychometry might give similar answers after all...

Could you use the regenerator to make a really unethical infinite burger machine?

No.

What would happen if the Catfiend got dunked in the regenerator?

Better skincare regimen.

Is Step's exact goal to which us readers have yet to be clued in gonna be revealed in b3? And if so, will there be the option to tell anyone else, like a ranger or Mortum or would that be last book material?

This is book three material. Would have happened earlier, but Sidestep is not very trusting.

if herald and argent had both received scars in heartbreak, what would they have been?

They both have their own scars, no need to come up with hypothetical Heartbreak ones.

What would a 90+ Force/Subtle telepath be able to accomplish? Would any dampeners even be a hindrance anymore?

Dampeners will always be a hindrance. They will just not be a hard block. And they will be able to accomplish anything I find cool in the story.

With guilty end livestock dreams, did step outwardly react to it in any way like if they were having a nightmare? If so, was there anyone watching and what was their thought process, especially if a particularly telepathically powerful step lashed out a bit with their powers in their sleep and caused a disturbance with the dampeners?

Sidestep was watched. Not saying more.

How dangerous are the malfunctions in Ortega's mods? Are they potentially life-threatening or just at risk of shutting down, perhaps permanently with the way they've been battering their mods?

Potentially life-threatening.

Has Ortega ever tried frying an egg with the output of their mods? If yes, what were the results?

Egg in microwave explosion and resulting burns.

Did Dr Mortum and a romanced puppet have other dates outside of Joes and hanging out in the lab? If so what did they like to do?

Yeah, they did. Might have been some dinners, movies, other things like that. It varied depending on what they have in common.

Without being too spoilery will the livestock variable affect mostly flavor text or will it have a greater impact on the story/certain interactions?

I mean flavor text has impact on how things are seen in the story...

How are Re-Genes transported to and from action locations? How are they "stored" when they're not yet needed? How did they get Sidestep from Nevada to Boston, for instance?

They are treated a bit like soldiers. Long distances, it's by air, short distances by military transport. Sidestep is a special case, but even they did not go on commercial aircraft. It was a military plane, then directly into a car to be driven to location and briefed. They usually stayed in safe houses.

Did Argent's traumatic boost to technopathy stop the nanovores from eating her? Or was it telepathic feedback from when Sidestep TBR'd and stopped the entire swarm?

Yes, Argent stopped hers before Sidestep stopped the rest. She was one of the first attacked.

How long did the nanosurge last between making landfall and it's being stopped?

Maybe four or five hours? Not sure.

I was excited to see that the game tracks whether Ortega suspected the MC before the potential reveal. Did you plan to do something similar for the other Rangers? I always thought that was a really interesting facet of the Steel/MC dynamic and Rangers team dynamics in particular (whether Steel had suspected the MC all along, whether one of the Rangers had suspected but never told the others...), so I was curious if it would come up in-game.

Might go on and add variables there if needed.

Approximately how far inland from the coast did the Nanosurge manage to infect before Sidestep stopped it?

Not sure. It varied a little in depth, it wasn't a straight line, more like a growing blob. Maybe a km tops, but remember that the shoreline is not as heavily built up as it is today.

A lot of Sidestep's belongings ended up with Ortega, but what about their apartment's fate? Is there a canonical state for it? Or up to head canon?

Up to headcanons.

is there something physically about danny that makes the nanovores gravitate toward him (like idk. o negative blood), or do they just like his vibes ?

Argent likes his vibes.

Do any of the rangers know about talodine and it's effects on telepaths?

No.

Follow-up on that— if yes, step can mention that they feel drugged if they've been in the crash. If step really has been drugged and it's not their paranoia, was it talodine that the rangers used?

I mean they are drugged as hell due to injuries, but not talodine.

self indulgent please forgive me but in regards to a positive/sibling relationship with HG, is it possible to have a positive relationship with Nocturne and/or Jake assuming no nefarious intentions? Or one but not the other? Would they reach out or would step be the one initiating friendly contact?

You can have positive relationships with both of them.

For the siblings steps, is there a possibility that we are gonna get a family dinner/hangout with HG at some point?

Too awkward not to.

You've talked about different types of minds. For example, Argent's is like a hot iron ball, hard to read but you can pick it up and/or possess it (my explanation sucks sorry) and minds like Danny's, butterflies that are easy to read/feel but hard to grab/possess them. When it comes to threading, does HG find it easier to thread a more consistent mind, like Argent's type, rather than someone with a non-consistent mind like Daniel's? Does it make any difference to them? Are they able to tell the consistency/shape/landscape of the minds they come in contact with?

Oh yes, different minds are easier to thread for HG, but for them it tends to be how long they last. And the painful truth is that they can't tell beforehand, or know anything about the minds they snare. So it is all observing the results. Consistent minds are easier to thread and keep threaded, unless the thread goes against base convictions.

When Ortega and Step meet in Rebirth, you get the option of saying that you didn't contact Ortega after escaping in order to keep them safe. Was there some truth to that or were we supposed to see it as just another lie to avoid talking about what really went down and Step's future plans?

There was some truth to that. Some Sidesteps might still feel that Ortega might have wanted to help them, and they would probably led to them both being discovered and killed. Sidestep did not appreciate Ortega's sneaky parts enough.

In terms of heat production, who's higher? Blaze or Pyroclast?

Pyroclast.

Bouncing off of that, does Blaze have immunity/resistance to his own heat? Or could he hurt himself by cranking it up too high? Does this affect his perception of ambient temperature? Like he never feels hot on summer and doesn't need to wear heavier clothing in winter?

He has immunity to a point. He could reach a point where he could hurt himself, just like we can hurt ourselves with our own strength. We just have subconscious limits that stops us before that happens. And yes, he's not bothered by normal temperature variations at all.

how's ortegas sidestep scar doing post mc-crash/broken out by someone who isn't them?

Ehehehehe heh ouch. Not good.

What would the youngest HG sibling have gotten from boosting?

If Sidestep never existed and the sibling never died, what are the odds they would've met and started dating Ortega? What would HG's reaction have been?

They probably would have died! I really have no idea. And the odds of them meeting and dating Ortega are as high as for every other person in a semi-appropriate age group.

When was the last HG sibling born approximately?

Oh no, time, my mortal enemy. I'm not sure.

What ended up happening to the metro network of LD after the big one? Do any villains use closed down metro tunnel ruins as their base?

Oh it went defunct immediately. Some parts collapsed, other parts were just twisted, some were flooded. The remaining tunnel ruins are popular with both squatters and villains who likes to live cheap.

In honor of spooky month, do any of the rangers believe in ghosts? How about the HG trio or Vera/Arde and mortum? Do they believe in some superstitions or in the spooky spiritual side of the world?

Definitely believes in ghosts and spooky shit: Jake, Daniel.

Kinda believes or wants to believe: Ortega.

Doesn't believe but you never know so some rituals are good and useful actually: Chen. Mortum.

Really? Ghosts? Come on....: Argent, HG, Nocturne, Arde, Vera.

Do Danny/Argent notice Ortega acting differently around sidestep then they normally do? Does Chen see a difference from before? What do they think of that?

Different compared to what? At what point in time? Ortega has always been kinda high strung, it's hard to understand what goes on in their head even for their teammates.

If Sidestep had brought a cake to the meeting to be a good guest, would the HG trio have eaten it?

At the first meeting? Hell no.

Does HG appreciate people who push back/aren't overawed by the image created of them, or do they just like people who are assholes?

Bit of both. Being surrounded by yes-sayers can be tiring.

Who would be more of an asshole to each other in a reunion, HG or Ortega (and what kind of assholing)

It would depend entirely on the circumstances, they are both assholes.

Can Argent's nanovores be reprogrammed/reset so that they revert back to their wild, less 'evolved' state? Or is the change permanent?

It would take a massive effort. The changes are very deep.

If such a change occurred, how well would Argent deal with it? Does she have the skill necessary to change them back to their complex state?

Yes she has. It would just take a bit of time.

Chen met Cavalier briefly right? How did Chen react to his attack on the Pentagon and 'death'? Was he curious about Cavalier's motivations? Did he ever look into the attacks?

Angry. Upset. Betrayed. And then he started wondering. He did look into things very loosely, but it was hard to get anything, even for him.

Is Cavalier ever coming back?

No dead rising from the grave despite this being the spooky season.

rangers gotta do fuck marry kill with the other three as options. what are their choices?

I can't do that. This is one of those games where my asd brain takes everything too literally and I can't have fun with it. Sorry.

How would the Rangers have reacted if Sidestep had turned up in HG's company (partaking in criminal shenanigans or not)? Would Ortega have reached out to Sidestep too? Would Chen?

Ortega would have. Most likely Chen too eventually.

Has HG ever threaded out of spite? Say if someone else managed to poach a potential recruit first, and they thread said recruit to join them? (or the poacher themself to hand them over?)

Oh yes. HG is quite a spiteful person.

Does Ortega have modded vision to not blind themselves with their own powers, or do they look away/close their eyes for a brief second?

They have modded vision to help with that. Just reactive protection against sudden bursts of light. Otherwise it would be debilitating.

Not sure if it's been asked but do Nazar or Themmy have any vices? Does Vera or Arde?

Pyroclast works too much. That's the vice, he uses it as a weapon against himself. Themmy had the sweets vice. I think Vera might smoke, and Arde would have a carbs vice.

Out of every Ranger in the FWT, who would you say is the most popular?

You might as well ask which US sports star is the most popular. That would vary by demographics, location and taste.

How common is snow and rain in LD?

Rain is common but seasonal, coming in December to March. It tends to arrive in big deluges rather than a daily drizzle. Snow is less common than it was, the world is warming up again, not to the standards of today but warm enough that there's no snow unless something seriously weird is going on. For snow, you

need to go into the mountains.

What are the favorite holidays of the Rangers, good doctor and HG trio?

Thanksgiving: Ortega, HG.

New Years: Nocturne, Chen, Jake.

Halloween: Argent, Mortum.

Christmas: Daniel

What gifts would be appreciated by the Rangers, Dr. Mortum, and the HG trio?

I have no idea. I have never really understood gifts in real life, so that's really hard to make up!

Do all the Rangers have a set path they will go down if you turn them or will there be some room to mold them?

I don't see set paths, everything is mutable.

Which love interests would be best/worst at pulling off a kabe-don? Which would be most/least appreciative of the MC doing the same to them?

Another thing I need to google. Oh. That is a thing I suppose? Huh. I... can only see Ortega interacting that way? Argent would have, but she's so short it would only be funny because she'd have to like climb a chair or something first.

[Time for your questions of the month!](#)

[Sep 25, 2023](#)

Hi, I am working on the first Revelations demo, it's fun putting everything together for this path. But until then, entertain yourself by asking me stuff!

[1.1.4 Good For You](#)

[Sep 18, 2023](#)

Path 1.1.4

(3875 words of Ranch broken legs ending with solo Ortega friend or romance. Sappy Sidestep opening up. Once again, this was written in one sitting, first draft, no variables, no choices, no personality, no grammar checking. Will probably be changed a lot, I just needed to get it out there.)

(The other part of Revelations I am working on, 1.2.2 is in the boring stage of filling out and adding variables and connecting scenes to turn it into a proper demo, so nothing fun to share there yet. Progress is being made though!)

You're never getting used to the emptiness. Stuck in bed, you can't walk outside to enjoy the near-endless horizon, but nothing can hide the absence of minds. Just one, distant, preoccupied. Feeding the horses. Too early to feed you yet, you need your sleep, she's worried...

The thoughts of concern makes you recoil like a snail meeting salt. You don't need to feel exactly how pathetic you must look, all you have to do is look down on yourself. Day three, and nothing much have changed. Clothes have changed, but casts have not. At least Ortega and the others have left for now, giving you time to recover yourself and forget the embarrassing memories of your first day here. It's easy to do, you were half unconscious with pain already. You feel better now, not because you've healed to any great extent, but because you haven't moved around. You need to rest. Allow your bones to knit. Even the best therapeutic casts can only do so much if you don't allow them time to work. The micro-vibrations feel nice, and you wish you could fall asleep again to enjoy them.

You can't. Instead you stretch your mind, as broken and aching as your body. Tia Elena is petting a horse, her thoughts as solid as the ground she stands on. Would Ortega's thoughts feel the same if you could ever read them? Or would they be flighty and skittish like the horse? You can feel them, relaxed, but ever

ready for flight, checking the signals for the others in the small herd to know if it's time to run. No, Ortega wouldn't be a horse, at least not someone running from danger. maybe towards. You shake that thought from your mind, and stretch further, but there's no other humans near.

The sensation is something akin to relief. Not that you can relax, you're too aware of your weakness. Would you be able to detect any thought-voids? Maybe, if something alerted you to trouble. The horses are good that way, ever alert for strange smells and sounds. They'd pick up on a threat quicker than you would in this condition. And if they didn't, the dogs probably would. Not inside dogs, thankfully, you couldn't handle an excited border collie right now, let her two rottweiler friends. They're among the hardest dogs you've met to change the minds of, their instincts run as deep as their need to breathe. But this time, they are on your side.

Safe. It's hard to guard against that feeling, even as broken as you are. They roam the ranch, Elena's eyes and ears. It shouldn't be safe for a lone woman to live here, out in the middle of nowhere, especially not the mother of one of the Rangers. She's armed, sure, but the real protector hovers close to her, eager for breakfast. She laughs, scratching the bony forehead around the horns. A Nigerian dwarf goat might not look dangerous, but Snowball is the reason you agreed to come here. How long has it been since you and Ortega rescued her? Almost a decade? She must be getting old, but there's no hint of pain in her joints or back. How would aging even work for a boosted goat? What other experiments did the scientists subject her to before she killed them?

You can feel Snowball pick up on your presence, and you send a ghost-pet across her mind, once more affirming your mutual pact of protection. You've upheld your part, you brought her here, to Elena's ranch and a life of relaxed happiness. In return, she'll eliminate any threat to this place, but from what you can pick up from her, so far it's mostly been Coyotes getting exploded. You hope there won't be human operatives next time. You hope Ortega's been able to erase your tracks through the system. `!{he}` seemed confident enough.

But `{he}` always does. Seeing `{him}` that distraught at the side of your bed in the hospital was new, and you've both done your best not to talk about the mutual cracks in your facade. You don't doubt it is coming, but right now you have enough to deal with from `{his}` mother. Who is heading back to the house to cook you breakfast. Grand. That means you'll have less than an hour to put yourself together in some imitation of humanity.

You reach for a drink of water, the movement making you wince. Almost time for a new dose of painkillers as well, though you're lowering the dose to what you can tolerate. You don't need the numbness, not now. The combination with your concussion reminds you too much of helplessness. At least you've got long sleeves now, Ortega promised to bring back some clothes in your size, but until then you have to make do with `{his}` spare ones. The shirts are worn enough to feel like silk,

`*if tall`

and with enough room for movement that you don't feel claustrophobic.

`*else`

and large enough that you need to roll up the bottom of the sleeves.

`*if ortega_secretcrush`

At least they don't smell like `{him}`, that would have been additional torture you don't have the bandwidth to deal with right now. Thankfully, Elena uses a different detergent.

`*elseif ortega_flirting_new`

You almost wish they would smell like `{him}`, but Elena uses a different detergent.

`*else`

They smell like Tia Elena's detergent. Safe. Crisp.

"Good morning. Are you awake yet?" The words are softly spoken through the door, allowing you ignore them if you had any hope of going back to sleep.

"I am," you say instead, resigning yourself to her sunny face as she pushes the door open.

"I'm making breakfast," she says, though the smell of coffee whiffing through the open door tells you that much.

`*if veg`

"They don't have that vegan bacon you liked so much out here, I've told Ortega to bring some when `{he}` comes back. But I've got some vegetarian patties in the freezer if you want some?"

`*else`

"Do you want bacon or not?"

`*fake_choice`

`#"`I wouldn't mind some, I need the proteins."

"I wouldn't mind some," you say with a sigh. "I need the proteins." And an appetite. But the nausea will fade and you need to eat.

#"No thanks, I'll stick with porridge again."

"No thanks, I'll stick with porridge again." You still feel nauseous, and the thought of something fried makes your stomach turn.

#"Please, I'm starving."

"Please," you say with a sigh of relief. "I'm starving." You need to eat when you're injured. Thankfully that's never been a problem for you, and even with the faint hint of nausea from your concussion, your stomach is grumbling impatiently.

*if (not(veg)) #"No, unless you've got any vegan bacon?"

"No," you say, shaking your head. "Unless you've got any vegan bacon?"

"Sorry. They don't have that out here, I've told Ortega to bring some when \${he} comes back. But I've got some vegetarian patties in the freezer if you want some?"

"Thanks." You try to ignore your nausea. You need to eat. "Some proteins will be nice."

"I'll be in with it soon." Elena hesitates a moment before continuing. "Do you mind some company when eating? I've only had coffee?"

"Why not?" You suspect you don't have much choice here. She's filled to the brim with questions, and today is apparently the first day she's felt comfortable approaching the painful subjects. It's better to have food to hide behind. Makes it feel less like an interrogation.

"I'll be back with your tray in a moment." Her face lights up in a smile so much like her

*if \${he} = "he"

son

*else

daughter

that you can't help but answer it.

As soon as she's out the room, your face falls back in its usual scowl. You shouldn't let this get to you. You're \${villain_name}, and your broken body is nothing but a temporary inconvenience. Being here feels like hanging by your fingertips, your past the gravity that threatens to pull you down and break you. You can't allow that to happen. You need to remember the stakes.

And yet... the moment she pushes the serving cart through the door, you find yourself letting go, plummeting freely into memories...

*page_break ... The Summer of 2012.

[i]"I can't..." you mumble, bundled up in Ortega's car as \${he} drives too fast, too reckless down the bumpy road. "Your mother..."

[i]"She'll deal," Ortega assures you. "You think this is the first time she's seen me messed up?"

[i]"I'm not talking about you." You press your knuckles into your mouth, feeling the pain as your teeth almost break flesh. Almost. "I'm not safe."

[i]"You said you can't be around people. There's nobody there but her and the animals. If it becomes too much, just tell me, and she'll move into my place for a few weeks while you recover."

[i]"What if I hurt her?" You teeth has left deep indentations in your flesh. A small valley of red surrounded by pale edges. Dry. No blood.

[i]"You're not going to." Ortega sounds so sure, but \${he} doesn't turn to look at you as \${his} car speeds down the road. "Right?"

[i]"I wish I knew." You can't stop the chuckle, it feels odd, like a tongue rattling in a can not knowing what to with itself. "Everything feels wrong now. After..." Void. After killing Void.

[i]"You did what you had to. We did what we had to." Ortega does look at you then, the briefest of glances, turning back to the road immediately. The look on \${his} face is grim. Did your eyes gleam green just then? You've spotted it in the mirror, it's impossible to imagine that \${he} wouldn't. "The Cult of the Green Sky is done."

[i]"I know." You do. That's not what scares you.

[i]"I'll be okay," \${he} lies, in the face of your memory of watching \${him} scream, strung up for some sadistic bastard's enjoyment. If neither of you talk about it, it might as well have been a dream. "I just need some quiet. And you do too."

[i]"I know." Los Diablos had crowded you as you returned, leaning in with screaming mouths and minds tearing at undeveloped shields, wanting more, wanting everything. You would have lost yourself had you stayed there. Ortega's suggestion threw you a lifeline you hadn't admitted you needed.

[i]"You'll be okay," \${he} says with the surety of faith.

[i]"That's doubtful." You breathe another laugh, and this time your tongue fits right. "You're assuming I would know what being okay would feel like."

[i]"It's okay to be fu—messed up." \${he} bites back a swear, already preparing for \${his} mother. "Ashfall's not doing any better. Chen and Luis wil hold the fort until we return."

[i]You don't answer that, nor the next few sentences. Ortega doesn't need a discussion, \${he} needs an audience to monologue to. And maybe you need \${his} voice, anchoring you securely in your body and head, instead of hovering on the terrible boundaries that the Void opened inside you. If what you did to stop the Nanosurge broke something inside you, the Void dug her fingers in and tore it open. No. That would imply intent. The Void didn't mean to do anything to you. You were inconsequential. A hostage for Ortega's good behavior. A sacrifice for \${his} eventual ascension.

[i]And instead you are the one sitting here, after flinging yourself on the pyre intent to burn. Yourself. The Void. Everything.

[i]Everything burns.

[i]Maybe that's how you need to think about this. About yourself. Damaged. You've seen what Emberfall left of his victims, struggling for life in a hospital ward. Third degree burns can be survivable, as long as the skin grafts work and infection doesn't take root in the meantime. Maybe that's how you need to think about yourself. About your mind.

[i]No skin. No walls. Open to everything. Even the bad stuff. Especially the bad stuff. Ortega was right, getting away from the city was necessary, and not just to give \${him} time to put together a new public face that fits right. You need to build some shields. New ones. Better ones. You put up brick walls after the Nanosurge, but they're in ruins, unable to withstand the seismic disturbance of whatever the Void tapped into. No. Something new. Something better. And in order to do that... you need to be around someone you can shield yourself from. Ortega wouldn't do, \${he} wouldn't tax your mind like that.

[i]\${his} mother though? She would do.

[i]You press your hand against your eyes, hard enough to see stars. Green. That's a thought you don't need. You like Elena. You've had dinner with her a few times. She's seen your face. You've laughed together. She's not a tool, she's Ortega's mother.

[i]"How's her Ranch?" you ask, desperate to ground yourself in familiarity. You haven't been there yet, Elena moved out of Los Diablos permanently after the Nanosurge.

[i]"It's nice. I've only been there a few times myself, and most of those back when my uncle ran it. I think she's got rid of most of the cattle. Glad she kept the horses. She's got a couple of farmhands to help her run it, but she's given them a week off. Guess we'll better get used to mucking stable if we want to earn our stay..."

[i]You smile to yourself as Ortega keeps talking. Animals. Ordinary. Life. You can do this. And if you don't, you promise yourself to tell Ortega that it's not safe. You can trust \${him} to make the right decision. Maybe not the one you want, but the one you need.

*page_break You Trust \${him} With Your Life.

"More coffee?" Tia Elena makes a move for your cup, and you nod mutely. It's not strong, the scent offering promises that the flavor can't cash, but right now you don't mind. It's warm, and it gives your bruised hands something to hold.

"Sorry. I think I spaced out there." You look down at the remains of your breakfast, eaten while you were lost in thought. You used to trust Ortega. When did that change? Right now it feels impossible to determine.

"It's fine," she says, "concussions makes people lose track of things." You're offered a gush of warmth remembering a young Ortega suffering bed rest after a bad fall off \${his} bike. Fond memories since things turned out fine, but filled with remembered worry that it could have been worse. Would be worse.

"You can just ask, you know." You don't want more Ortega memories mainlined into your tired mind. Better to offer her a knife for your own jugular.

"I don't know where to start," she admits, looking out the window. You echo her movement, the curtains are open now, revealing sunshine and view if the distant brown hills. "We thought you were dead."

"That's not far from the truth." Your voice is bleak enough that she doesn't get angry. Doesn't accuse you of nearly ruining her

*if \${he} = "he"

son's

*else

daughter's

life, though you catch an echo of Ortega's grief reflected in her thoughts. You raise your shields, you don't need to know how it feels to watch someone you love nearly destroy themselves. "It wasn't my choice to stay away." Not at the start. And then things became too hard.

"Is it true... that people might be looking for you?" Cautious words. Is she afraid to reveal that Ortega has told her some things?

"Yes," you admit with a sigh. "I shouldn't be here. I'm putting you at risk."

"I'm the mother of Charge." She tries to catch your glance. "My husband was transferred to Los Diablos to help with the restructuring. I've had threats against my life before. Besides," and here she smiles, "I still have the cutest bodyguard."

"Have you had any... trouble?" You wouldn't have let Snowball stay here if you weren't sure that she was safe to be around for friends. If you hadn't made sure to tell her that Tia Elena was important and precious.

"Once." There's a look of unease on her face, and you realize she hasn't let Ortega know. "Snowball... dealt with them. I suppose the coyotes took care of the rest. I had to keep the dogs in the barn for a week until the rains had washed things away. I didn't tell the police. It seemed... unwise."

"And hard to explain." You're still impressed that Elena accepted Snowball into her household, even after knowing what the goat was capable of. On the other hand, she did the same with you. "I'm sorry I'm not what you imagined."

"\${name}." She pauses, trying to find the right words. She leans closer, hands clasped in her lap. "I'm so sorry you felt you couldn't tell us. I'm so sorry we made you feel that unsafe and unwanted."

"You didn't," you argue, but can you really finish that sentence? Not more than other humans? You feel that she wants to see herself as more than that. Understanding. Caring. She wouldn't have told anybody. But... "At least it wasn't just you. It was everyone. And your husband was in the military." The fact that he was dead before you met her didn't mean you could dispel that family connection.

"That he was." She looks down at her hands. "I just want you to know you're safe here."

"Thank you," you start, but you can't stop, "but I'm not. Not here. Not anywhere. And it's not your fault. Too many people saw me at the hospital. All it takes is one stray comment. Running away here is..." you rub your eye. "Maybe it's stupid. Maybe it's delaying the inevitable. I just need enough time to heal. Then I'm gone."

"You don't need to hurry." Her gaze goes to your casts. "Broken bones takes time. And you don't have to pretend to be strong. Not here. I've seen worse."

"It's not for you," you say dismissively. "It's for me. I can't afford to..." Crack. Break. Splinter. All metaphors that feel too apt with your broken bones. "Just let me do it my way." It's not like with the Void, you're stronger now. Been through hell and back enough that this is a minor inconvenience.

"Fine. I will trust your judgment." She doesn't want to, you can feel that. But she will. "Just tell me... if worst come to worst, what will happen? What should I do?"

"It will be during the night." You're sure of that. Standard procedure. "Probably around 3 or 4 am. I expect the horses to pick up on it first, or maybe the dogs. Do they bark?"

"Sometimes," she admits. "They roam the property, keeping the horses and goats safe. Stella usually picks up the scent, and her barks bring Joe and Pima." You catch her thoughts, and it makes sense. The border collie bringing the two rottweilers for backup. Enough to make the coyotes run. "Sometimes they wake up Snowball too."

"It will probably sound just like that. But the barking will go quiet fast." You don't tell her why, you see from her eyes that she knows. "If you hear that, don't go outside. Go and lay down under your bed and leave the rest to us." Her scent will already be strong on the bed, hiding beneath it means there's no new source of scent in her room. Hopefully enough to for hurried operatives to overlook her presence. She's not important.

"I can't just hide," she says, and there's Ortega staring back at you but in the shape of a petite woman in her sixties.

"Yes you can. I can't worry about you. Please. Leave them to me and Snowball." You try to project confidence, but it's hard to believe your own words. Broken legs. Bruised mind. Filled with painkillers and spite. Will they be prepared for you? How much do they know? You'd feel more secure if you were confident in your ability to possess one of them. But your inability to find your puppet has made you question that part of your talents, will they recover as your brain does? How will you know?

*if \${he} = "he"

"Once Ricardo returns, I will rest easier."

*else

"Julia will come back soon, then you won't be alone."

She does her best to push back her nervousness and you don't mention that if anybody is liable to lead them here it is probably Ortega.

"Don't underestimate me," you joke, gesturing to your body. "Despite my current condition, I'm not exactly helpless. I haven't spent the years idle."

"I can see that." She nods, looking at you with a faint frown. "And I'm going to want answers about that. Eventually." The last is added softly enough to make it feel like less of a threat.

"Later." You put your mug down with a finality that surprises you both. "It's not something I want to talk about."

"You said that once before," she points out. "And in the end you did. And it helped."

"If you say so." You wish you could remember how it had felt, sitting in her kitchen, eviscerating memories for examination in a vain hope to chase out what seeds had been planted inside you. You wish you could remember so many things.

*page_break You Wish You Could Forget More.

[An Awkward Conversation \(Chen POV\)](#)

[Sep 14, 2023](#)

A small one from Chen's POV, this is in the path where you try to convince Captain Blaze that he's on the wrong side, he tackles you through the window, and you let yourself plummet to your doom.

Night has fallen, and with the darkness comes the yellow glow of streetlights filtering through the blinds. The television is on, but nobody is watching but the dog. The greyhound is nearly asleep on the couch, but occasionally wakes up as the colors flare to life, the movement on the screen attracting his attention a moment before his head sinks back down. The noises in the kitchen doesn't disturb him, dishes being put away is a familiar clatter that doesn't mean food. The sound of approaching footsteps in the hallway outside makes him look up, and as the footsteps halt and the doorbell rings, he throws himself off the couch and sprints to the door, reaching it well before his owner. Wei Chen, Marshal Steel during working hours, doesn't pause to check before he opens the door. This is not a random visit, Captain Blaze of the Guardians is expected. Or, as he's known here, Vincent Marino. Chen's ex. A status neither of them is comfortable with.

I let him in, like I've done a dozen times before. The brief moment of awkward politeness breaks down into a relieved chuckle as Spoon demands attention. He's not a service dog, but that doesn't mean he doesn't help.

"Such a good boy." Vince smiles with his whole face, not just the polite quirk of his mouth he affects in public. "Looks like someone still likes me." He busies himself with scratching Spoon rather than looking up at me.

"I never stopped liking you," I point out, a quick glance out the door to make sure he wasn't followed. "That wasn't what it was about."

"One could argue you never started to like me in the first place." Vince looks up, the accusing glance softened by the fact that Spoon is trying to lick him in the face.

"What do you want me to say?" The question is rhetorical and the argument repetitive. We've had some version of the same every time we've met in private since the breakup. "That I slept with you because you're good looking? I can do that if makes you feel better."

"You're a terrible person to argue with." Vincent sighs and stands up, kicking off his shoes before heading inside. "Too accommodating."

"I'm not going to scream at you just because you're convinced people don't care if they don't raise their voice." I say it as a joke, but it's the truth even if he doesn't see it. One of the many reasons why things didn't work out, sometimes people can't give each other what they need. Even if what they need is simply the feeling of being loved.

"Can we not to do this?" Vincent turns around, the exasperation projected as hard as Spoons desire for more attention. Bless that dog for his willingness to defuse tense situations. "I'm not here to argue."

"I'm not arguing. Do you want some tea?" I head for the kitchen, glad that housekeeping dropped by earlier and cleaned the place. Worried that he'll take that as a sign of something. At least I'm not freshly showered.

"Might as well. Not going to get any sleep tonight." He follows, sitting down at the kitchen table while Spoon pads over to floomp on the floor, tail still beating a steady rhythm. "And I never could tell. When you're arguing."

"It's not important now." I put on the kettle, then turns around and try to read the look on his face. Wistful. Worried. "You're not here for me."

"Well, not your body anyway." The laugh is strained, and he quickly continues. "I need your input on something."

"If this is Guardian business we could have done this during office hours. Then we'd both get paid." So it's something that can't be said and overheard, and he trust my security measures more than he trusts his own.

"I don't want this anywhere near work. Yours or mine." His face has gone quiet in that nervous, twitchy way.

"Intriguing," I admit, waiting for the water to boil. "Internal team issues?" Zephyr is a powder keg waiting to explode, I never understood how Vince could deal with them so easily. Old friendships I suppose. I know how that is.

"No," he admits. "I can't talk about the new recruit yet. It's not finalized."

"Really?" There's something in his voice I need to remember for later. New recruits should not be a source of tension, but that look on his face means he's not agreeing with whatever decisions they're planning to make.

"It's about Retribution."

"Oh." I am sure nothing shows on my face, but just in case I add a neutral "It is business then."

"Sorry about that." He watches me prepare the tea, and for a moment there's a familiar sense of peace to it all. Do I miss us? Miss him? I ponder my own emotions as I serve us both, then sits down across from him.

"You wouldn't be here if it wasn't important." And maybe that's the clue I needed. We are over. I don't miss what we were. I just miss the domesticity. The sense of another person in my home. Someone to make tea for. It's a dangerous emotion, because there's a face attached and it's not Vincent's.

"You've probably heard about the attack downtown yesterday." He sips the tea, still too hot for a normal man to drink. It doesn't bother him.

"The hotel? Yes, I did." I don't elaborate, what details he chooses to share will be important.

"It wasn't official Guardian business," he admits. "I was there alone." The steam rises from the cup in his hands. "A glorified bodyguard I suppose. To make sure nothing happened." He hesitates, judging my response.

"And something did." I don't ask questions, if I did he would be able to judge how much I know. Who ordered him to be there? The Mayor? Another member of her administration? Deveraux was there, and he's on too many of my lists to be clean.

"Retribution attacked." Safe information, the papers had already printed that. "I'm not sure if the visiting delegation was the target, or Deveraux."

"If there was money involved, that's always a safe bet." I pause, trying to dissect why I just said that. Am I trying to defuse any suspicion that Retribution might be more than a simple thief and robber?

"I suppose." Vincent doesn't buy it. "Honestly, I'm not sure I understand anything of what happened there."

"So there is more to it than the official version." Captain Blaze being a hero, tackling Retribution out a window to save everyone inside at the risk of his own life.

"Yeah." A nervous laugh. "I mean, it's true, but..." He falls silent, and I let him work out what he's about to say without prompting him. "I couldn't fight them in that room. You know my powers. If I was going to have a chance against that armor I needed to be away from flammable objects. And civilians."

"Commendable." I mean it. It's not easy to have that kind of destructive powers. "Still, tackling someone through the window is a Charge move. You're not invulnerable and you can't fly."

"I know." He sighs. "But Retribution has those jump jets of theirs. I counted on them to break the fall. I've watched the Lady Argent fight on the bridge enough times to have some idea of their capabilities."

"They do like to jump around," I remark dryly. My smile is fond, though hopefully it's taken as mocking. Not that I need to worry, Vincent is engrossed in his own story to have room for anybody else in it.

"But once we were falling, they just... froze." A frustrated gesture, Vince always spoke clearer with his hands. "We would both have died if I hadn't managed to work their grappling hook in time."

"Clever." I make sure not to let my face show any emotions. Falling to their death. Letting it happen. I wish Vince was mistaken, but I don't think he is.

"Not clever." He looks at me, willing me to believe what he's telling me. "I heard a voice in my head. Sort of. More like a compulsion. And I knew how to activate it."

"A telepath?" So far Retribution has not shown any signs of telepathic capabilities. That is, unless you know how to look. Unless you suspect who's beneath the helmet. Looks like he doesn't. Good.

"No. I..." he shakes his head. "I don't think they were human? It wasn't words as much as... I don't know. It's going to sound crazy," he laughs at his own absurdities, "I think they might have been rats? I don't even know how I know."

"Rats." Another piece of the puzzle. Psychopathor. What my Wolfpack informant was talking about. The Special Directive's involvement is a lot more troubling now. Who were they really hunting for there? "I don't think you're crazy."

"So you know something." He gives me a sullen look because I am not sharing it immediately.

"No. It's merely conjecture," which is technically true. "Psychopathor used something like that."

"Weaponized rats." Vince shakes his head. "You think Retribution is connected to Psychopathor?"

"Or perhaps the same supplier."

"I've never heard of a biological interface like that, but I suppose it makes sense. Though asking me to save their master is a bit much for a targeting system."

"It worked. You did."

"I saved myself." He's too defensive, there's more to it than that. "But..."

"You're not here because of my technical expertise," I say gently, leaning forward. "And you're not here because a villain tried to kill themselves on your watch." I'm proud I can say the last with a straight face. How the hell am I supposed to deal with that?

"Villain." Vincent's face does a familiar journey. I know it because mine has done the same. "I'm not going to argue that they're dangerous."

"And a criminal," I add. "Who put Charge and Herald in the hospital." Do I need to remind myself rather than him?

"I know. I'm not arguing that either." He sounds as frustrated as I feel when thinking about this. "I just get the impression that they're..."

"They're what?" I ask the question as softly as I can. I know what I felt when Retribution helped saved civilians in Carter's mansion. I see the same expression on his face now.

"They're after something other than a quick buck." A frustrated gesture. "And they kept talking as if I should be agreeing with them. If I knew the truth. It felt like they were testing me."

"Until you both went through the window."

"Yeah. I don't think they thought I'd do that."

"They don't know you like I do." I kick myself for giving that clue, but luckily it goes over Vincent's head.

"It was a stupid move," he laughs, oblivious to my slip. "And afterwards they just... left. Like they had what they needed from me. You know what bothers me the most?"

"No?" I have my own list, starting with why the hell don't they trust their friends enough to tell us the truth?

"I get the impression that I was there because Deveraux was expecting something like this to happen. He paid out of his own pocket, asked me to keep the Mayor out of the loop."

"And you agreed?"

"Of course I did!" He gives me a defensive look. "I know the man's corrupt, but I've got no proof and he's got the Mayor's ear. Did you think I was going to pass up an opportunity to make him think I'm the same way?"

"And the money doesn't hurt."

"Dammit Wei, you know me better than that." He sounds legitimately angry now. "I don't do this to get rich. If I was, I'd take that movie deal and quit this whole mess."

"I'm sorry." But not for pushing his buttons. "For what it's worth I feel the same about Deveraux." And much of the administration.

"As did Retribution, I think." Vincent looks over at Spoon, who has fallen asleep in his bed. "I think whatever they have planned won't stop with robbing banks and beating up heroes. There's politics at work here."

"So what you're saying is that we might have another warlord on our hands? I thought those days were over." Digging, carefully. I don't want suspicion to fall on me.

"Maybe. No. Not exactly." He looks down, struggling with himself. "I get more of a Cavalier feeling about this whole situation."

"Oh." I frown, because that thought disturbs me more than I'd like. Why didn't I see the similarities? Because I believed they wouldn't go that far? "How come?"

"It's been bothering me for a while. This whole..." he gestures vaguely, and for once I'm not sure what he's talking about. "It was a lot easier back in the Long Beach Heroes."

"Well, for starters, that "beach" was not much to defend." I try humor to see if that gets a reaction.

"Don't laugh," he protests. "It wasn't about that. It was about preserving an ideal. I know better than you exactly how messed up the seaside was. Is. I lived there. We lived there. We weren't defending some rocks and ruins, hell, the old beach's underwater by now. It was about what we wanted it to become. What old Los Angeles was about. What Los Diablos could be in a few decades if people just put some work in."

"Don't make me regret breaking up with you." I smile softly, because this was the side of Vince I saw so rarely. The idealist.

"I broke up with you," he says dismissively, and there's the other side. The asshole one. "And I'm serious about Retribution. They're dangerous."

"They haven't killed anybody yet," I point out. Even themselves, but not from lack of trying if Vince is to be believed.

"It's not about that. Anybody with a gun can kill someone." He's upset, but I wonder if even he knows why. "I'm talking about dangerous for the status quo. They want to change things. I'm not sure how or why, but I think they tried to gauge how I might feel about that."

"Have you talked to anybody else about this?" I keep my voice carefully neutral.

"Hell no!" The exclamation is followed by a laugh. "I'm not stupid. Nor do I want to be disappeared."

"You think it's that serious then?" It's a relief to hear that.

"I don't know about Retribution, but you know as well as I do that that Resolution 32 is up soon." His mouth does that little twitch again, and I need to remind myself that I'm not the only one that can read him. Trust Vincent to drag home baggage I don't need.

"I'm not sure 2027 can be called soon." Too soon for many.

"Don't play dumb with me," he pleads. "If you think I'm imagining things, just tell me so. But don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

"Pretend for a moment that I do." My voice is soft as I lean closer, speaking in confidence. "I'm the Marshal of Los Diablos. I work for the US government. What do you expect me to do?"

"What you usually do," he replies, leaning close enough that I worry for a moment that he'll try to kiss me. "Whatever the hell you want."

"Vincent." His name is a sigh on my lips as I lean back. "This is what you never understood. What I'm doing has very little to do with what I want, and everything to do with what I have to."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He looks offended, like a dog when someone takes the squeaky toy away.

"It means that you should keep your thoughts to yourself on this matter. It's not safe." I give him a stern look. "I'm not safe."

"I see." He swallows, suddenly aware of everything that he's exposed by coming here, even if he never got far enough to actually speak treason. "I guess we're both bound by our jobs."

"That we are." I wonder if he's picking up on what I'm hinting at. "We're here to protect the city."

"Whatever you think about me, that is why I'm doing this." He gives me a pleading look, as if he's trying to convince himself as much as me.

"I believe you." I can't resist taking one small chance to add "And from the sound of things, so does Retribution."

"Hah." He shakes his head at that. "I don't know what to feel about that."

"Neither do I. Just try to be careful." I wish I could take that advice myself, looks like I don't have time to be as careful as I'd like. Not if I want to have a chance to interfere before it's too late if my suspicions are correct.

"I'll keep my mouth shut and my ears open," he assures. "I guess I should be careful about sharing this with anyone?"

"Even me," I admit with a sigh. "At least for now."

"I get it." He pushes back the chair with familiar impatience. "Thanks for listening."

"You know I'm good at that," I tease, rising to my feet as well. "Unlike some." Going back to personal, make sure nothing else slips out.

"Fine, fine, I won't kiss you goodnight." The smile is familiar and wide, though it doesn't hit the spot it used to do.

"You should find someone else to do that." Do I care? Yes. I do want him to be happy. And out of my hair.

"So should you. They don't pay you enough to be married to your job."

"You have no idea what they pay me." I watch him put his shoes back on.

"Enough too have no private life?" he teases.

"I do have a private life."

"Spoon doesn't count. I mean it, Wei. Find someone that can make you happy."

"Go." I give him a gentle shove through the door. "I get enough of that from Ortega. I'm perfectly happy."

Vincent has the grace to exit without further protests, and I close the door behind him. The reinforced steel masquerading as veneer is cool against my brow. Happy? Am I? Lonely?

I curse quietly as I return to a television playing shows I don't care about. Trying not to think about old friends. And new enemies. How long can I let that suspicion fester before it destroys us both? How long can I avoid thinking about... no. There's sadly no avoiding that. Curse Vincent for putting that thought in my head.

Not that it matters. That's one road I can't afford to go down. Personal feelings be damned.

I need to focus on the job.

[August QnA!](#)

[Sep 9, 2023](#)

Alrighty! Short update. I am no longer sick and is working on trying to figure out how to do this whole full-time writer thing. I'm currently a bit wibbly mentally (burnout from the very busy summer, my aspec brain doesn't handle prolonged masking well) so I am not very much on social media (other than twitter for news). However, I am working! There are several projects, but these are the three ones:

1) I have pathed the start of revelations to where things start to fuse. I will write one path at a time, and put up separate demos for them until it's time to fuse. The first one will be the Rangerstuck one I have been working on. Now that the pathing is done, I can relax and write and know the direction.

2) I am doing a bit of bugfixing on Rebirth when my brain can handle code. Right now it is in prose mode.

3) I am finishing of a ttrpg volume for RuneQuest Glorantha I have been working on with a friend. It is currently in the editing stage. I did write 50 000 words on it while I was on vacation and got inspired by the scenery, so I can still crank out the numbers.

As you can see, I have prose/coding/editing projects, and it depends on where my head is what I do.

My biggest issue is that I need to reach my brain how to shift hyperfocus, so I can move from project to project with less angst and downtime. That's my main project this autumn, I need to find a rhythm that works productively. How to work fully on one thing without feeling guilty for the things I don't do...

Hope y'all are doing fine, this month's lore post will be Steel perspective, and we'll get more revelations!

Thank you so much for your support, I can't tell you ow much I appreciate it

/Malin

Rest well and feel better soon!

Thank you! I do feel better now, at least it wasn't covid!

May it happen that sidestep will not be able to reconcile with Mortum once they're in their lab? If so, may Mortum try to use sidestep to whatever telepathy experiment they're working on?

Well, things like that will always be up to the individual Sidestep and their actions and reactions. Will there be paths and actions that will lead to the rift being permanent? Yes. Might there be reconciliation? Also yes. Might Mortum want reconciliation but Sidestep refuses? Also possible. As for the last, I mean... if you have a telepath handy it would be a shame not to use them.

I'm interested in a general sense in international affairs. There is Diablos and its relationship with the rest of the US, but what other nations are taking advantage, who have consulates in Diablos? Anywhere else that boosted or modded people are particularly common? Anyone famous internationally as like "The most powerful/dangerous person in Asia"? Any other places where truly devastating mass casualty events have happened?

Alrighty! I love international politics. First of all, let's make clear that the Free Western Territories sits in an international gray zone. They are still considered to be part of the US as far as the UN is concerned. So there are no official consulates or anything like that. However, that isn't to say that there's not anything going on behind the scenes. There are trade delegations that are little-disguised spy and diplomat missions from all there of the other major blocks (USSR, EU, China) and several independent nations. The most important (and open) of these are Mexico, Canada, Brazil and the Republic of Nigeria. Some speculate that the groundwork is being laid for the west to "break off permanently," much like Hong Kong or Taiwan. As the end of the agreement that made this rebuilding possible is closing in, we're in for a volatile time indeed.

Mods are common in the USSR, and one could argue that they lead the development in those technologies for military use. Southeast Asia is another hotbed of boost activity. Some say it is because China and India is using some nations as offshore research facilities, while others point to the years of conflict laying the groundwork. Both the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia have several boosted heroes and villains, and the island nations have the highest concentrations of boosts outside the west coast. I haven't named any of them yet, but now you've got me thinking.

There has been other disasters in the history of the FH world, but I haven't detailed them yet. The nanovores were first used in the gulf, that is the one I think is the most relevant.

Some of the early Lore posts deal with the history and geography of the world, if you haven't checked them out yet there's some interesting things there.

Does Vera visit her community often? Has Armadillo visited there?

Vera still lives in her community, as does Armadillo.

Do Armadillo and Shroud have any nightmares about their past in the farm?

Oh yes.

And considering that Armadillo and Shroud seemingly escaped roughly at the same time... Did something happen at the farm during that time?

Something might indeed have happened... Something throwing the farm in enough chaos that several people took the chance to escape.

Out of interest, what is the state of libraries in Los Diablos? Do they even exist?

Libraries exists and is an important communal resource! However, they are run by local communities and charities, and as such what books they have can vary wildly.

Do re-genes that are used against other re-genes automatically become outsiders among others, or is there some kind of 'rule' that must be broken first?

Re-genes are often used against other re-genes. They are weapons, and that is something that all re-genes have learned. You become an putsider for other reasons.

Did Shroud broke a rule when she was used against other re-genes?

No. She did her job.

Is the regene sidestep can save in book 1 aware that someone saved them? How do they feel about that?

They are aware that they should be dead, yes. Everything else is spoilers.

As sibling what villain career would HG prefer sidestep having? What career they would find most worried over sidestep?

Joining HG in their crime business would be the best! Sidestep as mob boss (underling). They would be the most worried about hero hunters, because seriously, wtf!

Considering high force sidestep can break through HG dampeners, would they consider upgrading them? Could this also make them loose a little bit confidence with their protections against telepathy?

Oh yes. There's no small amount of oh shit oh shit going on inside HG's head after that.

What is Marcia up to if she's not working for Sidestep's 'business'?

Probably working in another store.

Can Sidestep who broke their legs expect free food from Marcia?

Oh yes!

Could HG ever dare to reveal Sibling Sidestep or Jake of red-threading them?

If HG ever does, that will be a big character moment for them.

Is Iris part of our fanclub? Couldn't help to notice that being friendly to her rises our fanclub stat 🐾🐾

Hehehehe goooooood spot. Yes. Iris is involved.

Could Armadillo help Sidestep grow more comfortable with their tattoos and re-gene identity?

Depends on the Sidestep! But Arde is the first exposure to a re-gene in a long time, Sidestep's gonna have to deal with some feelings.

And for Argent, if they got rid of their 'pets' would she love to live somewhere with big windows, and a good view of the city?

YES! (Look, ill-gotten gains it might be, but Sidestep's luxury apartment is sweeeet).

Shroud's butler mentioned an incident that happened with Shroud. What was that incident and will we get to find out what it was?

When Shroud gets starved she might start to lash out involuntarily and eat people. Not the thing you want to do in a friendly place.

What are the HG trio's sexualities? Did they all already know they were bisexual before meeting each other? Is HG demi?

HG is 100% demisexual. The way I see it, the concept of sexuality period was always more of an issue than with what gender. The fact that Nocturne is a woman is less important than the fact that HG got interested in the first place. They see themselves as pansexual, but definitely portrays themselves as having a bigger sexual appetite than they actually do. This is one of the reasons they are alright with a poly relationship, as long as they care about both of them it also takes some of the heat off them. HG is aware that Nocturne has bigger appetites.

Nocturne is bi, and knew that from an early age. However, due to her life and issues she never met people much before HG, so she had few practical experiences. Now that she feels confident and secure, she's catching up on lost time. She's very grateful that HG is alright with her adventures. And, since she knows that if HG wasn't, they could simply adjust that part of her. She trusts HG completely, and this is one of the parts that, for her, proves that it's mutual.

Jake performs straightness and masculinity, but he's been aware that he also likes men for quite a while. Jake is more unsure about how he might be seen than what he does, performance is a big part of his personality. Sure, he's bi, but he wouldn't advertise about it. On the other hand, he wouldn't deny it either. The tension with HG is slightly different depending on HG's gender, because being second in command to a woman is as much of a challenge to him as being the boss's Sidepiece if HG is a man. In a way, an nb HG is easier to deal with, because Jake's preconceptions are already broken.

In the HGenforcer!Sidestep AU would Nocturne try to seduce Sidestep, or would that be too weird?

Look, that's family business, she won't touch that.

When sending the puppet to meet HG why isn't there an option to say that the puppet was actually the villain the whole time and they were only pretending to be their subordinate?

See. This is interesting. Hmm. I don't want to spoil things. But just think about the fact that voicing the (lie?) that the Puppet has actually been running the show might matter. Lock the doors. Don't look. Never acknowledge. Yes I am being obtuse.

Before HG erased it in the epilogue, how did Nocturne feel about being on the other side of invasive telepathy, that she didn't have control of her own power?

Horrible. This was back in her worst nightmares, being unable to control such simple things as being able to step outdoors without having a breakdown. It was a nightmare, and she will remember it.

Can Argent wear lipstick or would the nanos just eat it?

They would eat it. It might last for an hour or so if she concentrates.

Betrayal is a very sore point for Mortum, but how would they feel/what would they do if they betrayed a friend? Like if they were forced to by someone else, they didn't realise the other party would view it as a betrayal or they were acting on misinformation or a misunderstanding which they later learnt was false?

Ahahaha oh boy, we might see that in book three, won't we? Mortum is normally quick to move on and close the door behind them, but sometimes that's not possible.

And would Mortum try to salvage a relationship they ruined or just accept it was over? How far would they go to try and fix a relationship?

Mortum tells themselves they would accept that it was over. However, part of them desperately wants to try to fix things.

You've said before that the Rat King doesn't fully understand Sidestep's thought process, like thinking the fight between them and the Rangers like play fighting. How much of Sidestep's trauma do the girls actually understand?

Animals dream. Animals are afraid. The Rat King can understand and sympathize with what Sidestep feels, even if they might not pick up on the details. Being locked in a cage or chased by monsters is familiar to rats.

Is there a level of understanding or familiarity to Step's trauma because they were both psychic experiments? Or is it like how they don't really get things tied to physical sensations and they don't have their own equivalent to experimentation related trauma?

There is definitely understanding and familiarity. Probably more than they can express in emotions right now.

Would whoever is behind the telepath disappearances be interested in telepathic tech too, like Mortum's telepathic related projects?

heh. Oh yes.

Would they want to get the Rat King or Sidestep's suit, either to help their own agenda or if Step is a known telepath and they were interested in Step's connection with the girls?

Hmm not quite as interesting.

We know that Herald and Locus were Sidestep fans and saw them as an idol, is there any other characters we've met or heard about so far who were also huge Sidestep fan girls/boys?

Not that you have met or heard about so far.

Have any of the Regenes who've escaped before tried to band together? And if so how successful was a Regene collaboration?

I will say spoilers, but also yes.

And given that Chen has issues with Argent and doesn't fully trust her has there ever been a point where he's considered trying to get her kicked out of the Rangers?

No. Not at this point. She is too useful. He's willing to accept a certain amount of bullshit and risk for the greater good.

I don't normally interact publicly with media so I apologize, I don't really know the etiquette. I absolutely love this game/story and as much as I want to understand the game in its entirety but uh, I'm no good at math but I think every possible combination is like a lot so working my way through the major beats is my goal for now. So instead I will simply ask, and pardon if this was already asked at some point I am somewhat new, Do you have a favorite villain suite design for Sidestep? If so I am curious to know and I wish you well!

Welcome aboard, and don't worry about etiquette, just be nice! But that question is asking me to pick favorites! There is so much good villain suit art on tumblr. I can't pick out who I love the most. However, I will namecall asaxophony's design for his villain "Killjoy". Why? Because it's not only cool, but it also includes a huge goddamn sniper rifle that has never been mention in the book, but nevertheless is such a big part of the character. That's the kind of ballsy move I applaud. Make your own canon! (in this case literally). Does the villain have a sniper rifle? Well, I never specifically say they didn't...

Would Mortum have helped sidestep if they had passed out in their car? (Truth Hurts version for simplicity) what would have been their thoughts when they saw the tattoos in that situation?

Yes they would have. There is actually a similar scene to that in the game, if Dr. Mortum has a normal gun they shoot Sidestep in the alley, and during the first aid they notice the tattoos.

I'm rereading rebirth and can't help but notice the Chris Perkins like nonsense in the warehouse with the Special Directive. I love Acquisitions Inc. with Chris as DM, I must have rewatched his run at least ten times. I'm curious are re-genes basically "born" like Saiyans where they're in gestation pods until their old enough to take care of themselves?

Aquisition Inc is fun! And I am not too knowledgeable of saiyans (google says it's a dragonball thing?) but yes they do remain in their tubes until their biological age is about 11-14.

Also if it's not a spoiler is hollow ground able to feel anything from a distance or do they need direct contact with a target?

Direct contact only.

Oh hey, do technopaths in your universe interact with tech in similar ways like everyone talks to tech, or do they have individual means of interacting.

Individual means. Some might see it more as programming, others talk to Stabby the Roomba as a pet. Some have distance, others need touch. It varies.

Again possible spoilers but is the Special Directive organized like Cerberus in M.E.: with individual cells that have little to no knowledge or contact of each other or an actual organization like the CIA?

More like the CIA, though smaller and more secretive.

Also did you know that the USA already has both marshalls that are stationary or wandering law enforcement officers, and the US Army Rangers which is a special forces division of operatives, outfits, units based on the mission, general, or occasionally outside factors like congress making demands or public opinion of the outcome or political tentions? Cause unless something major changes in later games I see no reason the

Rangers in story couldn't just be a division of the Army Rangers or a partnership between the Marshalls & Army Rangers. Again sorry for rambling I tend to get carried away.

Yep! That is where the inspiration came from! The Rangers in game is a separate organization under the justice department, mainly because the president at the time did not want to be seen having the west coast under military rule. However, there is a lot of cooperation with the military, and many members of the Rangers have a military background.

Was Ortega as annoying to Anathema as they were to Sidestep about knowing their secrets? Or was there something about Themmy that made Ortega not push as much?

The difference is that Hood vouched for Anathema, and Ortega took Hood's word as law. And there's something about Themmy that gave Ortega the feeling that Anathema might answer, and they would not like the answers.

On a scale of 1-10, without saying names, rank the imposters based on how much of an asshole they are.

We have one solid 5, what you put in you get out. We definitely have one aiming for 10, while another can vary wildly between 1-10 depending.

In the re: Heartbreak Postscript post, Sentinel says "We don't know for sure if it was gas..." but then he bring up Dreamweaver. Did they not tell Sentinel that it was a telepathic attack or was he saying that for the therapists sake? If the former, did he ever find out that it was telepathic and why would they keep that info from him?

He was telling that for the therapist's sake. He knows the truth.

Could they do the HB experiment on tactile telepaths or would that not work?

It would work, just more complicated.

Malin, do YOU have a facial hair preference for Ricardo?? (Ride or die mustache fan btw, it's the only correct answer)

The mustache is in the original book, that's all I say.

What are the Rangers dumbest fears? (spiders, the garbage disposal, stop-motion animation, etc)

Ortega: Jellyfish. Chen: Clowns. Argent: Horses. Daniel: Snakes.

How much better (or worse) would Ortega have fared after HB if Themmy hasn't died?

The same.

Does whichever body you get stuck in at the end of Retribution have a say in which imposter you get or can all of the imposters be in either body?

Which body you are in doesn't matter much. However, some of the variables which decided what body you end up in might also influence the imposter equation.

Did Step ending up alive make Ortega or Chen rethink Anathema's death?

Chen, yes. Ortega has not reached that stage yet.

Are we going to learn how HG reacts to Mortum helping a Step who refused to work with them? Cause I can't imagine HG letting that partnership continue.

That will be interesting (and potentially troublesome for Mortum)

With no damage taken, is the villain suit fully sealed to the point where Step would be safe from nanovores?

Yes, once the internal re-breathers are on.

In Truth Hurts when Dr Mortum first sees Sidestep they describe their appearance as features blending together or looking thru a mist. Is this how most people perceive Sidestep when they have their "don't notice me" aura up, or is it unique to the viewer?

It is unique to the viewer. Mortum is lucky that they see someone, some people just notice nothing at all.

How conscious is Sidestep about using their powers to make people not notice them? Is it always deliberate or sometimes emotion based? Sides already agreed to meet with Dr Mortum but is clearly nervous about the outcome. Post face reveal, has Sidestep ever consciously or not tried to make any of the Rangers forget/misremember their appearance?

At this point it is a reflex. Sidestep has to actively focus NOT to turn people's eyes away the moment they get nervous.

So this is about Chen's name. With which characters (which Wei and which Chen) his name is formed?

伟 (wěi) - as in great, robust.

陈 (chen) - as in old, antique. This is the family name.

Could Five Pennies control or influence anything other than those pennies??

While he was active, he could influence other things as long as his pennies were touching them.

Does Bumblebee have wings? Why did she become a hero? Does she enjoy her job, being part of the Guardians?

She has wings! Foldable, insect-style, see-through. A bit more dragonfly than bumblebee to be honest. She became a hero because she wanted to help people. She likes working with the Guardians.

What would past!Wei think of his future self potentially *dating* Sidestep? What about past!Herald learning about potentially dating his hero?

past!Wei would laugh that off and be unimpressed. past!Herald would be intrigued.

What were Shroud's and Armadillo's roles back when they were working for the Farm? What did their responsibilities look like?

Shroud was a cuckoo, but much of her job was also inside the Farm. Whenever you needed to extract someone's memories, and weren't too concerned if they died from it, that's when she came in.

Armadillo was a terror-beast. Part of a team, fighting the heavy hitters and taking damage. Bit of a tank.

How long does it take for 'the ground to crack under [HG's enemies'] feet' after they've wronged them?

Depends. Between a week and a month.

What was it about Sidestep that made Locus look up to them?

They looked so young, and never backed down. It was a lot of projection on her part, she never saw Sidestep without the mask, but the media often presented Sidestep as a sidekick, so they had a teenage feel there.

Wait, I'm confused. Did HG's older brother (the one who took the boost with him and ended up with geokinetic powers) die in the boosting process? Or did he survive a bit before dying?

Oh he lived for years! The one that died in the boosting process was a middle brother I think. I've been a bit up and down whether HG have two or three older siblings. Until it's in the book it can change. The older brother who got geokinetic powers is fixed though, he was the one who ran the organization for years.

Are there legal precedents of any sort for heroes acting under mind control/telepathic influence? Any laws? Because villains like Dreamweaver have been around in the past.

If you are not responsible for your own actions, you can't be held legally responsible. You can still get in trouble for getting into that situation though. So, someone who was subjected to a hallucinogenic would not be responsible for the things they broke during their rampage, but someone who willingly took a hallucinogenic would.

How long has HG's family-run crime organisation been running? When was it first founded/created?

HG's dad was the one who started things, it goes back to the aftermath of the Big One. The HG family was there during that mess.

Could we potentially recover any destroyed/wiped memories for Chen, who suspects he's been a victim to a mindwipe or two during his time at the military? What about with Sky-Raider?

It might be possible. It would be a bit like the bodies of Pompeii, the memory might be gone, but the impression around it might be enough to see what it was.

Is there a list of people Sidestep has bitten?

Nope. It might be a long one.

What was Arde's first impression of the Rangers?

Argent was the only dangerous one.

How does Chen deal with fear? Was part of his disdain for Sidestep fear of telepaths/telepathic abilities?

Fear and caution. He tends to try to face his fears, but he's not being Ortega about it. Sometimes it is good to keep dangerous things at arm's length.

We know step projects their nightmares, but what about their feelings? Is it hard to do it consciously? Do they do it unconsciously often? How much of their feelings would the people that surround them feel?

Sidestep does have empathic talents, but it's generally nothing they do consciously. They pick out feelings others already feel and heighten them, rather than project their own. Sidestep is way too private to want anybody to know how they feel, that's usually kept securely under wraps. Dreams can sneak through though.

There was a snippet you wrote long ago abt Locus around there, was it deleted?

I haven't deleted anything, but it might have been on my tumblr you saw it if it was long ago.

When Sidestep makes a deal with Hollow Ground and walks away "unmolested", Ortega doesn't think they're a Re-gene fake after the crash even if sides admits that they're the villain. But when Sidestep says "fuck you" to HG and runs away, Ortega thinks they're regene fake after the crush if they admit they're the villain. Is this a bug or is there a specific reason for it?

It only matters what Sidestep has done, their deal with HG has nothing to do with it. If Sidestep has done acts so terrible that Ortega can't imagine Sidestep doing them, then they might be called fake. It's the broken illusion.

Something I have often struggled with is understanding how much 'prep' to do prior to starting writing. I find it very overwhelming to jump in blind, but when you plan everything out it gets boring. I know you've mentioned before not doing the latter, I'm curious how much prep you have in mind?

My prep is imagining cool things in the shower or while driving. Little scenes and sentences in a scrap folder. A big branching map on how all paths connect, but with little details there. I prep enough that I know where I am going, but not too much. It's a bit like when traveling to a new place for a vacation. I make sure to have a map how to get there, tickets, and the hotel where I will sleep. I don't research all cool places to see or where to eat beforehand. And I certainly don't make a schedule for the week with which sights I should see every day. I want the mystery of exploration to remain for the writing bit.

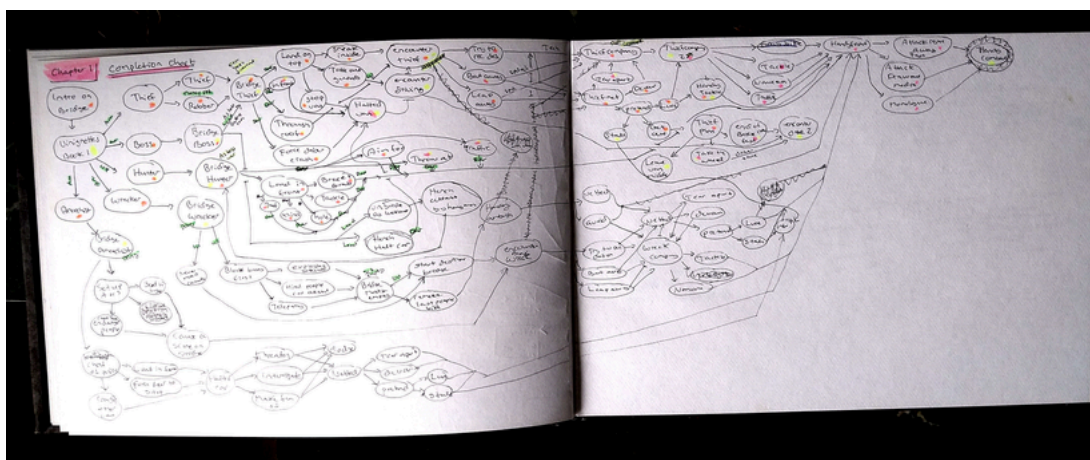
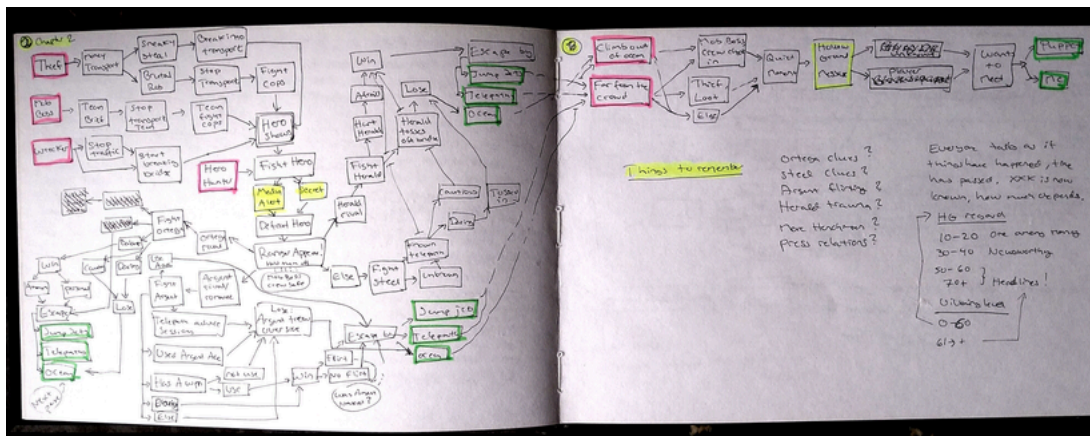
Are there any resources you use to keep track of branching paths and where they intersect?

Pen and paper. Still haven't found anything that beats it.

Do you make outlines? If so, do they tend to be questions you want answered in the chapter? A sentence? Paragraph? Goals for what is accomplished within them?

Very brief ones. Usually some notes of things like -fused path here, -learn this if you haven't, -can steal gun, and stuff like that.

This is what some of my outlines looked for Rebirth. The first is the bridge scene outline, and then my expanded bridgescene color checklist to make sure I have connected the dots. The last is the HG meeting outline. As you might notice, things changed from the first outlines (and the chapter numbers are never correct, they just are in the order of scenes I plot).



Yes, he could do that. He doesn't open his windows that much anymore... but he has definitely found himself in some weird corner somewhere in the flat.

I was wondering, if Rat King ever got to get a body in the form of Dr Mortum fitting them on one of his failed roomba experiments, would the doctor consider this to finally be a success, or would the chaos of leaving five rat brains wheel around in a lab still be leading to failure?

I mean... some success might have unforeseen drawbacks. I do think that the joyful "wheeeeeee" would make it worth it though.

If we stopped Ortega from shaving his mustache, we promise to not make fun of it again. But since we're a Villain liar that lies, will we still get to tease some more? Like finally getting him that Ranger-blue cap for his birthday?

There will be the full menu of hilarious/sincere birthday gifts!

You said before that you enjoyed people's reaction to re-reading and finding clues hidden in plain sight in the text. I was wondering if you had a favourite reaction, or one that surprised you the most? I personally can't wait to read Fallen Hero yet again after going through all your patreon posts and finding all the little hints I missed before and wondering where the ones we'll find about next are!

My favorite is the one person back soon after rebirth was released (I don't remember their name, it was on a fan discord) who made some really astute predictions and observations that nobody at the time took notice of and then never mentioned it again while I was sitting there going "oh shit". I know the Re-Gene and special directive was part of it, and they also nailed what went on with Argent and the nanovores based on the scene when you mind-dive into her head, and a path in the sewer fight. But my absolute favorite reaction in general is all the people who bought into Sidestep's completely reliable narrator voice, thought Ortega really was a nice b/h/imbo, and was shocked when they found out it wasn't the truth.

Is telekinesis connected to telepathy cause I remember wine class breaks weirdly & attention is drawn to it in the gala in rebirth? Also I may be jumping to wild conclusions here but, does sidestep have all forms of telepathy mentioned in the lore dump you put up a while ago or a least the ability to develop all the different telepathic disciplines?

Telekinesis and telepathy is not generally connected in the FH world, unless someone is a double boost. And at this point, Sidestep have most of them yeah. There will always be weird offshoots, but Sidestep is as wide-ranged as they come.

In the extra content on tumblr and patreon I've noticed that female characters tend to be featured less (with either Step and most of the other gender swappable characters usually defaulting to gender neutral/non-binary or male, or set male characters like Danny and Chen getting more extras than, say, Argent) so I was wondering if at some point there could be a chance to see more of the ladies or f/f material. It's not a big deal, just thought I'd selfishly ask given that I'm a lesbian with an obvious bias lol

For Argent, the reason was that I didn't want to go into depth with her until her secret was out after retribution was published. I couldn't go into backgrounds and internal thoughts without risking revealing too much of her nanoness. As such, her pieces was short and very controlled. Now that's out of the bag, and I can treat her like everyone else.

I will admit to trying to use the gender neutral terms as often as I can for Ortega and Mortum. And, Ortega in particular has had some pieces that has been more focused on Ricardo. Looking back, that's partly because Ortega was male in the original book, so that tends to be the default for me due to habit, and also because I've done some thinking about Ricardo's relationship with his dad (as in four funerals). Julia got some Hood pieces though.

Another thing is that many snippets and stuff have been asked for by readers. The tumblr things I used to do were little gift fics, and those were based on what people played. Sadly, there's a majority of Ricardo out there, and Herald was also very popular.

And lastly... I will admit to struggling more with writing femininity. I've always struggled with that part myself, I am genderqueer, but I've gone the whole route from "sure I am a boy" to "oh wait, I am butch" to "I am a he/him lesbian thank you very much" to "alright, this is complicated, genderqueer it is. " I'm 52 at this point, but I still am very ill at ease with my own femininity, and prefers it when people think I am a dude (many people at a first glance in real life). On bad days, I might be two steps out the door before having to run back and change clothes because they make me feel too feminine and self-conscious. It was easier being a full-time metalhead. So, writing women struggling in a man's world (like Julia) or being comfortable with their femininity (like Argent) can be more of a struggle on a bad day. I put a lot of myself into the various characters in this book, and some parts are easier to access than others.

But, I will say one thing! Please continue to ask for women, lesbians and everything else! It helps me to not default to the simple thing, and I love writing them! It's just sometimes easiest to go for the simplest route.

Oh shit sorry for the inconvenience I just read the lore on re-gene creation, I'm curious what are the chances of two clones of the same person with some genetic mods mostly testing different makeup suitability to the drugs in the same batch? I've been working on some headcannon in which my sidestep has a younger twin since their based of the same person.

Yeah, they usually prep a batch of similar regenes in a batch. Even small modifications can give different results, so there's usually at least a dozen at the start.

Speaking of HG's threading, what exactly is the toll they have to pay for each one? Have to rest/sleep a bit longer (5 minutes more or something?) on a day to day basis? More lethargy in general? Can they guesstimate when threads need to be reinforced based on how active/awake they feel?

Physical tiredness. More sleep. A bit like a lion who has eaten a lot. HG can't feel threads breaking, but they have a pretty good estimate by now. They have physical reminders of important people, and try to have a good rotation going on.

You mentioned that if Jake gets stuck inside of things when he tries to re-solidify, he'd destroy whatever he was overlapping with and cause an explosion. How long does it take for him to recover from *that?* Would it kill him if something got stuck inside his head and he tried becoming tangible?

It depends on the material. Technically, the area is always filled with air. That and things like water and stuff doesn't pose any issue, that's just pushed out of the way. Hard stuff like bricks and wood fractures easily and explodes like shrapnel. It hurts, but doesn't damage Jake permanently. Solid and dense things like metal is more problematic. That will hurt Jake, but a thing in his head it wouldn't kill him. However, trying to solidify inside a massive metal cube might. It's easiest to think of it this way: Jake solidifies like ice forms, there's small kernels at various parts of his body that goes solid first, and as they spread, the material surrounding them gets pushed outwards and to the side. If it resists, it will break, break and explode.

On a scale of 1 to 100 how hard would it be to get Ortega, Argent, & Mortum to be in a poly relationship with Sidestep & actually get along? My Sidestep is clearly a glutton for punishment.

Oh boy, that's more on me if I can manage to write it. It's not impossible.

Hey what do Argent's eyes look like with three pupils? Because I keep thinking of Kashin Koji from nioh 2 which has some unsettling implications.

I googled that, but I only see glowing red eyes! Argents eyes is more like three small black pupils forming a triangle. A bit like the triangle laser sight of a Predator.

You mentioned before that Ortega misunderstood the tension between Blaze and Chen... what exactly is that tension between them *actually* born from?

They were sleeping together secretly.

Does Herald ever miss his old life?

Sometimes, yes. There was a lot of peace and quiet.

Will it be possible for Sidestep to become disgusted with themselves after punching Ortega?

Once Sidestep does some growth and thought. A discussion about that is coming.

What would HG have done if Sidestep had just... straight-up ignored their invitation? No puppet or sidestep themselves appearing at Parkfield? Given a polite (or not-so-polite) "no thanks" and hid their goons so HG couldn't get to them for refusing?

I had that as a part originally, but the book became too long so I scrapped it. Basically, HG would have gone after stuff they could find close to the villain. For super secretive ones in the tunnels things might have been fun, but for people with staff in a penthouse things might get hairy. But I wanted to force the HG interaction for the story.

What would step have turned out like, had neither Ortega nor HG found them, but instead Vera who promptly assimilated them into her community(and maybe had a new partner along with arde)?

I dunno! You tell me, I'm not familiar enough with Vera yet.

If a particularly nasty Sidestep (mine) has been awful to Mortum and let their puppet fall in love with them, then revealed the truth about the puppet but after that they went 180 and sent that puppet into the fire to meet HG and then outright refuse or ignore Mortum's call for help with rescuing that puppet's body from ranger custody I assume the doctor will be very upset.

I think that is VERY fair to assume.

Is there going to be a way to be friends again or should that horrible Sidestep (mine) start looking for someone else to make their tech armors from now on?

I think there will be a way back, but it's not gonna be pleasant.

Assuming the regenerator works for her without any particularly nasty effects, what is the first thing Argent plans on doing after using it? Does she even let herself dream that far ahead?

She doesn't dare to dream. That would make her current reality even more horrible.

Jumping off again on one of my previous questions, Shroud needs to death-touch to live, but would repeated dips in the regenerator be able to supplement or outright replace "life energy" in her diet?

No. That would not help.

If we had a close friendship with Nazar, would he ever think about arresting Sidestep if they're a famous, wanted villain, if it guaranteed him to become Marshal?

Oh that would be a tough call. It would depend on what kind of villain Sidestep was. A murderous one? Yes, without hesitation. A kind thief? Probably not.

Another springboard question, did Argent ever catch feelings or anything similar when flirting with other villains? Or is Sidestep villain just special in that case?

I think it might have happened once before, early in her career in San Francisco, but I don't think it was for a proper villain. Just one of those shady vigilantes that occasionally fights heroes too. Never went anywhere.

Pyroclast is said to be able to reach a temperature similar to actual pyroclastic flow, but can he also match the speed of a natural one? To put that into perspective, Wikipedia says that's anywhere from 100 to 700 km per hour.

No, he can't. A lot of that comes from explosions, hot air/water expansion, and downhill movement. He can't move fast at all. Well, unless Sentinel or someone similar would help.

Does nazar harbor any resentment towards ortega for the void's death?

He says he doesn't. He might even think he's telling the truth. But...

And towards sidestep?

Nah, Ortega got the brunt of that.

Sidestep's role in stopping the Nanosurge was publicly hidden, but known among more informed circles. What about their killing of the Void? How did Ortega report that to their higher ups? What's the story that the public knows? What's the story the bigwigs of the world know?

To the "world," the Rangers killed the Void. No specification. This is not uncommon, when it comes to cults, things like that are often muddled to make sure there's not a single target for any survivor's vengeance. To the bigwigs/government, Ortega killed the Void. Ortega lied, with Sidestep's blessing. To have Sidestep kill the Void would be to put a big target on their back. Not only for revenge, but for recruitment. The ones that know the truth are the Rangers, Ashfall, and a few other, trusted, hero colleagues.

All these cool asks yet here I am * cough soo, uh.. we can definitely flirt in the armor with the ROs but would any of them be down to have some "fun" in-armor/costume? 🙄 despite things like "afraid" status?

Not with the afraid status but... hehe, well...

Was the Big One purely naturally occurring? Or were any Boosts involved?

To have a boost be able to trigger something that cataclysmic would put them far beyond any form of power scale. Every single part of the disaster was something that was bound to happen eventually, it was linking them up like dominoes that made it this catastrophically bad.

Weird question but: how would the Rat King have reacted to Heartbreak if Step had had them at the time?

RUN RUN RUN RUN RUN!

Have the Rangers seen Argent's three pupils? 🙄

Ortega has.

How would the nanovores in Argent Show up in an X ray scan?

Argent manipulates the scanner to show a solid body. Like the rays can't penetrate her skin. That's the easiest way to deal with it, otherwise she would have to try to do detail work every time and remember how the hell her skeleton is supposed to go.

has work on book 3 started yet ^_-

Yes, there are several excerpts on the top tier, and I have pathed the start to bring everybody back to the same point. There is no demo yet, but I'll be working on pulling the excerpts into a single document soon so we can have the first glimpse into what happens after one of the end states. It's a bit more complicated than last book, since people start at different points.

How public would each of the Rangers make their defections? Would some of them fake their own deaths to establish their new identities without ties or would they throw off their positions in front of the press? Will Sidestep be able to help them in these endeavors?

I don't think any of them would fake their deaths. If they are at the point of switching sides, that means that they believe that what Sidestep doing is right (even if they might disagree with the means). Some might do it super publicly (hi, Ortega). Some might not make a big deal about it but let others put together the clues after their resignation (Steel).

If Chen was at the gala, how do you think the gala fight would've went down? Does Step still have a chance of success here?

If Steel had been there, the counterattack would probably have been a team effort. Argent likely wouldn't have stormed off. Steel wouldn't have had his armor, but he might have had weapons. Sidestep would still have had a chance of success since nobody would have been prepped for war, but it would have been harder.

If Argent managed to kill Step in the gala-sewer fight, how would Ortega react? Would their reaction differ with a massacre!Step?

If Argent had managed to kill Sidestep, nobody would have ever known. The villain would be... gone. Mysteriously. Maybe the armor would have been found floating in the bay, obviously dumped to avoid getting linked to the owner. And Sidestep the civilian would just have ghosted Ortega again, never meeting back up. Ortega would be heartbroken again, but also not surprised.

Will there be another chance beyond the meal at Hoots to establish Step as a vegetarian? I appreciated that option, and the mention that Ortega is cooking veggies instead of meat at their apartment.

When we have other meals, yeah! I need to adjust the other meals so you have the option to set it there too.

Were Blaze and Zephyr very close to the nanosurge when it happened? How was their involvement in that event?

Yeah, they were close survivors, being located near the beach. They spent their time rescuing civilians. Zephyr was fast, so they saved a lot of lives. Blaze was pretty much untouchable by the nanovores (high temperature) so he could keep small zones of them at bay (his range is not massive) while Zephyr worked. They both have nightmares about what they saw there.

How would the LD Rangers compensate with losing one, some or all of its members to villain Sidestep's side? Are there replacements lined up? Will other teams move in temporarily?

It is likely another team will move in until replacements can be found. The San Francisco team, for example, have several sub-teams and manpower to spare.

Where does Arde live and what are their accommodations like?

They live on a roof in Vera's neighborhood, they have a small house built on top. (it's common to "refurbish" older buildings with more improvised top floors). A lot of people know that they live there, but not that they are a regene. People think they are a vigilante, so they keep it an open secret. They mostly get around by jumping, there's not even proper stairs access to the floor anymore, just an improvised water line.

Was Tina's Aquarium the aquarium that we see in the HG's moray eel vision?

Yes. Yes it was.

Did Ortega believe they were the one most deserving of the marshal promotion after Hood's death? And did they ever consider rejecting it in hopes the role would be offered to Sentinel?

No, Ortega was as surprised as anybody else. But they never considered rejecting it, Sentinel would just have to deal.

How active are villains in Los Diablos? As in, on a weekly basis, how many fights/threats would the Rangers expect to deal with and what level of threat would be considered 'normal'?

I mean it depends on the level. Active villains can be everything from robberies to car thefts to massive terror attacks. The Rangers only deal with the biggest villains and events, so I would say that about one or two fights a month as a team. The individuals on patrol might do more, but that's more of an opportunity than a requirement. Nobody's asking the Rangers to stop a robbery. The one who is by far the most active in that respect is Herald. The least active is Steel, he's got a lot of admin to do instead of going on patrol.

Does Ortega recorder Sidestep if they're the one in the car instead of the puppet? If so, where does that tape end up?

Good question! Ortega always has that recorder...

If and when Argent does get the regenerator working, is there any unfinished business she'd want to attend to before trying to get rid of the nanovores? If she didn't find out that sidestep was the one possessing her before using the regenerator (effectively), what would her plan of action be to confront them?

Hmmm. Oh that will be a BIG issue for her. I honestly is not sure what she would do. She is very aware she's the most deadly member of the team, but she's also desperate for her body back. Which path she will walk I won't know until I write her in that position.

Why is Porphyry in the Guardians? Didn't they refuse to work with

Porphyry is not in the Guardians, they were in the Long Beach Heroes. If I ever implied that was the case, I was misunderstood, or messed up.

Is Sky-Raider gonna end his vacation voluntarily or may some event happen that he'll have to rush them?

He might not even have made it off the coast...

Are there any physical, non-mechanical materials that would interfere with telepathy? Like a literal tinfoil hat?

No. Not at this point.

Would Locus work with people that would be situated on the villain side?

Oh that would be a hard sell. Not impossible, but the treat and better be huge.

Sidestep is missing something vital in the livestock dreams and if their scar is 50 or less. Is that vital thing the same thing in both situations?

Yes.

At the end of livestock dreams, the scientist talking to Dr. Siepen is smiling (and can't stop) and so does Step, was that the first time Sidestep possessed someone?

Sort of... deep influence would be a better description, Sidestep was still in their body.

What would Dave's doubt score be?

80

Would Chen or Ortega be opposed to cloned replacement organs or limbs?

No. I think Chen half hopes that will be possible once he retires. At this point, his mods makes it easier to interface with the armor and make him more efficient. Lacking legs and one arm makes some interesting configurations possible.

is it possible for sidestep to let HG thread them even if their stats stopped it the first time? would that change with force v subtle?

No. It's a self-defense by Sidestep's mind.

How much does HG know about telepathy? Have they read anything about Ljungstrand?

Not that much, but they have read a little bit to try to work out their own abilities. They have read a paper of two written by Ljungstrand.

Is mortum currently helping anyone enhancing their boost abilities?

Mmmmmaybe.

Will step be able to talk with Mortum about some of their career events like The Void? (I'm laughing so much at Mortum's rant about The Void and sidestep in this last snippet)

Yes, I think so.

How would Steel, Herald and Argent feel about learning the full breadth and depth of injuries Sidestep has both endured, then self-medicated/treated? Romanced and un-romanced?

Steel would not be surprised, Herald horrified, and Argent impressed. Wouldn't matter if there was a romance or not.

Why does Mortum think sidestep is juicer?

If it is from the last Mortum lore post, I will say that is spoilers and you need to add up the dots yourself.

Is the Threat That is Coming something that Sidestep can join or even incite to happen in some routes?

Definitely influence.

When Vernon met HG, did he meet them knowing they were HG? And when he walked away/finished the meeting, did he leave knowing he talked to HG?

Yes and yes.

If Sidestep was hit by temporary amnesia that takes them back to pre-first-escape mindset, and their RO/BFF had to take care of them for the week, how would they (the RO/BFF) react to a pre-first-escape version of step? Would anything in particular stand out to them?

Oh this is an impossible question to answer, because everybody's Sidestep's are different. Some might have changed a lot, others not much at all. So that is up to headcanons and your own personal Sidestep. But, I think that most would be perceived as more cheerful than the current version.

Was Shroud being used by the farm for the same cause Sidestep was but in a different way?

Yes.

Does Hollow Ground keep any aquariums in their home? Any with eels?

Yes for aquarium, but no eels.

Why is mortum so sure nothing could have survived in the gun for that long without being sane? Did anyone else get trapped before the Catfiend, like the Catfiend had been?

Oh yes. They made experiments to see how long things would last. Some of them not... nice.

Did Charles lie to Mortum - or at least withhold information - about the gun's capabilities?

OH yes he did.

We know Ortega and Argent find villain!step hot, but what about Chen and Danny? + Mortum Bonus: Objectively, would Mortum find hot a hero like sidestep? I mean we know they like charge

Chen doesn't find the villain hot, he might find Sidestep hot. Danny might, in some cases, especially the functional or mysterious armor. And Mortum agrees that heroes can be hot, they're just naive.

Adding on to the above: Which villain armor styles would each love interest, including the villains, find most attractive? ("Least unattractive" counts, if that's the best we can do.)

Functional: Herald. Chen. Mysterious: Ortega. Vera. Imposing: Argent. Sky-Rider. Terrifying: Mortum.

What does catfiend meat taste like? Can we turn it into an infinite burger machine?

Like ammonia and piss. Not edible.

Does Shroud know Ljungstrand?

Kinda. They've met.

Does Danny ever forget shit in his pockets and drop it? Like his phone or wallet or whatever?

Not more than others. When he floats, his clothes and pocket contents floats with him.

What happens to his hair/the hair of people he's carrying with his powers when he flies? Discounting wind. Does it just float around like in a zero-g environment?

Yeah, it gets lighter, at times up to zero-g float. Wind and acceleration moves it a lot, but Danny truly has shampoo commercial light and fluffy hair most of the time.

Do HG's powers give them any way of detecting their own threads? For instance, if they suspected they'd accidentally threaded or failed to thread someone, could they "check" for threads somehow, or would they just have to observe the person's behavior?

Observe behavior.

On a related note, you've mentioned HG can undo their threads. Does that mean giving a counter-command, or can they telepathically remove threads? If the latter, is it more of a "Delete Selected Thread" or "Delete All Threads" (even ones they're unaware of) process?

It is either a counter command (requires touch), or letting the threads decay naturally and not renewing them.

sidestep napping on HG how smug would HG be about it

Very. Nocturne would roll her eyes.

If the Catfiend can no longer be affected by the Boost drug directly, could it still be affected by processed Boost biological materials? Like blood or flesh? Would Void blood even do anything for it.

I mean it would do things for it, nice things. But not spurt new boosts or damage them.

Asking for science, since HG is such a hype man (gn), would they send Step pictures like a Facebook mom (gn)? Will loser steps or steps with low arrogance get motivational speeches from their big supporting sibling?

I dunno, will need to see that. It's definitely not impossible.

How do HG and Jake manage drawing the line in their affair when it comes to work/personal life between the both of them? Do they do stuff just the two of them sometimes or their connection exclusively happens because of Nocturne? Do they feel awkward about this?

It is a bit more awkward. Nocturne is the glue there, they rarely do non-work activities together just the two of them. But they work together a lot, so...

Livestock dreams hints at bullying happening among regenes. Do the handlers notice? If they do, do they try to put a stop to it on the account of too much initiative taking or are they okay with it because it sows discord among regenes?

The handlers notice if it becomes overt, and usually puts a stop to it. However, so much about regene relations goes below their radar.

If step gave them a smooch or forehead kiss at the end of Rebirth how often does Ortega Think About It? Does step pushing them away make Ortega think about it more or less than if they agreed to be something more/complicated?

I mean it's impossible not to think about. And pushing them away makes Ortega think about it more.

Has Argent taken any trophies from villains she's beaten? Have any been given to her? Did she keep any of those/threw them all away?

Oh Argent has trophies. She has her own little trophy room though she doesn't show that to most people. She doesn't throw anything away. Ortega hasn't seen it...

Does Steel ever think of his life beyond/after the Rangers? If he does, what does he see himself doing in retirement?

Oh yes, he does. He's ready to retire. In his ideal life he'd take a year or two and slowly get most modwork replaced with cloned/grown bodyparts and the extensive physical therapy that requires. After that he might start his own business. Maybe a non-profit thing. Or a bar.

In the time between Ortega's accident and their father's death, what was their relationship like? More sour than usual due to Mr Ortega blaming his child for their recklessness or was there some sort of truce given the heavy circumstances?

It was more of a truce at the start, which soured fast Once Ortega realized that the opportunities they had been offered were influenced by their dad wanting them in the military.

Before Sidestep found ACE in a comatose state in that hospital, what would have happened if HG reached ACE first and used their power to order them to "WAKE UP"?

Wouldn't have worked. There was nothing in there to register a command. Ace wasn't asleep, they were empty. Wouldn't be able to process or understand the words.

How would the HG trio comment on the puppet being a mirror image of step, given that step is already a mirror image of HG's youngest sibling?

I mean just because it is a mirror image thing doesn't make them identical twins or anything. It would be mostly like "huh, you really did go and make the body you're hiding in look exactly like a younger version of yourself."

In the screenreader version, some of what Catfiend says are interpreted as words (e.g. tasty). Are these the actual thought of the catfiend, or just what sidestep thinks they mean?

If you try to speak the Catfield garbled text, you can hear words in them too. But yes, Sidestep IS tasty.

Does Tia Elena have dogs for help on the ranch? Will ranch stuck steps get to meet them if they exist?

Yeah, every ranch needs a dog or two. I don't know any details of them yet, so don't ask.

Would alcohol still have an effect on Argent or would the nanovores prevent it

It can, she avoids drinking too much.

In the rangerstuck scenarios of b3 sidestep is unsure whether it was steel or ortega, depending on the relationship status, who got them the new leg casts. Who was it actually?

Dunno yet.

when ortega snitches on sidestep in revealed mccrash, how did they do it? tell steel, who told the rest of them? reply all in the group chat?

He told Steel, who let the others know. Ortega was pretty banged up at the time.

Does HG know that they can't influence emotions directly?

No, HG knows the outward effect on people, not exactly what happens inside them.

Even if they didn't tell them in the group chat, do they have a group chat? What's their dynamic? Do they leave Danny on read?

I think they have a group chat. Too funny not to. And no, they' don't leave Danny on read.

In a roof training scene, Danny describes how sparring with Step is different than with Ortega or Steel. How would he describe sparring with Argent?

Scary.

Is step's level of wealth gonna bear consequences down the line?

Yes. There's some possible big money sinks in book three depending on what you want to invest in.

For Sidestep's that go the sibling route with HG, can HG contribute their wealth and resources to the regenerator project?

Yes.

Any chances of ortega coming out to their mother in early b3 if you ended up staying at the ranch and are romancing them with a same gender step?

Guaranteed.

It's been mentioned that some of the characters have had... 'dreams' about sidestep... is there a possibility we might ever get one/some of them as lore posts...? As a treat?

This is not a nsfw patreon, but I'm gonna think about it!

In Argent's lore post at the auction she thinks she could take out all the villains in the room if she wanted to. Would this have really been the case or was she overestimating her abilities?

Argent bragged just a little bit. It would be hard for her if she didn't want to kill everyone there and just go full nanoswarm.

Did/does Sentinel know Daniel looked up to Step?

That was kind of impossible to ignore.

Did Pyroclast actively choose to join the SF Rangers or was he assigned to that team?

He actively choose to.

Would he have joined the Rangers if he had to be on the LD team?

What would the team dynamics be like if Pyroclast was on the LD team?

He wanted a break from Los Diablos and a fresh start. It would have been too tense at the time, these days it might work better.

When was the last time the LD Rangers, or any Rangers teams I guess, worked with the SD?

I would say a year or so ago for all the teams.

According to the MC, all four Rangers' hair is either as soft as or softer than it looks. That got me wondering: are there any characters whose hair is coarser/rougher than it looks? What's the apparent-softness:actual-softness ratio on our new villain ROs? (I understand if that last question is too big a spoiler to answer.)

Hmmm. I would say that Sky-Riders probably is not as soft as it looks, since he bleaches it. That tends to be rather rough on the hair. But also, I think it comes from the point that Sidestep doesn't touch people that much privately, and when you run your hands through someone's hair and it's not filled with various hair products to look official it can be surprisingly soft.

is Sentinel invited to the birthday party?

Yes.

Any chances of Step eventually getting over their photo-phobia and be willing to take a cute couple pic with their RO?

Oh boy. The biggest challenge. Why not fight the Catastrofiend instead?

Since Locus literally reads people's mind, she can't read animal's minds like Sidestep can, can't she? Would she be impressed by Sidestep? Would she be interested in learning?

Yeah, Locus can't read animals. And yes, she would be impressed and a bit jealous.

After finding out that Sidestep was a regene, did Steel ever suspect Ortega might've known if they had dated Step in the past? Given that it was plausible for them to have seen them naked

Chen definitely thought Ortega might know. Especially since Ortega was so secretive and protective about Sidestep. But it's not a thing you just ask...

[Time for this month's questions!](#)

[Aug 26, 2023](#)

I've come down with my partner's cold, luckily not of the corona kind. Please gimme your questions, game updates will resume soon!

[Truth Hurts \(Dr. Mortum POV\)](#)

[Aug 23, 2023](#)

(Dr. Mortum viewpoint, the La Cantina scene. Need to gender for genderfuckery in this one. Male Mortum. Female Eden, romanced. Male Sidestep, Cyrus Becker, Retribution. Inner monologue translated from French. Partner is sick as a dog after traveling and I am dealing with jetlag so forgive the lateness of this. At least two different tests are covid negative si it's probably some other bug)

A shadowy corner of a nondescript bar, in a perfectly average neighborhood of Los Diablos. Alone at a table sits a far from average man, pretending to be just well-off enough not to be bothered, but not enough to be robbed on the way home. It's a delicate balance to navigate the world while black, but at this point it's become an innate reflex while out in public. The glasses doesn't hide as much as they reveal whatever happens in the surroundings to the wearer.

Can't be careful enough. Not tonight.

It's an absurd thing to do, accepting the invitation to this meeting, but I suppose curiosity has already killed the cat. Still got a few lives left. Besides, it's just a bar. La Cantina. Perfectly average. Perfectly normal. Not the kind of place that would host a criminal conspiracy. No suspicious connections regarding the owner or the staff, a hint of conflict with the garbage union but that's to be expected as a restaurant. Can't have too much of a profit margin here, spent too much on rent in comparison to the prices they can charge.

No. Stop. I already checked out the place, no need to self-soothe with logic. Instead, I pull out my phone to distract myself. It's at odds with my humble presentation, a phone with a screen is not something in everyone's hands, but I need to plug into the drone perched on the building opposite. I doubt it's an ambush, but I like to see what's coming. Experience has taught me that trusting people only gets you hurt in the end. And Retribution might be a paying customer, but they are still a villain. One who has fought to preserve their privacy.

Why meet tonight? Is it that I have earned their trust? Did Eden put in a good word for me? Somehow I doubt it, there's a tinge of bitterness every time she speaks of her boss. Something buried there. Something familiar that gives me the urge to try to find leverage enough to dig my nails in and widen the crack. Walk away. Be free. Before something happens. Trust me, I know.

Trust. Do I trust Eden?

It's an absurd notion to bring something like that into what we have. I know it. She knows it. And yet I can see it in her smile, all delectable on my bed, tangled in the sheets. Stealing my clothes. Stealing my time. Stealing my food. Stealing my heart. As it is. Happiness is as absurd as the notion that it might last.

What if Retribution is here to tell me to back off? Would I do it? Would I kill them?

"We need to talk." A man's voice as a movement across from me rips my thoughts in half and I swear quietly to myself as I look up. Too much time spent in the lab, what is the use of taking precautions if I don't pay attention to them? Amateurish, let's hope I don't hang for that mistake.

The face is too scarred to be nondescript, too willfully bland to be real and I can feel my eyes starting to slide across it, features blending together and no. No. There is a familiarity there behind the furrows and the scars and that damnable mist I have to fight to perceive and I know this man. Know of him. Cyrus Becker. Formerly known as Sidestep. Former associate of Charge. Of the Rangers. Rumored savior of the city. More than once. I've heard enough rants about what happened to the Void to last me a lifetime. And he's here. Here.

"If this is some manner of trap the Rangers have arranged..." Did Eden betray me? Set me up? Was this a long-term plan only now coming to fruition? That makes no sense, she could have set me up months ago I've left myself open enough for a dozen betrayals but what if she was captured? Interrogated? Wasn't there rumors that Sidestep was a telepath? Charles thought so, but he wasn't the most reliable source...

"Eden told you the truth," he says with the kind of face that could lie about just having stabbed you in the stomach. "You know who I am." The last is said as if it is a secret shared, and I am forced to come to the conclusion that this is Retribution sitting in front of me.

Control. I reach into my pocket as I run calculations in my mind, not bothering to get them right, only to distract. I knew a telepath was a possibility when I came here because I wired the armor for psychic interface. Nothing has changed. Sidestep, though. Fuck. That was unexpected. One pill or two? I settle for one, it should blur things enough and the aftereffects of numbers are nasty enough that I don't want to overdose if I can help it.

"You shouldn't take those with alcohol." His forehead furrows, but is it concern for my health or an attempt to read my mind?

"There are a lot of things I shouldn't do, Monsieur Becker." I wash it down with the drink I had been nursing. "Like talking to you." Meeting Retribution was a calculated risk, having a conversation with Cyrus Fucking Becker was not on the list. Charge's former bosom-buddy.

"I brought your gun," he says, and I don't think I am imagining the hesitation. Was I not what he expected? Good. That puts us on more even ground.

Sidestep died in the Heartbreak incident. And yet he's here, looking like he's been through the grinder, masquerading as a villain. Stealing things. Or perhaps it's not a masquerade. Something must have happened, something I am unaware of. I saw the footage of Retribution vs Charge. That was not faked. There was real viciousness there, perhaps I just misread the motive. No need to prove themselves as a villain. Instead it must have been fueled by an old grudge. Friends turned enemies. A story as old as time. He looks as ready to pull the trigger as you did.

"So you really are her boss." I can't let myself make up scenarios, focus on the facts. This is the man Eden is afraid of. Don't underestimate him because he used to be a hero.

"I am." A weird twitch of his face. "Sort of."

"And you came here for what? Just to deliver my property? Or something else?" This makes no sense. If I took a risk, he took a bigger one. Showing me his true identity might be acceptable if he had been new. Unknown. Now he has handed me a sack of past connections and weak points and I don't understand why. And what I don't understand makes me twitchy.

"You deserve to know the truth."

"The truth." I try to read his intentions but fail. The truth about him being a former hero? The truth about why he's turned villain? "That's valuable in our world."

"And in short supply." He sips the drink, and I wonder if he's trying to read my mind. Or if he's stalling.

"Go on." Is this a trap after all? I don't look at my phone. That would be to show weakness.

"What kind of relationship do you think we have?" The question lands heavier than just making conversation but I can't for the life of me guess where he's going with this.

"We have a business relationship," I say carefully, adjusting my glasses. Nothing odd comes up on the scan. "You have always paid on time."

"We don't just have a business relationship." His face twitches again and he looks down. There's a pause. A sigh. "Please... please hear me out, and then you will get your gun. Whatever you decide to do afterward is fine with me."

"Talk then. Eden has been evasive about your true motives. I hope that whatever will come of this will not be taken out on her afterward?"

"I would never do anything to hurt her." He sags in his chair, looking as innocent as the day is long but I know better than that. I know a curated facade when I see one and now that the numbers have taken hold it feels like I see him properly for the first time.

He's scared.

I don't speak, instead I nod, trying to read the body language of a man more used to lies than honesty.

"I saved Eden's life," he admits, desperate for me to believe him. "But I couldn't save her mind."

He wants me to believe him. Whatever is coming is bad enough that that it would be worse if I thought he was lying to me. But I don't say anything, instead I keep looking at him and right now my eyes are a more dangerous weapon than my words. He looks down before he continues speaking.

"I found her about three years ago in the hospital. In the...storage, I suppose you can call it, brain-dead and waiting for her organs to be harvested. Nameless. Faceless. Perfect."

It's the way he says 'perfect' that makes me flinch and reach up to touch my glasses. Just a hint of tint to them to hide my eyes. The rest I can fake, but I don't trust myself right now. This is bad. But I don't think he is lying. I just don't know what it means for Eden.

"So I stole the body." He hesitates, voice faltering, and then he repeats, quickly, voice low with what might be shame. "I stole the body, and then I tried possessing it."

Possess? I don't move but I keep adding up the clues and I don't like the picture I'm seeing. Breathe. Don't show the bastard anything.

"I'm sure you've already figured out I'm more than I was." He smiles. A sharp little thing, more truthful than all the regret he's been projecting so far. Proud. The bastard is proud. "I can break into people's minds and control them if their wills are weak enough. And this was a body with no will. No mind. I wasn't

possessing a body, I **was** her. Things felt as natural as in my own body. No. Better." He swirls the whiskey in his glass and I see nothing but familiarity in the way he tilts his head slightly as he looks at me. If I trusted my legs I would have run. "I brought her back to life, I gave her a name, a place to live, a purpose."

"Brought her back to life..." My voice speaks but I'm not sure it's me. It's someone else, someone calm and collected who is analyzing the situation. Who takes the time to think about it instead of reacting institutionally. Instead of screaming in his face.

"In a way. It's still me. My mind. When I'm in her, this body sleeps. Right now Eden is back in a coma, in her apartment." He keeps looking at my hands instead of my face. Good. Then I can control. "It was just supposed to be a mask. You know who I was. I can't just contact somebody to build what I need. I was a hero, nobody would believe me, and I'm not fool enough to assume nobody in the underworld knew my face."

"Some did," I say, because the waves he made didn't go unnoticed. Not by people who knew what to look for. "Knowledge is the most precious currency." He can't read my thoughts, if he had he would already have started running. Is he armed? Could I take him in a fight? Do I want to? Is he really...

"So I needed a mouthpiece. I needed to be charming, confident, not..." He laughs, an edge of hysteria to it. "Not this. Not me. I'm better now; it was worse back then. Interacting was hard. Death took its toll..." He presses a hand against his head as if it's hurting. Good. He should. "It was just supposed to be a job. I didn't mean to..." A shaky breath. "I didn't mean to fall in love with you."

"You did what?" I can't keep still, not after that, not after this absurdity that is unfolding at the table. Is he really sitting here telling me that it's been him all along? Perched inside Eden's head like some vulture pulling strings? "How?"

"How do you think?" He smiles and looks away and there's an echo there of Eden with three drinks under her belt sad for some reason she won't tell me. Guess I know the reason now. "You're charming. Too charming. I fell too hard, too fast, and didn't know how to stop."

"You. You mean Eden." The distinction feels important somehow. Fingers in the dam to stop it from leaking while the crack just keep growing. This will drown us both. Dammit, why is he telling me this?

"We're the same. One mind. Two bodies. Mine is sadly a little more..." He shrugs, scratching one of his scarred hands. It's a familiar look, I've worn it often enough myself.

"Are you telling me that you kept hiding behind Eden because you think you're ugly?" I pick the kinder thing to say because I don't want this mirror held up in front of me. I don't want to sympathize or understand. I want to hate this man with my whole being and yet...

"No." He twitches like I had slapped him, fingers digging into his arm. "There are things I can't tell you."

"I thought that was why you were here." Is this what he's offering? Half-truths and denials? The bastard broke my world and he has the gall to sit here and say he can't tell me why?

"There are truths, and there are truths." His eyes shift, looking for an exit I don't intend to give him. Not after this.

"And there are lies." I look straight at him, safe behind my tinted glasses. I can pick up his raised temperature, embarrassment or anger? I try to find Eden in the way he leans back on the chair, keeping his distance as I lean forward. "Like the ones you told me."

"That's just business, you know how it is." His voice cracks, the laugh is brittle and he won't meet my gaze. His fingers keep worrying the glass like Eden used to do, but he doesn't have the nails to pull it off.

"I know how it is," I say, loud enough that one of the other patrons briefly look my way before looking back as if someone had taken her head and physically averted her gaze. Nobody is looking at us now. All have gone quiet. Telepaths. And yet I can't keep my mouth shut. "And now you have decided to try to do what? Push the reset button? Is that what this is? You won't even tell me the truth!" I spit the last at his lying face.

"I can't," he protests, voice raised to match mine. "I mean it, I'm not doing this to manipulate you!"

"Please, give me the dignity of assuming that I know when I'm being played." It's not the first time, but I won't admit that. I survived that. I'll survive this. "Eden set out to manipulate me from the start, but that was fine because that is what people like us do."

"But it became more than that, didn't it?" His voice has gone soft, begging for scraps. Begging for me to throw him a bone, to say I understand, that I still care. That I forgive. That I'll take him back. Little does he know I've been here before and won't make the same mistake.

"No." The word feels good. The stricken look on his face even better. "You just assumed it did." I put down my glass before looking at him once more. He looks hurt. Good. That feels good. "Give me the gun. Our business is concluded."

"I'm sorry."

He slides the briefcase over with his foot, and I reach down to pick it up. Probably not wise, he might take rejection badly but right now I am too angry to care. In a way it would be simpler if he did try to hit me, a cleaner break.

As it is, it's hard not to look back as I stalk out of there without another word.

My composure lasts until I have turned the first corner. Then my breath grow quicker, half a laugh, half filled with tears. This can't be happening. It's absurd. I don't know who I met in there, but it can't be Eden. Sweet, confident Eden with her vicious sense of humor and world-weary swagger. Eyes too old for her age.

She had a rough life, she used to joke. Haven't we all, I used to reply. Neither of us asked any questions.

Wasn't that the deal? Live in the moment? Have some fun? It wasn't like either of us wanted or could commit to anything more. Except. Except. My fingers fumble with the code to the briefcase, I didn't ask for it but my watch can handle that. Connect. Scan. Hyperventilate until the moment it opens.

Relief. Another choked laugh.

It's there. That wasn't a lie. My unfinished masterpiece back in my hand. Born with the help of one bastard, delivered back in my hands by another. Full circle. Moving on. My feet do at least, my heart keeps doing reruns of the bed we shared.

Did I really not notice anything wrong? Did she?

Not like she was the only one with secrets. I never told her. Would she have minded? If I had, would this have come out earlier? Instead of us both wrapped up in lies pretending neither of us cared enough for the truth? We had fun. Right?

I shove the gun in my pocket and keep walking, leaving the briefcase on the ground. I don't need another reminder of Eden. We had fun. More fun than in years. More fun than in ever. I don't laugh enough. She said that. I agreed. Only temporary. But it wasn't, was it? I kept telling her to leave her job. That she was at risk. That she was being used. Little did I know how right I was. Was that why she was always so angry at her boss? Why she looked so scared when we talked about her leaving? Was it guilt and not fear? Did she wonder if she could tell me? Did she imagine what would happen?

Did she imagine this?

Is that why she was afraid?

No. Not she. He. Not Eden. Cyrus. It's an absurdity I need to remember. He was who I really was kissing. Talking to. Laughing with. I quicken my step, my car is not far and right now I need speed. Outrun this mess before I make it worse and the what-if's starts to follow like flies.

Movement!

"You." I spit out the word but it's not as venomous as I had planned as Cyrus grabs my coat and pulls me into an alley. Strong. Stronger than me. I don't want to investigate how I feel about that.

"We need to talk." His voice is rough, not with a threat but with a desperation that makes him dangerous.

"We talked," I say. I try to sound calm and controlled, but I can't. I've had half a block beating my emotions into submission but they won't lie down and die and now this bastard wants to dig his thumbs in again.

"Then we talk again," he says with the conviction of a fool who thinks something will change if you go through the same motions twice. But he lets me go so they won't.

I don't think I've ever pulled a gun as quickly as this, surprising Retribution who's been doing hand-to-hand fighting with Lady Argent, Sidestep who was known for second guessing his opponents but right now he can't read my thoughts and I am angry enough to take stupid risks. It's under his chin as I press him up against the wall and the small sigh of surprised submission as he freezes makes me feel things.

"I should kill you," I hiss instead of examining whatever this is. My gun can't kill him, but he doesn't know that. I want him afraid.

"Don't do this," he whispers, and I can feel him tensing under my arm. Pressed against the wall. "You know I can take that from you anytime I want."

"Then do it." I keep the gun jammed under his chin, my arm pressed against his chest. I can feel his breaths. Shallow. Tense. He's taller than Eden was. Slightly taller than me. For some reason that infuriates me. "Vas-y, tire, you bastard."

And then he moves. So fast.

And I pull the trigger. Reflexively.

The gun discharges with a familiar discordant hiss, and the world cracks in two. Ozone. Rotting meat and ammonia. The crack of crumbling bricks and a grating metal groan of pain. Cyrus is still here, scrambling back in fear as I am. The 4dcompression chamber hadn't been empty.

It had been full.

"...Mon Dieu!" I can feel a familiar crawling up my veins, and my glasses shift spectrum to protect me. It can't be!

But it is.

There is a new shadow in the alley, right next to where Cyrus was held a moment ago, half buried in the wall, wrapped in eerie fluorescence. A distorted shadow, taller than a man but hunched like a twisted grasshopper, too many blades, too many limbs, face moving in ways it shouldn't.

The Catastrofiend.

"..H.hh[b]R[/b]t..." The Catastrofiend hisses, in its familiar, guttural growl, like a chainsaw running on empty. The blades twitch, not the sleek sharpness and straight edges Charles installed, but jagged and bent, like lethal wreckage. Half of its body is still stuck in the wall, but there are cracks forming as the concrete strains to contain it. The mouth opens and opens, the jaws slitting apart upward, then sideways, the wet fleshy throat gray and discolored in the faint light. It's covered in spots, like mold, the skin cracked, the insides glowing faintly. It looks hurt. It looks wrong.

It looks MAD.

The wall cracks a little further and I am grateful that the numbers spare me from any psychic feedback. Someone must have shot it in self-defense, and then succumbed to their injuries. How long had it been in there before the gun was found and sold at the auction? By all rights it should be dead, but Charles had always said it was beyond such human concerns by now.

I hate that he might be proven right.

We're both backing away as the wall cracks. I should run, but I can't, that would mean turning my back and there's no loyalty there, no intellect to reason with, just a broken thing out to replace the biomass it has lost.

And I know how it does that.

I can't stop the whimper, and it swivels its head towards me. Milky eyes. Broken sensors. Is the proximity sense still active or just the motion sensors? Damn Charles for putting me in this situation, I don't want to be here. I don't want to be meat.

And then it looks away. Straight at Cyrus who has moved sideways down the alley, away from me. With purpose. With threat. The mad bastard can't plan to do this, can he? Sidestep fought the Catastrofiend once but that was with Charge and no matter how much I hate to admit it, I'm no Charge. But he's smiling. No. Growling. And the Catastrofiend is looking at him as one hand gently removes the last bits of wall nearly fused with its gray flesh.

"gh..[b]Tz[/b]..Tzzt.[i]jee[/i].." The words are pushed out and I don't want to understand them but I do. Tasty. It has decided Cyrus is the better target here. Juicer. I don't think it's wrong.

Cyrus keeps backing up, and the Catastrofiend follows, like a cat stalking a mouse. This is what I wanted, right? A chance to run? If I leave him here all loose ends will be wrapped up. The Catastrofiend will eat. I can go back to my old life, with no risk of any further interference. And Eden...

No. I squeeze the gun in my hand. Eden doesn't exist. He told the truth, it's too absurd to be a lie. It was never Eden. Just this bastard dressing up in borrowed clothes and skin pretending to be someone else. Someone better.

He looks up, as if he heard my thoughts, hands up as if he's keeping the Catastrofiend at bay with sheer willpower. ~Run~ he mouths. His eyes widen as it moves, the small lapse in focus enough to ready it for a pounce.

"Non!" I scream, pulling the trigger again, hoping for a miracle. I'm not granted one, there's not enough energy to create a second portal, not after this long. All I did was get its attention.

Shit.

I reach for my pocket, but I already know I will be too slow. So now I die. It's fitting, in a way.

"No!" Cyrus echoes my earlier cry as he tackles me out of the way of the descending claws, a stupidly reckless move, true Sidestep rather than the villain he has become.

"Ooof." I fall heavily, breath torn from me and when I try to get it back the ammonia nearly makes me puke. Cyrus is on the ground, face contorted in pain, with a growing pool of blood under him. The Catastrofiend is standing over him, long tongue lapping at the blood on its blade, desperate for sustenance.

I have a moment to act.

Instead of running, I reach into my pocket and throws the scrambler I had ready in case I needed to escape from Retribution. Telepathic baffle, flashbang, olfactory assault, the whole sensory array. My glasses protects me from the light, the numbers from the baffle, and I have to hold my breath for the rest.

Instead of running away I run towards him. Towards Cyrus. The Catastrofiend is curled up in a ball, screeching in pain. Still weak. That gives us a chance. Me. Gives me a chance.

"Come on you bastard, on your feet." I scream at Cyrus, but he doesn't hear me. His ears are ringing like mine are, and he's bleeding badly. I force him to his feet, his arm over my shoulder and then I run. No. Stumbles.

It's not far to the car, thankfully he waited to the last moment before ambushing me. I can feel the warm blood soaking my suit jacket as the car unlocks and revs its engine as I approach.

"You're paying for the suit. And for detailing. Blood on leather seats is disgusting." I ramble, but he shows no sign of hearing me. Going limp. No. Not on my watch. "Pay attention!" I slap him as the car backs up because I have no time to drag him in. His eyes focus somewhat as I push him into the seat before nearly sliding over the hood as I get behind the wheel.

My ears slowly stop ringing as I speed down the road.

"Is it following us?" Cyrus mumbles as he pushes himself up to check in the rearview mirror.

"I don't think so." I glance at him in concern. One hand is pressed against the wound in his shoulder, but it's only slowing the inevitable. That needs to be dealt with. "It seemed too confused for rational thought."

"It will heal," he mumbles, and for a moment I think he's talking about his wound. But he's not. "It always does."

"Thank you for saving my life back there." I swallow. I have to acknowledge that happened.

"Sorry for bleeding in your car." Cyrus face is gray and his breath shallow. He should be going into shock but he's still talking. Stubborn bastard.

"Wouldn't be the first time that happened." I want to continue with a biting remark about sending the bill. But I don't. Instead my voice goes softer and I say "there's medgel in my pocket."

"Thank you." He reaches over with a wince, carefully pulling out the two round gelatin patties in their plastic coverings.

I don't wince when he touches me.

Neither do I smile when he uses his teeth to tear the first one open like an animal, before pressing it against the wound. I pretend not to hear the gasp, but he's holding up better than I would. Not that I am that used to fights in the physical way. Not for years. Not like him. I suppose there's a reason for the scars.

I look out of the corner of my eye as he frees the second one in the same way, reaching back to press it against the entrance wound. Thankfully it is within reach, I'm not sure if it would be worse playing nursemaid or pulling over and risk the fiend catching up with us. I know how fast it can be.

"Do you always carry medgel with you?" Cyrus relaxes somewhat, both of us know that will stabilize the bleeding until he can contact a proper doctor. Someone not me.

"Of course." I check the mirror again before initiating the recall sequence for the drone. I will need it to check for anybody following.

"I still can't believe you tried to shoot me." The laugh is nervous, and he echoes my look in the mirror.

"Oh, it wouldn't have killed you. I just wanted you out of my hair." It's no harm to admit that now. Whatever happened in that alley it solidified one truth between us Neither of us want the other dead.

"What happened? Where did it come from?" Cyrus pauses, then his voice goes low and clever like Eden's used to do. "Did it have anything to do with your gun?"

"Unfortunately, yes." I don't look at him, instead I keep driving. "It's not a disintegrator gun; it traps matter inside and reconstitutes it later." Why am I telling him this? He doesn't deserve to know my secrets, and yet I can't stop myself.

"Huh." There is a pause as he mulls over your words. "And why was the Catastrofiend in there?"

"I don't know, and quite frankly, the implications are frightening." How could it have survived that long? Nothing should have. Nothing sane. Or did Charles lie to me?

"So what happens now?" Cyrus sounds like he's afraid of my answer, and he's not alone in that. So I deflect, like a pro.

"I drop you off at a corner and then contact the LDPD and tell them they have a new problem in town." Easy. Logical. Cyrus will no doubt alert the Rangers. And then both of you can go back to pretending nothing happened between you.

"I meant between us." The bastard has the nerve to look right at me. Braver than I am, that's for sure.

"I need..." I drag the word out, staring at the road ahead. "I need to think about this." Because after this I'm not sure I can forget it. The anger has faded into a sick ball of pain and frustration. I sigh and steer the car to the curb, we are far away now that it should be safe and I don't want to talk about this right now.

"Can..." He corrects his stutter, steadying his voice. "Can... Eden come over later? To... talk." The utter arrogance of this man, thinking he can ask something like this from me.

"Give it a week," I say, softer than I should. I open his door by remote, a signal as strong as any that this is not a time for explanations or apologies.

Or goodbyes.

He gets out, and neither of us say anything as I close the door and head off down the road.

A few hours later I am as clean as I can be, freshly scrubbed and with my car at Anders' place. He can deal with blood, wouldn't be the first time. First time it's not mine though.

I could have let him bleed out.

I throw myself on the bed in an impressive display of teenage heartbreak. It doesn't matter. Nobody is here to see. And nobody will be. How could I have been that stupid? Be fooled like that? Me? Of all people?

Did I want to be fooled? On some level? Was I just lonely?

No. I've been lonely for years, companionship is a small thing to give up in exchange for security and time to work. No more lab partners. No assistant staying long enough to get close. Nobody waiting in my bed.

Mother of God. I cover my face in my hands trying not to think about that. Was that all it took to take me down? Someone that made me feel like a man? Am I that easy? Falling for a smile and a wink, as artificial as mine ever was? I've paid a fortune to get to this point, and he did what? Kidnap a comatose body? What a laugh. It can't be true. It's a lie.

A lie to do what? Ruin his relationship with you? A lie doesn't make sense, only the truth does. No matter how unlikely. I've seen stranger things. I've made stranger things. Telepaths are... odd. Even for boosts. I know that. And I know it was a lie.

Still feel real. He had her smile. The way she cocked her head. Hit differently in a male body, but doesn't everything? If I had been in his shoes and had that kind of opportunity, would I take it? I'd like to think I wouldn't, but...

No. Don't do this. Don't ascribe my own motivations to him. Don't make apologies for what he did. It was wrong. It was bad. I know that. But was it wrong when I did it? No. It wasn't the same. And it wasn't for the same reasons. I didn't know. He did. It was planned. Willingly.

He's a bad man.

I've had enough of bad men. I've had enough of feeling used. Feeling weak. What am I going to do anyway? Walk up and kiss him? Would I even want to? No. We both liked the lie.

The truth can do nothing but hurt us.

[Back in Sweden finally!](#)

[Aug 18, 2023](#)

I am back in Sweden finally after my long adventure in the USA. Just one final trip this weekend to my parents to pick up our cat, and then it is back to work and writing on Monday! Feel super inspired!

[July's vacation QnA!](#)

[Aug 9, 2023](#)

Alright, I am still on vacation, had a massive car ride yesterday traveling back and forth over the Cascade mountains, through the passes and the dry terrain on the other side. My first trip to that side, and it was inspirational and cool. Here is the QnA, will be a little late with the rest depending on our schedule (today is rest and recuperation, my foot is messed up).

When was the last time the ROs cried and what was it about?

Ortega: Depends on the path, but post crash was traumatic for everyone. Ortega is not afraid to cry.

Chen: He would say he doesn't remember, and he might be right.

Argent: She's unable to since her "accident".

Daniel: Definitely post crash, either from relief or anger or worry depending on path.

Mortum: If the puppet reveal happened, that was definitely it afterwards, in private.

Has the omega label already been tossed around by the boost categorizing ... people? Department? Committee? How does that work anyway? Is it just a casual thing or do boosted heroes have that on their ID?

It has been tossed around as a possible thing. Currently, the classification is mostly handled by the military and technically classified, but enough has leaked that civilians also find it useful. It's not on their ID, but it is on their files with the military and police.

Also, the CB initials, do they stand for Cuckoo Batch? How did you come up with the name Cuckoo for infiltration units?

Nope, it does not stand for that! I used the name cuckoo because of the bird, whose parents infiltrate their eggs in other birds' nests. Pretending to be the real thing but not.

Can step still send telepathic messages to a romanced argent? Like warnings or combat tips/plans? Or is she just completely blocking all telepathy? And in a previous ask, a onesie was proposed as a good safety device for some argent cuddles. Does that mean her nanos can't go through non-living things? Also will a romanced step help her with that in later routes? If in a poly route with Ortega?

For a romanced/friendly Argent, you will be able to send her messages and things. That kind of surface communication is different from manipulation, a bit like talking to someone compared to grabbing them and throwing them on the ground. And nope, her nanos can't go through inorganic things. We'll see what kinds of help that Argent will be open to with Sidestep, both alone and in a relationship with Ortega. There are things that can be done if the trust is there.

Did the younger sibling enjoy spending time with their mother? What did they like to do together?

I will assume this is about Hollow Ground's youngest sibling. And since they were in their early teens when they were arrested, I would say things were complicated. It's not easy being a young teenager when your siblings are a lot older than you are. Being the designated baby might be nice when you are an actual kid and doted on with things like trips to the arcade or the aquarium, but towards the end I think the sibling was very tired of "baby things". So there would be arguments about how they are old enough to do things, be a proper adult. I think the last year was filled with conflict, and repeated attempts to reconnect. You know, teenage things.

What did the HG oldest brother think of HG? What kind of leader he would have seen them?

HG's older brother didn't see them as a threat, or in fact as a very strong leader. HG was always too clever with words and ideas, so they were the perfect diplomat and assistant. They got along well.

Just how strong were HG oldest brother's powers? Are his powers also the reason why there are earthquakes around Los Diablos?

They were strong, and getting stronger. Volatile. And yes, they might be a part of why the earth around Los Diablos was and is so restless. It takes a long time for messed up fault lines to calm down. I would say that towards the end, his powers were probably greater than Hood's, though not as focused.

And considering HG survived the boost drug and was secretive of their powers, what did their family theorize as their new powers?

It took a long time for HG to figure out their powers, and they never really got how they worked until the rest of the family had already passed. People were thinking it had something to do with charisma or reading people, but everyone imagined it was a small thing. One of those marginal little boost powers where people should be happy they lived, but also, what a consolation price.

What does Nocturne like about her powers? Are there some aspects of her powers she finds frustrating/annoying?

Nocturne is slightly frustrated at the lack of precision and versatility. She can do one thing, and does it well. But, it's a defensive thing, and she would like to be more proactive. She's working on figuring out the base parameters, but she's also a very busy woman, so she has other things on her plate.

How often Jake talks with his family?

I would say weekly, sometimes more.

How does Jake get along with his older sister?

Very well now that they are on opposite sides of the ocean. She can run things there, and he can be his own man without someone looking over his shoulder and questioning his decisions.

What is the general public opinion on dissolution of FEZ?

It hasn't really sunk in yet for most people. In fact, many don't even know. It's not a big subject in the media, which is interesting come to think of it. Almost like some people don't want it talked about.

Has Shroud heard anything about Sidestep as a re-gene?

Yes.

How long did it take to Armadillo to trust Vera?

Years. Vera knew them only in their armored form for quite some time.

Does Mortum have any alternative plans if they fail to get their gun?

No. It's a one of a kind. They will get it somehow.

Do regenes have any kind of age system? I remember Sidestep thinking they found human age thing weird so do regenes have different kind of counting how regenes age?

Not really, the weird thing is children and growing up, as well as the really old and wrinkly. Both are stages that regenes don't experience. The first because they are decanted, the second because it's a somewhat new process, and most regenes die before growing old.

Kinda heavy question but I think you previously mentioned in another qna that the Farm scientist have they own way of trying to avoid regenes killing themselves. I'm wondering how do regenes deal with suicides among themselves?

It is a complicated thing. In one way, many regenes sees this as the final way to regain control. This is something they do. for themselves. Empowering. On the other hand, usability and strength is something prized within the regene community, and suicide is a way of rendering yourself useless. Which is failure. There is no one thought about it, but it is seen as something that concerns regenes, not humans.

Considering Ace saw a vision that hinted for Shroud's death. Can some Sidestep's to use this piece of knowledge to save Shroud or just plainly making sure Shroud dies?

If Sidestep is stuck in Ace's body, that will definitely be something that comes up.

What is usually victims fate in HB experiement?

Madness and death.

Rosie is said to be invulnerable to bullets. Is her power more similiar to Themmy in a way that she doesn't feel the pain or more similiar to Argent that she feels everything?

More similar to Themmy. She feels the impact, but it's not painful. More like someone throwing marbles at you.

Does Armadillo have any opinions on Sidestep's villain careers?

No. They are picking their path, which is fine.

How are cuckoos raised to act like humans? Like classes or acting out different scenarios and learning how to act?

First, they are implanted with a new batch of more diverse memories. And yes, then there are human classes. They interact with psychologists and scientists, and then taken on increasingly larger field trips to experience the human world. The small towns closest to the Farm theories that there's some sort of mental treatment facility out there where the patients can occasionally come out and enjoy a walk or a trip to the store. They would be clocked as stiff and weird during these first outings, and possibly seen as autistic or something similar.

What had Armadillo heard about Sidestep as a regene? (Excluding Sidestep's last escape)

That is something you'll find out in game.

What do the teacher re-genes find most enjoyable part in their work? And the worst part?

Being allowed decisions and a measure of autonomy, as well as doing something for their fellow regenes. The worst part was failing people.

Does San Francisco have they own Rangers team? If so, do they have any option on Los Diablo's Rangers team?

They do have their own Ranger's team. The founding Marshal was called Armstrong, and was an ex-military mod. The physical kind, not the armor kind like Chen is. He died a decade or so ago and was replaced by Kaleidoscope, who is a boost with light powers (hypnotic, blinding and lasers). She's a beta level, but quite experienced. Their most notable member is Pyroclast (formerly Ashfall) who is the most powerful member of the team and rumored to be gunning for the Marshal position when Kaleidoscope retires (or messes up). I haven't detailed the other yet. They are one of the top three strongest Ranger teams. There is some rivalry between LD and SF, but a lot of that is personal rather than institutional. Pyroclast has views on how his former friends have handled things, and he doesn't agree with many of the decisions. And then there's Lady Argent...

And I think Sidestep has thought it a couple of times that they almost died in their first cuckoo mission. Just what happened in that mission?

I haven't decided yet! Maybe it will be a flashback eventually.

Who would be better at controlling unfamiliar nanovores, Sidestep or Argent?

At this point? Sidestep, though it's close.

Could Sidestep's nanovores eat Ashfall?

Technically in his transformed state, but it would be hard to get in more than a nibble before they would be destroyed by the heat.

Do any of the Rangers recognize Sidestep's armor as Mortum's work?

Yes, at least to the point of having that as the most likely option.

Is Sidestep's exponential power growth solely due to trauma boost response, or is there something specific about Heartbreak that caused it?

Hmmm. Good question. Mostly the former.

Is there... Something more going on in the fallen hero universe? Like with the Void, kinda eldritch feeling? Cuz I get those vibes sometimes.

I mean it would all depend on how you defines eldritch. There's some weird shit out there, but exactly what's going on is unclear.

Also, how ya doing? Hope you're good :)

I am! I am enjoying my holiday, been traveling a lot, bought a lot of books, meeting people, eating American junk food and planning stuff. I woke up at 2 am one night and had an idea, and now I have 30 000 words written on a TTRPG supplement. So it is getting back into gear. This has been so good for me, I can't wait to get started properly on Revelations when I get back home at the end of august. I am starting to get that wonderful tingle of anticipation, which is what has been lacking for a long time.

When you get the Oops achievement in Rebirth, the woman says, "We had enough wild goose chases last year." Was it anyone specific? Or just some random runaway re-genes?

Hehehehe yeeeah. That comment. Nice. Not gonna answer.

Will Step ever find out that the SD found them by accident after HB?

Maybe in book four. Not sure yet.

Would the Rangers (whether it's the main crew or the people that run the show) prefer it if Herald was more of a fighter? Or do they like that there's a more support-oriented hero?

Herald has exactly the role they want. Not everyone needs to be a murder machine.

Could the Rat King control the nanovores by themselves or do they need the base of Step doing it to work with them?

They need Sidestep and the suit to do that. They might be able to do the little neutered colony on their own, but I doubt the girls would take the chance and let them out. Wouldn't want to risk getting the armor or their containment unit eaten.

What's the maximum power the strength armor upgrade can get to? We know it can pick up a van but could it pick up a semi-truck?

The hardest thing with a semi-truck would be getting a good grip and not having it break apart in your hands. The honest answer is that it is as strong as I need it to be for the story.

When the Rat King "possesses" Step, like in the fight with Jake after the auction, can they make facial expressions? Like intentionally? I'm assuming they can't speak because you know, they're rats, but would expressions just come naturally or would Step just not emote? Also, did they enjoy controlling an actual human body instead of just the armor?

I think some facial expressions would be there, because so many of them are almost involuntary. Like grimacing when hit, or crying out in pain. But there would certainly not be many of them, though I think some Sidesteps are bad at emoting anyways so there might not be a big difference. I think the girls felt that a human body was a LOT of responsibility, the armor is easier.

Has Heartbreak gone through a traumatic power increase in the past?

Yes.

You've said Ortega doesn't wear a helmet (except for special occasions) but do they wear a mask most of the time? Idk why I got the impression that they just went around bare faced in their hero suit. Or is people not recognizing Ortega as Charge a "Clark Kent/Superman" situation?

Charge never really wore a mask. It's very much a Clark Kent/Superman situation, though not fully. For Ortega, I think that the Charge personality is something they keep wearing in civilian mood most of the time. It's more like a famous actor rather than a secret identity, sometimes you do see a Hollywood star going out for a drink if you live in LA, and that's where a lot of Charge sightings come from. Ortega would never deny that they were Charge if someone asked for a picture or an autograph.

When Ortega do want to be anonymous they dress down, grab a helmet and their bike, and drive elsewhere. Or puts on a cap and some glasses and do the slouching thing. In a way, spending time with Sidestep was wonderful for Ortega, because Sidestep's "don't notice me" powers also meant that few people bothered Ortega. They enjoyed that spillover a lot.

Does HG still have an inkling that Step could be their sibling even if you don't go into their mind at the meeting? They seem to be based on their reaction. If so, why did they immediately jump to "kill them" if you refuse their offer? Were they too panicked over someone seeing their face to think about that option or did they think, "Well, my siblings dead and they wouldn't have refused me so it definitely can't be them."

I think it was a combination of "shit, they saw my face," and the uneasiness of "they remind me too much of family, this is a dangerous loose end", in combination with "it can't be my sibling, they're dead, and I can't show weakness."

Since no one at the farm has a concrete answer on how Step got out the second time, could you tell us any of the theories they have had? I'm assuming possession could be one of them or mind control or maybe a mole in the farm helping Step out. Also, what happened to the person/people that Step possessed to get out?

Mind control and/or sympathetic staff. There were several people on staff purged after the escape, and the people Sidestep possessed were some of them.

How messed up is a person's body after Shroud "eats" them? Ignoring the mind, if Shroud were to eat someone and then you immediately jumped into that person's body, would you still be able to walk and function properly or would it be a struggle to move?

It would be a struggle to move. It's not exactly the same, but it is a bit like having had a massive stroke. You might be able to relearn lost skills and train your body, but it will take time.

Why did Ortega always feel the need to be in a relationship? Was it just because it got them more publicity or was there something deeper there?

I think Ortega is genuinely uncomfortable with being lonely. They like people. They like family. They like friends. They like sex and intimacy. And due to their work and personal tragedies and failures, they have fewer and fewer people to share their time with. Their mom lives in the countryside. Some of their friends have retired or died. Their surrogate dad died. The Rangers are the closest thing to friends/family they have, and it's easier to get a boy/girlfriend than make a new platonic friend at that age. At least if you've got the kind of smile Ortega does.

Imagine if Step was not a re-gene, just a regular telepath. After HB, would the SD still have spent all the resources to keep them alive after they jumped? Would they have kept them alive indefinitely after for testing or would they have "gotten rid of them" when they got what they needed?

They would have spent just the same amount of resources keeping them alive.

Also, in the Dignity is Overrated snippet, is Step just like full ass out in a hospital gown when Vera picks them up on her shoulder? That's rough lol

It is indeed rough. I might need to add a blanket... maybe.

So I recall you having said that Argent's nanovores can get irritable and excited by any strong emotions not just anger, if I am remembering that correctly then I just, I'm really sorry but I feel like it needs to be asked; there is a greater than zero percent chance the nanovores eat you when Argent orgasm's yeah?

Argent thinks so.

Besides the immediate current Rangers team, has anyone else been told that Sidestep is still alive? Or have they all been very good at keeping it hush? Thinking ex-members such as Luis who knew Sidestep, or people like Owl who know Ortega really well and have seen them at their lowest because of, in part, our "death".

I would say they are good at keeping things hush, but at this point we know that some of them likes to run their mouth and information keeps leaking... It's fair to say that some people close to the Rangers know by now.

Would the Rangers be less trustful of a revealed step who used terrifying armor, even if they weren't an active killer, just due to fear? Or would actions override armor choices by that point? Especially for Ortega and Herald who can have the "afraid" status from the museum fight.

If they knew the truth, the design of the armor wouldn't matter as much. Sure, the effect would still be there, but lessened. Herald might have more trauma about it than Ortega.

Are the Rangers, notably Chen and Ortega, curious about what our character is doing for money/work nowadays, and has that curiosity been strong enough to lead them to go snooping? Or do they assume it's likely illegal and are preemptively turning a blind eye?

We all know that Ortega at least has probably gone snooping, if nothing else because they think that it's probably related to HG. Chen is more likely to assume it's illegal and stay away.

What do re-genes typically wear when they are at the Farm? Is there a type of uniform? Does it differ between cuckoos and combat re-genes?

There is a uniform, and how it looks varies a bit depending on the "level" of regene. Newly decanted ones have loose clothes, more reminiscent of scrubs or hospital clothes. Easy to put on or take off for tests. They are uncomfortably thin. Experienced regenes have skinsuits in their battle colors. These have no arms and short legs on the farm, and is more reminiscent of an old-fashioned bathing suit. Regenes who are being trained have white or gray coveralls, again with no arms and short legs. There's an uncomfortable degree of infantilization with much of the clothes, they are made to make the regenes seem inhuman, and not adult. Cuckoos are the same.

So we've got a little bit of an idea now about how Ortega handles Step's regene reveal on the voluntary reveal path. I'm curious, if sidestep had worked up the courage to admit the truth pre-heartbreak, would Ortega's reaction be any different? Better? Worse?

It's hard to say. It might have been worse without the trauma of having lost Sidestep once. I really don't know.

Can regenes get sick (from viruses or pathogens etc, not motion sick like Step gets)? Cancer? They're made up of organs, but everything was lab grown, so were there any precautions taken to make their immune systems better/stronger?

Regenes can get sick, just like regular people. There's a slightly increased rate of cancer due to the boost drugs, but the immune system is pretty much the same. There has been no attempt to remove any genetic markers for certain kinds of inherited disease or things like that, mainly because nobody is sure how that would affect the boosting process. So regenes gets sick, just like everybody else.

Hello! I hope you're enjoying your vacation, I wanted to ask if argent had any fun indulgences planned for if she no longer has to rely on the nanovores. sunbathing? move to a place with windows? try rollerskating?

Sunbathing would be wonderful. As would having windows and a balcony. And an outdoor pool.

Second; did tinfoil hat ortega ever think about their and HG's (apparently) mutual grief over sidestep; related, their commonality in spending years thinking they were dead only for sidestep to turn up alive? or is their hatred of HG so immense that they can only think of them as an enemy? Thank you!

Those thoughts have snuch into Ortega's mind on more than one occasion. Not something they talk about.

Can Lady Argent blush in her current form?

No.

How do you keep track of and organize all your characters and their respective connections to the overarching Fallen Hero world? Do you have characters that just exists for the sake of existing, or do they all have to be intertwined in some ways?

I... huh. How do I do this? For me, characters serve the story first and foremost. The exceptions are characters I talk about and make up for lore or faqs, often they didn't exist until the moment I answered the question. It's a fun way to build the world. So those characters exists just because. Most people in the story has a function for the story. Not everyone is entwined with each other, but sometimes backgrounds and events match closely enough that it's fun to connect them because it adds to the whole. It's really what would serve the story best.

In the recent POV story for Ortega, Ortega mentions that Chen breaks keyboards over filling spreadsheets and pretends to hate computers. How many keyboards has he broken? lol

I would say a couple of dozen by now.

How did Chen go about managing his injures (i.e. when he lost his legs and arm)? Like, yeah his place was adapted for his injuries, but was he just on his own (No Ortega or Luis) or did the Rangers program people get him extra help? 🙄

Chen had professional help for a year or two afterwards. He didn't want to rely on his friends, and the Rangers paid for medical/assistance staff. He's still getting help on occasion when things are bad.

Is Argent more of a 'waits till the movie is over to talk about it' kind of movie buff or a 'pauses the movie every 10 mins to talk about it' kind of movie buff?

Pauses while talking about it unless the other person really dislikes it, or she already have seen the movie like five times.

Do Vera and Sky Raider have any particular opinions on Sidestep (the vigilante), or this that something they don't really have any thoughts on?

I don't think either of them had any big thoughts, but we'll see when I start writing them more. Things often comes out as I write.

What do they think of a villain who kills, either selectively or indiscriminately?

That's up to them. I don't think there are any big thoughts yet. We'll see. It would be more of a matter of why.

We know that Vera likes pigeons, but what does she think of rats? ʘ_ʘ>??C(●_●)ʘ??

I don't think she's fond of rats. They can be a dangerous pest around birds, especially caged ones.

Will using the regenerator make Argent less powerful? Would she lose her nanovores?

It depends a bit to what level the regenerator is built, but it will likely make her less powerful.

Is the regenerator a one-use-only thing or will multiple people be able to use it?

It would depend on how well it is put together, but it was not intended as single use.

Do Chen, Ortega and Argent consider themselves to be disabled?

Argent and Chen does, Ortega doesn't.

SI vastly enjoy the theme of identity in this IF. Would you say any of the heroes are who they imagined they'd be from children to now and if they could say one thing to their younger selves what would it be?

Hmmm. I would say that Ortega and Herald are the closest to being that. Chen certainly isn't, and neither is Argent. Ortega would tell their younger self to appreciate the people around them because they will not be there forever. Chen would say that keeping in touch might not be a bad thing. Argent would just say to stay the fuck out of the water. Herald would tell himself to stand up for himself more.

Will there be banter around an ortega present on whether we spent "clean" or "dirty" money on them? Does it matter to Ortega?

I honestly don't think it would matter very much to Ortega, but they might tease a bit.

In an earlier q&a you wrote that ortega did in fact find it hot that the revealed MC was a villain and they hooked up. Does that tension continue if you don't reveal yourself? And for villain ROs do they feel a similar sentiment.

The tension will continue! And I need to think more about the villain RO's to be sure about that. Mortum is a special case as well.

i noticed that sidestep has a distaste for pigeons, does this affect their opinion on Vera, if i remember correctly she'll be a romance option does it affect their romance noticeably, does she realise sidesteps reservations about her animal or do they hide it.

Sidestep has better learn how to get along with pigeons, and Vera have better learn how to get along with rats. Sometimes you need to do a bit of growing.

What's Nocturne's relationship to wealth/fanciness/opulence things? She's dressed to the nines in gold, likes her food to look elegant, designs everything to give off the right vibe, but tries to avoid fancy parties? Does she ever think it's too much/tacky? Did she always want to be surrounded by that luxury? Would she have still gone for a more luxurious style if she never had a reputation she had to play into?

Nocturne loves luxury. She didn't grow up with money, and she will make the most of it now. It doesn't matter if others see it, she's the one she's dressing and decorating for.

What exactly did the reporter ask that Five Pennies killed them for?

Spoilers.

What did HG's empire look like before Nocturne became part of the picture? What sort of businesses were they dealing in?

It was focused around gambling, boost drugs, other drugs and protection. Sure, those things are not illegal in LD, but there's still a big market for it. It was, however, very local. In fact, HG's first attempt to reach out to other cities through real estate was what caught Nocturne's eye as an IRS agent in Chicago.

What exactly has been negotiated between the HG trio in terms of their relationship? What's their relationship like? Is Jake free to pursue anyone he wants outside of it romantically or sexually? (Thinking of Umbral's girlfriend. What's the story there?)

It is in theory an open polyamorous relationship. All three of them are allowed to pursue outside agents, at least sexually. If it becomes romantic, that might be a different problem. Sex is sex, but the heart is important. That's what dragged Jake into this, Nocturne saw it as more of a fun adventure in bed, and then everything became more real and she had to have a talk with HG about it. If it happens again, who knows how it will be resolved?

In practice, HG is focused almost solely on Nocturne, and Jake is fun now and then, especially all three together. They have no interest of finding or sleeping with new people. Nocturne spends her time more equally between HG and Jake, and care for them both. She will, on occasion, sleep with others because she likes being wanted, but it's not a big part of her life these days. She was doing it a lot more before Jake, because she was still riding the high of having dealt with her many mental issues. Jake is mostly focused on Nocturne, but will have fun with HG, though there's more tension there. He will quite often date others, and in up in bed with them, but he doesn't keep people around. More than half is because of clout anyway, and because he wants to be seen as an independent man.

Chen has been the place filler for plenty of hookups and lovers pining over someone else, but has he ever been the subject of being pined after? Has he ever been the subject of unrequited love, turning down someone else?

I bet he has, and he didn't like it. It's the worst feeling, when someone wants something from you that you can't return. He's blamed his job on more than one occasion.

How did Blaze feel about Ortega nearly destroying themselves in the wake of Heartbreak + resigning?

It was sad, in that particular way when a washed-out boxed doesn't know when to quit the ring, and then they do and it becomes even worse.

Did Chen actually see Blaze as a placeholder for Ricardo when they were still hooking up? Or was that all in Blaze's head?

That was all in Blaze's head, and his insecurities didn't really help their relationship.

Back to the Nocturne facade threat question- what about with someone whose threat levels weren't known/considered to be average/low like any other? Still the same?

Hmm. I would say it would be similar.

I remember the open beta of Retri, and some parts you cut out. Was there any reason why you cut out who to prioritise first between Steel/Handyman/Argent?

Yeah, I realized that I couldn't follow up on it, so I decided to remove it.

One of the details that makes FH ring most true-to-life for me is how different characters have not only different thoughts, but entirely distinct *ways* of thinking. The way that Chen tends to think in words/with an internal monologue, for instance, or that Mortum thinks in an ADHD-esque nonlinear rapidfire. Is this a facet of characterization you specifically think about, given that you're writing from a telepath's PoV, or do the differences in thought process come naturally once you have a handle on the character?

It comes naturally. Once I get a character talking in my head while driving, their personality is pretty much set. Until they have reached that point, everything is still in flux.

Is it possible for Hollow Ground to accidentally thread people? That is, is the use of their powers voluntary, or does physical contact automatically turn their orders into telepathic compulsions?

It is automatic, so HG needs to be very careful with his words. However, it need to be an intentional statement. For example, "you love me" would thread someone, "do you love me?" or "I love you" would not.

Considering what an elaborate trainwreck healthcare is in the real U.S., I'm always curious how the whole mess looks in the FEZ—different, largely similar, the same but worse...? For instance, does the lack of regulation on health insurance make it even more precarious to be poor and/or disabled in the West? Is quality control an issue? Is it an improvement over the mainland in some ways—e.g., is "move to the FEZ where there's no controlled substances" a last-ditch survival option for people denied their meds, or is that sort of thing not possible?

I would say it's a similar trainwreck to the current US system in that it is very much dependent on employer coverage. However, as you say, there are no controlled substances, and cheap generic drugs can be bought, much of it over the counter. So for a diabetic, it would be better and cheaper, but if you needed cancer treatment or heart surgery, it would be pretty much the same. Many smaller communities have pooled their resources and have a local doctor, just like they have volunteer firefighters. This works well for smaller injuries or disease, but anything big and complicated is still at the mercy of the big hospital giants.

ROs most likely to cheat?

In general? Ortega. On Sidestep? None.

Given that HG seems to strongly value family and grieve about what happened to their little sibling, have they ever considered having children?

Yes, but they are a boost, as are Nocturne and Jake, so it would have to be adoption.

Back in the day did Ortega assume Step wouldn't let things progress beyond kissing to keep their relationship casual or did they understand it was due to their deep aversion toward their clothes off?

They assumed it was to keep it casual and Ortega at arm's length. They might have got a vibe that sexual things were an issue, but it was never talked about.

Do any of the main characters smoke weed?

I think Chen has done a bit of that, as did Herald when he first moved to LD.

Was the order to kill Hood issued by the Hollow Ground we know or the original Hollow Ground?

The HG we know today.

In a prev Q&A you mentioned looking forward to playing I, The Forgotten One. Have you had a chance to play it? I really enjoyed it and you were the reason I found it.

I have! Worked quite well too, nice success in battle, the cute beginnings of a romance between messed up people, and my sister on the throne with a small taste of jealousy puttering beneath.

Does the old man need help getting around??

No.

What're the HG trio (independently and as a whole) confident in? Can we, say, start targeting those to start sewing doubts and fears into their own capabilities? 🙄 And what might happen to them?

Here is the issue. If you are around Hollow Ground, you will not lack confidence. There's just a constant string of low level affirmations like "you're beautiful," "you can do this" and things like that. Doubt and fear will require some clever thinking from Sidestep if that's gonna work. But, Jake is slightly insecure about his manhood in certain instances, and worried that he's nothing but a goon in others. Nocturne is perfect. HG is worried about getting the people they care about hurt.

Say if Ortega meets Step's hypothetical found family, who are completely oblivious to their hero past (by Sidestep himself choosing to keep them in the dark)- or that they even used to be Sidestep. Would they feel tempted to tell them Step's wonderful exploits as a hero? 🙄 Would they do it?

They would be tempted and would do stupid hints until Sidestep told them to shut up.

On a similar note, what exactly did Ortega tell Argent and Danny about Step when they were reminiscing? Would either of them feel curious about the more dark, gritty parts to the past if they think Step would possibly tell them about it? Or are they content with the happier parts of what they know?

Oh they are both VERY curious about Sidestep's part of the story. And they will dig eventually.

Knowing what he does now, would Chen have changed anything about his actions back when he first found out the truth behind Sidestep?

Yes, of course he would.

How often do the LD Rangers contact Nazar in San Francisco, for any reason?? Would our dear Nazar be able to help hide, say a Sidestep who fled from LD, trying to escape their notice and being caught by them/the Farm?

I think there's contacts at least a couple of times per month. And Nazar would be able to help, but the question would be if he wanted to...

How much communication is there between the SD and the Rangers, especially in regard to high profile/threat villains? Like when they take Psychopathor in in the first game did they tell the Rangers (either directly or by making it seem like a different organisation like LDPD) that he was captured or do the Rangers just think he's gone quiet?

There is no communication outside of what is needed for certain missions. They would let the Rangers know about the Psychopathor, but it would be seeded through the LDPD. The less anybody knows what they are up to, the better.

Would the SD tell the Rangers if they they captured Sidestep's villain persona; or would certain circumstances like being a known telepath change this?

Sidestep is a special case, the moment they find out who is beneath the helmet if Sidestep is captured, that's when everything goes dark. Witnesses might be scrubbed as well.

You've previously said it will be possible to get some hero's to support Sidestep as a villain but what about getting any of the villainous characters to support a more heroic/anti-hero Sidestep. Probably not getting them to be hero's themselves but for example having Mortum more supportive of a political Step's goals or helping a Sidestep who tries to avoid casualties and keep people safe?

Oh yeah! One of the things with this game is the fact that the line between hero and villain is blurred, some villains are better heroes than the heroes are, and some of the heroes are true villains. The only thing separating black from white is the thin line of the law, and in Los Diablos, that depends a lot on what the companies want. I can see Mortum supporting a more heroic villain, though they would shake their head and caution them not to be too wrapped up in pesky ideals. Vera is more focused on her community, she sees herself as much of a hero as anybody in this city, so she'd be in. Sky-Raider is very much about the money, so the question would be how well it paid.

If any of the villainous RO's would support a less villainous Sidestep how would they fall on a scale of most likely to change their MO/behavior to least likely?

Hmmm. Changing their behavior. I would say from most likely to least: Sky-Raider - Mortum - Vera.

Would any of the Rangers be willing to work with Sidestep's villain persona without actually knowing who they are? And if so who would be the most likely?

Depends on what they do, but I can see that being possible due to certain... events in the future. Likely to least: Argent - Charge - Steel - Herald - Argent. Yes, Argent would be at both ends depending on the villain.

And since the release of the series has there been any fan theories or speculation that you've seen that you've thought was particularly outlandish, so wrong or just plain weird that it's made you wonder how people came to that conclusion? (you don't need to say what the theories are if you want to avoid confirming or denying any theories in case of spoilers)

No, you are all very good at coming up with ideas! Some are wrong as hell though, but considering the fact that I fill the story with mysterious clues I can see how you'd get there.

How does Vera's control over her pigeons work exactly? Can she communicate with them?

She can communicate with them, though it would be seen as more of an emphatic thing, with information exchange. It's not like she can sit down and discuss the latest movie, but she can learn about events and people. She can also look through their eyes with a bit of focus, though she can't control them as she does so. Which can be a bit frustrating.

What was Vera's reaction when she realized she could control pigeons?

Oh that is a spoiler!

Does Vera herself feel any different when she's in a pigeon form? Does her senses work differently at all?

Yes, she feels different, and her senses work differently.

Has Armadillo attended the villain parties with Vera or would they consider it too risky?

I think Vera would invite them, but Ardee would see that as too big a risk.

How does Vera's family feel about her being a villain? Do they know she's a villain?

None of the people in her immediate area really see her as a villain. She does good for her community, and at times her community's needs go above such things as private property. She would be seen more of the Robin Hood type.

What did HG think about their mother's wish for youngest sibling to go legit and get an education?

I mean... it's a nice dream, but the world doesn't work that way.

What kind of dynamic does Argent have with Chen and Herald?

It's slightly tense with Chen, not unlike how it was with Sidestep back in the day. There is respect and trust (she saved his life) but there's also that unspoken bit of mystery that Chen picks up on but she won't touch. He knows something's up, and suspect it's something shady. She doesn't deny that, but says it's none of his business. Herald on the other hand wanted to get close, and she likes him, but so does her nanos and that's... dangerous. He's too touchy, so she tries to keep her distance. She also doesn't think he should stay a Ranger, that will break his heart. He disagrees with her, and that's a big tension between them.

How do Chen, Lady Argent, and Herald potentially feel about fighting against the villain who is a known telepath?

Chen has the worst case of deja vu, this won't end well. Lady Argent is annoyed, but working on countermeasures. Herald doesn't really know how to feel, it's weird, but is it really worse than things like a big laser cannon?

What was Vera up to during Nanosurge and Heartbreak Incidents?

She was in town, but not directly involved. Just an onlooker, like so many others.

Is there decided year for when Vera and Sky-Raider debuted as villains?

Dunno their timelines yet. They've been at it for a while.

If Steel managed to retire, what would he want to do?

Might volunteer at a dog shelter, or work with veteran outreach or something.

Were the nanovores saying anything during the potential scene where Argent either scarred or took an eye from Sidestep?

KILL. EAT. KILL. SAFE.

What was HG's and Nocturne's reactions to the attack on the diner Ortega (and Puppet potentially) went to spy on Jake?

Worrying. Not surprising but an annoying escalation.

What would Nocturne do if HG were to be killed, considering her red-threads would disappear? Has she ever thought about what she would do or made plans in case of such an event?

She won't allow that to happen, that's the extent of her plans.

Has Nocturne met Armadillo? What would her instincts say about them?

Nope. Not met yet.

Are Vera and Sky-Raider masked or a public villains? How recognizable each of them would be on the street in their civilian guises?

Both masked. Sky-Raider has his armor, and Vera tends to wear a mask or be a pigeon.

What kind of lives do Vera and Sky-Raider have outside their villain personas?

Still working on that, we'll find out as I write.

What kind of family or past does Sky-Raider have?

Very much a working class background, single mother, broke, lost most of the family things when volcanic ash decimated the midwest. Joined the army because that was a solid way to earn a living, and it meant he didn't have to sleep on his mother's couch in their tiny little evacuation trailer. Yep, people still live in those temporary accommodations.

How do HG, Vera, Sky-Raider, Nocturne, and/or Jake potentially feel about Sidestep being a telepath?

I think Sky-Raider is potentially the most weirded out, but also the most innocent about it in the sense that he really won't know exactly what is going on. HG and Nocturne trust their defenses, Jake would be cautious as hell.

What impressions does Mia have on Sky-Raider and Vera?

Sky-Raider is kind of cool, Mia has only seen him from afar. She wants to interview Vera, but is convinced that the whole pigeon thing is just done with trained pigeons.

Would Mia had any particular impressions on Nocturne and HG if they had been public villains?

I feel that she either would think they were cool, or that they were trying way too hard.

In one q&a it was mentioned both Nocturne and Jake would have hated being public villains, what would both of them have hated about it?

The whole performance part for Jake, the unease of being perceived on that level for Nocturne.

What kind of life did HG wish for their younger sibling?

A successful career in the family business.

Would the nanovores Sidestep acquired talk or feel different to Lady Argent?

Oh yes. VERY.

What kind of reputations Vera has sown around herself? Which of her reputations she considers to be true and which false?

You can get away with a lot of things as long as you have the right reputation, and Vera doesn't mind being a little bit infamous. The way most people talk about her is as a thief and mercenary, which she agrees with, though she thinks it's for a good cause. She has been working with other villains in the past, infiltrating things and getting access for other, heavier hitters. This changed after she started working with Armadillo, because now she has less need of muscles. During those years, she was tied to things which she was only partly involved in, and got a bit of a reputation as an assassin as well. She's more conflicted about that, she has killed people, but she thinks that might reflect badly on her community, so she tries to play it down.

So I had high suspicion with Ortega where after the crash they always clock my Sidestep as a villain upon waking up in headquarters, but I decided to do everything the same except this time offer to help with HG and that led to innocent upon waking while changing nothing else; my question is does Ortega still have that high suspicion or did it lessen/disappear once their theories were shown to be wrong? Or do they still have them but are currently distracted by the Regene reveal and haven't been able to focus on it yet?

You obviously slipped right under the suspicion threshold for Ortega, there's still suspicions bubbling under there, just not enough for Ortega to be sure and force a confrontation.

Inspired on the Ortega hang out ask from last QA, what would HG like to do with a new sibling? What kind of villainous or civilian activities would they enjoy?

The inner HG in my head bluescreened at that. I honestly don't think HG has thought that far yet, they are like a dog who managed to actually catch the car they were chasing and now went... oh shit. What now?

I'm thinking about how blue of Sidestep's uniform is the exact opposite of orange on the color wheel. Was this a conscious design choice?

Yep!

Why wasn't Hollow Ground that interested in Sidestep when they were a vigilante/hero? Considering Sidestep was a telepath who was very close to Ortega they do seem like a good leverage.

Because there were a million little vigilantes out there, and Ortega was busy enough being Marshal at the time that they didn't need to be too severely dealt with.

What happens to Arde's hair when their armor comes out?

Tufts still stick out between plates here and there, while other bits are stuck under. It's not very comfortable, but it is a conscious fashion choice.

In the Farm, who were Sidestep's targets during the experiments? Re-genes? Kidnapped humans? Both?

Re-genes and Farm staff.

Sidestep says it's been too long since they've used Re-gene language. Does that mean they haven't used it on their second capture?

They were mostly kept isolated from the other Re-Genes at that point, first due to health reasons and later due to experiments.

I think I've made mention of this before but I still find it a little confusing, why does everyone refer to HG and Step as being 'siblings.' Is this just because of the presumed connection Step has to the youngest sibling from their past? An assumption that HG will want to treat Step as a kind of 'found family?' [Especially in the case of a 'protected' Step.]

I think it's just a useful shorthand, because it's a single word, encompasses all gender variants. It is assumed that HG will act on that, which I have done nothing to dissuade with my answers. It is also a lot shorter than "Sidestep might possibly share some genes with HG's dead younger sibling, and a lonely HG with a love for family might decide that is enough to treat them as family." So yeah, your last assumption is correct.

One of my favourite add-ons from Retribution, small as it was, was Ortega making mention of your tongue if it's pierced and commenting they like it. Is there plans to integrate these kinds of things more in the future? [Similarly for the type of clothing you tend to wear, since I believe currently that only ties in with HG if you show up in what you 'normally would wear.']

It shows up in a few other places too, but mostly if you wear outliers. Like Ortega assuming you have money if you dress nice, and not if you don't. I will continue using it in the future, but just like height, I do it in situations where commenting on clothes or piercings might come up, I don't like to force mentions of things because that often looks awkward in the text.

Is there a possibility in the future to add an option to just ask Daniel's name in between the option to tease him out of it and asking at the dinner? [I only realised after teasing it out of him in the first dozen or so playthroughs that apparently it's the only way I noticed to find out for a very long time.]

I think it's funnier this way though.

I recognize this could be spoilers, [and may have been asked before, though I don't remember]. Does the Scar from Heartbreak impact the identity of the figure whom takes over your body and/or takes over the body of the Puppet?

Spoilers! You'll know soon enough, the code will be out there...

Something that kind of bugged me for a while was the fact that if you admit to Ortega being the boogeyman, they will always reveal you. I was wondering if this was a result of a drugged up stupor, a sense of justice, or the rawness of the betrayal still running deep, perhaps a mix of all three? Or was it just that the recording made it difficult to avoid? [The blurriest part for me is the 'villainous' Steps who border on anti-hero like those training the heroes or being anarchist due to corruption in the system.]

That is Ortega feeling betrayed and overreacting. They will kick themselves afterwards, but they had just been in a car crash, was running on painkillers and panic, and had just had their worst fears realized, and some new ones planted there. Ortega makes rash decisions when becoming emotional. This had nothing to do with justice, this was drugs and hurt feelings. There's a reason why Ortega breaks some Sidesteps out nearly immediately.

When it comes time to choose Sidestep's Re-gene name, will there be an option to decide which of their names Sidestep prefers internally? (Even if actually going by the Re-gene name isn't actually feasible)

That sounds like a good idea!

Rangers vs. Rangers: which city's team comes out on top, and would the result surprise people? Or if this question is rendered moot by disparities in team size, what would be the fairest way to group all six teams into two evenly-matched sides? (Everyone vs. San Francisco??)

I would say San Francisco, because they have the biggest team 8w9th subteams) due to several population clusters in the area (San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland, Stockton, and Sacramento), though a lot of it would come down to how the battle is fought. The Seattle Ranger Rivergrass is very powerful near water, as is Captain Columbia. The San Francisco team doesn't have one, so that would be an equalizer.

To group them in two even teams would be hard since people aren't used to working together, but a working three-way split would be something like:

Los Diablos and San Diego (used to working together) with Sentinel out from retirement.

San Francisco with all the sub teams.

Seattle and Portland (also used to cooperating) with Portland bringing some power and Seattle sneakiness.

Reno won't get involved with that bullshit, Dave might agree to be judge.

On a related note, how well do fans' power rankings of heroes and villains tend to measure up to reality? Excluding mysteries like Hollow Ground, is there anyone in the cast whom fans greatly over- or underestimate, or whom nobody can agree on the right ranking for?

Oh the fans can never agree. And so much depends on circumstances. Think of it like comparing sports stars from different sports. It's really hard to judge a soccer player vs a hockey player, or a sprinter vs a pole vaulter. The only true lists are the one based on perceived facts, like how much has someone been seen lifting, or how fast have they been clocked while flying and so on. I would say that Charge is one of such controversies, because they shouldn't be that successful, yet somehow they are. And so many accusations of fangirl/boys have been thrown around, with accusations of being seduced by the hotness.

It's been stated that Mortum and HG (if they're somehow open with it) know that Ortega is dating Sidestep. How many people (villains, politicians, media or heroes) know Sidestep and Ortega are together? If Sidestep dates any other ranger does it become known too by anyone else outside them?

Some on the team have a hard time keeping certain secrets when they are happy. There's a handful, but I won't specify due to spoilers.

Will we potentially have the option to dox the HG trios' residences/faces via telepathy? 🙄 Or share information about them (and their relationship to each other) in that matter?

Sounds like a good plan if you can pull it off. Though there is the small matter that it might be like showing pictures of the Loch Ness monster, if you believe it's not real, it's probably a log.

We know the Rangers as a whole agree that Ricardo with a beard makes him look more mature than he really is, but what about the other options? Shaved and moustache?

I think at this point everyone is used to the mustache, so if Ricardo shaves it off, people think it's because he's trying to recapture his lost youth with Sidestep. So... slightly sad (but Danny feels he looks better though.)

What's Nazar's opinion of each of the Rangers? What about the past ones? (E.g. Hood, Anathema, Sunstream, etc.)

See. Nazar didn't idolize Hood, but he respected the man. Didn't meet him, but he's watched footage. Anathema always made him a little uncomfortable once Void had been defeated, there was that look every time. He liked Sunstream, and was sad to see she quit, but not surprised. He always felt she was quite brittle. I won't speak of the current Rangers, because of spoilers.

What languages does Pyroclast know?

Probably just English and Spanish, he doesn't strike me as a big language guy.

How did Ortega become good at detective work?

Occasional hyperfocus and a refusal to let things go. Ortega was always smart, school just didn't agree with them. And since they are good at reading people, they quickly learned how to spot when people were lying to them or making up things. Poker helped too. Other than that it's just knowing a lot of people, and be trusted enough that people share information. Learning from Owl and other vigilantes too.

What are the Rangers favorite movie genre?

Ortega: Seventies action movies.

Steel: Documentaries.

Argent: Horror.

Herald: Science fiction.

Between all the current rangers who's killed the most people?

Hmm. Steel probably.

What would be Elena's reaction to Sidestep punching/beating Ortega?

Depends entirely in the circumstances of seeing or learning it, and what happened.

Was Ortegas father physically abusive toward Ortega or just emotionally?

Physically too, though not majorly.

Which ranger has the best shot/more experience with guns? Moreover, who is the best martial artist?

Steel is the best with a gun and has the most experience with them in real life. On a shooting range, Herald could give him a match. I would say the best martial artist is probably Ortega. Argent can give them a run for their money though.

What approach would (or do) the Rangers and Dr. Mortum take in games with roleplaying choices? E.g., would they stick to the "good" options, find it more fun to play an evil character, try to be an edgy antihero but can't bring themselves to be mean to fictional characters...? Are they the type who chooses whichever options they personally agree with, a ruthless pragmatist who picks whatever optimizes rewards, a dedicated roleplayer only concerned with "what my character would do", or something else?

Ortega: What is the most fun in the moment, mostly roleplayer with a drive towards chaos. "But what if I..."

Chen: Mostly pragmatist until he gets emotionally invested, and then everything becomes a moral quandary.

Argent: Sticking to the good options, why not?

Daniel: Would try to be evil and badass, then would have a crisis about it, then something might happen and he would be all in because he's angry.

Mortum: What would make a more interesting story.

On a related note, would any of them behave differently in a group TTRPG, where the others can see and be affected by their choices, than in a private single-player game?

No.

Why did mortum first think the puppet was a goldigger? What attracted mortum to the puppet?

The puppet was smooth and fancy and worked as a liason for an unnamed villain. That to Mortum felt like someone wanting to become important, who would latch on to whatever famous/powerful person they ran across and try to work their magic to their own advantage. What attracted Mortum was the inability for the puppet to stay in character, and reveal their deep cynism about how the world and villains worked.

What are mortums thoughts on chargestep?

It makes sense, but also what a self-destructive streak in both of them..

Why does Ortega have undying loyalty toward Sidestep no matter what they do?

Because that's the way they are. I don't know how else to explain it, it's a kind of relationship hyperfocus. But it is not no matter what, that bond can break and that won't be nice.

Will Sidestep have the opportunity to take out the Handyman sometime in the future?

The Handyman will return, is all I am saying.

What was Ortega doing with a gun at the gala? Did they suspect an attack or does they always carry a gun?

Ortega took the gun from one of the security guards, Ortega doesn't usually carry one.

What made the Dr think the puppet was dangerous?

Vibes. Something in the eyes. That certain aura around certain people.

Between the dr and each ranger who exercises the most each day and for how long? What does their daily diet each consist of?

Ortega is leading by a mile there. Probably as much as Chen and Argent together (which are the two in second and third place). Ortega doesn't have a diet, but they eat a lot of varied protein, and several supplements.

What was Elena's thoughts on Sidesteps and Ortega age gap if they're in a romantic relationship?

She didn't. They're both adults.

Why did Ortega flirt with Argent when they met if they were still grieving Sidestep?

Because Ortega was trying desperately to stop grieving. To move on. Yep, the flirting with Argent was as close to a rebound as it can get, probably one reason it never went anywhere.

Will we have the opportunity to meet Dr.Mortums ex or any of Ortegases exes in the future?

I don't think so, but who knows?

What were the cliques of each ranger and the dr during high school? Did they join any clubs/sports?

Chen was in the chess club, and was caught in that awkward spot of being good at sports (especially baseball), but more of an outsider/nerd at heart. Right before he got kicked out, he had started growing his hair out and listening to hard rock and meeting people who liked metal and punk.

Ortega was popular, athletic but was bad at team sports, did some track and field instead, and did a lot of skateboarding and bmx biking after school. Didn't last long in clubs/teams, but was always the center of the party.

Argent was a computer club nerd who liked video games and wanted to be president of the video club because everybody else's taste sucked. She had older siblings in the same school, which also sucked.

Daniel played lacrosse, just like his older brother, and was quite good at it. He was more part of the art clique, and was a talented, popular if rather shy young man.

What are each of the rangers signature move? Ex:Uppercut, Back Kick, Sweep Kick, Jab

Ortega: Sweep kick.

Argent: Stab.

Chen: Jab.

Herald: Ram.

Are any of the rangers or the dr fans of soul food? If so which are their favorite?

Hmm... I do think Ortega would be a fan, would probably have eaten a lot of that growing up in Texas. Not sure what would be a favorite, since the definition of exactly what counts as soul food seems to vary a lot.

Near the epilogue of retribution Sidestep has the option to loose something? What is it?

Hehehehe. Yep. We'll see about that.

If you're stuck in Sidesteps body will the dr notice anything different about the puppets behavior/personality?

In most cases, yes.

Does Nocturne ever worry or think about her dependence on HG's red threads? It's known that she still has some issues occasionally propping up despite them being in place, so either they're not doing as well as they should, or they still need HG's continuous attention to keep them sturdy. Neither of these sounds like good news for her.

She loves and needs them, the threads were done voluntarily and at her suggestion. However, it is still something which needs upkeep and reinforcement, which is something on her mind. She doesn't like being vulnerable.

What exactly happened when Jake called Nocturne 'Nocky?'

Got "nocked" on the head.

Who among the HG trio can dance?

I think all three, though neither of them are experts or outstanding.

Can HG thread someone if either they or their target are drunk? What about if they both are? What if their target is unconscious?

It works while drunk. Not when unconscious. Need to hear and understand the words.

First off thanks mate, as an LA born Californian I love the character of Los Diablos though I can't really believe or see how the name would have changed to this since I've researched why & how the valley was named.

Blame me for that, I wanted the name change to force people to not immediately see modern LA. It might not be realistic, but neither is this story ;) And also, it was not the inhabitants which named it, it was the media, and as we all know, they don't always make the best decisions.

My two questions are: 1 how would people in the Los Diablos valley react to an event exponentially worse than heartbreak I mean black plague level catastrophe, especially the telepaths.

Maybe you will see... though, disregarding that glib answer, it would vary. If you're talking of a physical disaster, it is complicated. On one hand, the inhabitants are used to being self-reliant and take action. On the other hand, there's no central government to coordinate and assist. This can go both good or bad. As for being a telepath under those circumstances... it would be bad. REALLY bad. Probably run out into the desert to stay away from people bad. If you are talking about a telepathic disaster, then it would be wild panic and flight. Just get out of there as fast as you can.

Could Argent actually survive an uppercut that throws her into the Hollywood H from city hall, no electricity or power hax just a clean hit that's stupidly strong leading to a k.o. or K.I.A. I'm writing something for myself to explore a character I made learning about telepathy from my sidestep. Sorry for the short story I tend to drone on.

She could survive. The nanovores would form a protective shell/carapace, and would help stabilize her afterwards. She might be hurt for real though, most likely a bad concussion, broken ribs or internal bleeding. It would probably be a k.o.

Would Sidestep be able to enact possession of people if they didn't have Void's blood?

See... that is impossible to know for sure. I would not say it would be impossible to grow into that regardless, but the void blood sure helped to kickstart something.

Where does the SD's income come from are they paid for jobs or funded by Genitech or the govt? Do they have insurance to cover regene breakouts/property damage or is everything handled in house?

They are funded by several sources. The core is from the military budget, but several companies are pushing huge sums of money into their research as well. They also sell research and body parts, Genitech is technically not connected, but behind the scenes it utterly is. Everything is handles in-house, no insurances of that sort.

It's established that Re-Genes are generally bald. However, a bald person -ESPECIALLY one presenting as a woman- would be somewhat notable/memorable, not to mention the fact that it would be a dead giveaway to anybody who knows about cuckoos. So, do cuckoos just wear wigs while they're on a job?

Some cuckoos are allowed to have hair, others work in wigs, especially at the start.

Sidestep keeps calling Ortega an idiot, and we've yet to see Ortega fire back since Rebirth. Where there any specific choice words that Ortega used to refer to Sidestep back in the hero era that they've stopped using since their return from the dead?

I think "you're such an asshole" was quite common, but other things might have been too depending on your Sidestep. But good spotting that Ortega is afraid to push back...

Would Step feel it if there was a drastic change in the state of their body while possessing the puppet pre-imposter shenanigans?

No.

Do the RO's have differing goals or opinions on marriage/life partnership with Sidestep, or is that up to reader headcanon?

Up to headcanon, that will mist likely not come up in game.

It's obvious why Chen never told Ricardo he's gay but why not tell Julia? Especially when in some scenarios she's openly bi? And is there a chance she might still find out even if Step doesn't romance him?

Because then Julia would start trying to hunt of boyfriends for him, and that would be even ore embarrassing than the girlfriends. Chen is private, and he suspects Julia would do her best to "help out". She might still find out.

If we got Joshua fired in Rebirth... is there a small possibility we could recruit him in the future?

Maybe!

Has Dr. Mortum ever been dosed with Void blood?

Such a straight out question, did you really think I would answer that?

Did locus know that old era Sidestep was a telepath?

She might have suspected it.

Do Armadillo and Shroud know each other?

They at least know of each other.

Could Shroud recognize sidestep if she saw their face? What's her opinion of them? (If she has one)

Probably not. Her opinion is unknown at this point.

Followup to my question about whether or not arde was inspired by stories of other escapees: does arde specifically know the story of Sidestep, their first escape and their career as a hero?

Yes.

Is it possible to recruit(possibly only for mob bosses) other members of existing mafias? Like stealing Jake from HG by leveraging the fact he was unknowingly threaded? Or poaching Shroud from Francis by revealing you're also a Regene?

Yes.

More broadly, will Mob!Steps be able to expand their organization with new names faces?

Yes.

Would the regenerator also remove the blue-skin of a blue-gene?

it is possible.

Can sidestep offer the regenerator to arde, once they have it up and running?

Yes.

How many other boosts are out there with powers similar to Vera's? Are there any at the farm?

Hm. Similar. Not as many as you'd think, Vera is... weird. Not any at the farm, luckily for them.

What would happen if the Farm suddenly got wind that their property has an entire secret and self-aware culture hidden under their noses? Would this spark new research opprotunities or ethical concerns? Would there be schisms in the staff? A mass liquidation of all assets? Would the Farm even survive?

It is very unlikely that the Farm would survive, such as it is currently structured under this leadership.

Can Shroud "starve" to death if she's given enough physical food and hydration to meet bodily needs, but hasn't death-touched someone in a while? I.e. is the "life energy" she steals from others, necessary for her own survival? Or is it, for like of a better term, a recreational form of consumption?

It is necessary, her powers are eating her, that is the only thing that slows it down.

With enough biological material, could Argent create something similar to an autonomous drone that she controls via technopathy? Or would the risk of a separate cluster going rogue be too much?

She could but would not risk it.

Will we get to meet Sentinel's family one day?

Not sure.

Could psychopathor give the Rat King enrichment activities? Or was his psi-sensitivity too weak to allow for that?

Not knowingly, but they were strong enough for the rat-king to have fun tagging along anyway. Just more like looking over someone's shoulder rather than being involved in a conversation with them.

Did the Farm know that Sidestep was a telepath before picking them up at the HB site? Would they have settled for any survivor or did they grab a hero specifically?

They would have grabbed any survivor.

Did the Farm have any staff who were fans of Sidestep before HB? Did the higherup then censor Sidestep fans after the HB incident and finding out they were a lost cuckoo?

I don't think there were Sidestep fans at the Farm, they have a rather cynical view on heroes and vigilantes.

If sidestep is trans would that also make HGs little sibling also trans since Ortega saw their records and didn't make any connections to sidestep being trans

HG's sibling is not trans. Ortega assumed HG would have had powers to get records changed back then, as well as puberty blockers and stuff, once they thought about it post apartment talk.

What did an unromanced Ortega think of Sidestep's dating life back in the day? That there wasn't one to speak of or that they were just really private about it?

Could be either, but Ortega would have bet money on none.

Any chances of Ortega finding out the pressure ended before the bomb went off? Whatever that means?

Ortega knows.

Neither Ortega nor Chen saw Themmy die, but did either of them see Themmy's corpse?

No.

Has Shroud used her powers on a psi sensitive person before?

Not a true telepath.

Is the organization who created the rat king also responsible for whatever threat the farm thinks is coming?

No.

Are there any activities Arde would like to try but hasn't been able to because they're blue?

Yes, but they're also quite shy about being seen among people. So they might not do them anyway. Also, remember that the vestigial arms really complicated things more than just the skin.

Is there anything about the human world that Arde finds especially strange/puzzling? e.g. the concept of gender, nuclear family, money, etc.

Gender is weird. Family is understandable. Money is as well. Babies are precious and confusing.

We know a decent number of Regenes have escaped the Farm, but have any been captured then escaped again like Sidestep?? Any that have escaped not just twice, but multiple times?

I don't think so.

Does Vera know (of) more escaped regenes aside from Armadillo and Sidestep?

No.

Does Vera's community know about Arde? Do they think she just has a reclusive partner or are any of them privy to the full truth?

They know about Arde, but they don't know they're a regene. They think they are just a reclusive boost with ptsd.

Would it be feasible code/story-wise for sidestep to develop additional vices? Or have a 'counter' on certain decisions like tw alcoholism drinking to avoid problems/thinking that may influence flavor text?

I have been playing with the thought. It's certainly possible, but would the effort be worth what I can use it for is the big thing-

Will we be able to sniff out the mole for HG in order to gain their trust?

Perhaps.

Does Arde have any ambitions/plans to take down the Farm or are they content with staying away and remaining free?

Taking down the farm is like blowing up the moon. Too big to consider.

What would Arde stats (as sidestep) be? Daring ruthless ect.

Dunno yet, I need to write them more first.

We know how the rangers feel about memes, but what do the HG trio, Mortum, Sky-raider, Vera and Arde think about them? Do they understand them? Use them/like them?

I think Arde likes and understands them, they are a useful shorthand for a confusing human world that can be distilled down to repeatable core components. I think the rest doesn't really care one way or the other.

If Nocturne wasn't in the picture to intercept Ortega's plans, how much damage can they do to HG's empire?

Might have brought it down already.

Considering the physical dangers some of them can face, what medical training does each RO have (accredited or not)?

Pretty much between a firefighter and an army medic. They can handle emergencies. Ortega has the most, because they have voluntarily gone out to learn it since they were young due to accident prone hobbies. Chen learned in the army. Argent needs to know how bodies work. Herald knows the basics, but is also the one who has to use it a lot since he is the one first on the scene for disasters and similar. Dr. Mortum knows a lot but resents having to use it.

Was sidesteps face revealed to the public after heartbreak? If not how was mortum able to recognize sidestep when they meet face to face

No, it was not. Dr. Mortum has contacts, and did some Sidestep research for... reasons.

Was Locus ever targeted by the Farm? If so, is the reason why they want her the same reason they went for all those now-missing telepaths?

Yes and yes.

You said that Mortum and Herald would fare just about as well as Argent with the nanovores. Why?

A strong core self of control and responsibility as well as empathy.

And what would their relationship with the nanovores be like?

If we consider similar powers and events, I think Dr. Mortum would see them as machines, and would see themselves as a true cybernetic organism. I think Herald would see himself more like a prison guard, and would be rather miserable.

Do the Rangers know about Daniel's rich kid past? How much, if they do? Did any of them ever ask why he'd leave such a 'comfortable' life for heroism?

They do know the general story, it is not a huge secret. Most of them chalk it up to guild over his brother.

Ortega's mind's currently inaccessible but could they take a trip into Sidestep's mind if Step pulled them in?

Not at this point.

When Joe warned/gave advice to the puppet about Jake looking for the puppet, was that Joe paying back the puppet for Ace warning him about the hotel fire in the past?

Yeah.

Before anything romantic developed between Herald and Step, did Ortega know that Herald had a crush on his idol?

Ortega suspected it, yeah. Herald is not that good an actor.

We know the rangers have preferences over the villain path that sidestep chooses. Does Vera and Sky-raider have a preference too?

Probably, but I need to write them more to be sure.

Does Argent technopathcially hear anything when Sidestep uses their nanovore gauntlet near her? Do her friends?

No. The Rat-King runs interference for the armor. Can hear chitter, nothing more. Just like Sidestep doesn't immediately pick up on her nanovores.

Did Argent ever flirt with a villain before the chance with Sidestep? Did she ever get in trouble for it?

Yeah she did, it's fun. And she got slightly in trouble for it, but also Charge... so, nothing new.

If Boosts are infertile because of the drug causing DNA damage, do Boosts have a higher chance of contracting cancer?

A slight increase, yes.

Ace is a boost, do they have any cravings? Is it whiskey/alcohol?

Ace liked whiskey, but that was a choice, not a craving. They didn't have any if you don't count the gambling addiction.

What did Snowball's mindscape look like when Sidestep pacified her?

It was a locked cage with electrified walls, and Sidestep broke them down and let her out and showed her what freedom tasted like.

Can Argent re-wrangle the nanovores back under control if she lets them out for a feeding frenzy?

Yes, but it is an effort. If the swarm grows too much, there might be issues...

Is Revelations gonna be the book in which Step will finally be able to (unreasonably) accuse Ortega of having abandoned them after HB, plus irrationally blame them for everything else?

Yes. There can be some heartwrenching arguments there.

Does Steel have an opinion on the Ortega mustache debate for male Ortega's?

No, but he is secretly very amused at Ortega's insecurity. "The mustache is fine for fuck's sake. What's wrong with looking your age?"

The heartbreak site still gives bad vibes even after HB is long gone. Which means strong enough telepaths can permanently affect the psychic plane... Could a strong enough telepath in theory etch their consciousness into the psychic plane and become immortal in a sense?

Yep. In a sense.

If Nocturne and HG kept thinking about telling the truth of the fact they threaded Jake, does that mean HG can undo a threading?

Yes.

Extending on the concept of spare parts... Would/has the farm experimented trying to make "spliced" regenes? If they got a regene with regeneration say then tried to splice crab claw arms from an otherwise undesirable regene onto them?

OH yes. That's just sound science.

'You don't feel retired.' What exactly was it about Sidestep that made Steel get these vibes, irregardless of Ranger relationship/telepath status?

Still had the wariness, the way of treating everyone like a prospective enemy, every room like a possible ambush site.

In the faker path Ortega says "I know what they can do with bodies. Clones. Fakes. I just didn't know they could do memories". How does Ortega know they can clone people?

Ehehehehe yeeeeeah. That is a VERY good question. One might wonder what conspiracy boards they have been hanging on, or whether they have seen something...

Will we find out what Mortum and Hollow Ground were discussing at the end of Rebirth?

Maaaaybe.

Beyond Steel, do the rest of the Rangers have Ortega facial hair preferences?

Herald thinks Ric looks nicer without, Argent kind likes it.

How old would hollow grounds younger sibling be if they were still alive?

In their thirties or so.

When Ortega catches step leaving parkfield and step is revealed as a re-gene but still innocent. What does Ortega think step was doing there now that their sibling theory was busted

Helping out with tracking HG even though Sidestep might have said no or not even asked. Ortega is like that.

What would happen if Sidestep used their nanovores on Argent?

Maybe you'll see.

If Sidestep lets Blaze push them through the window and the rat King ends up saving them, what does Blaze tell Chen? What makes Blaze "sympathetic" towards sidestep?

I won't say yet, that might be a fic eventually.

Is the old man still in Los Diablos?

Sort of maybe but not quite.

Will we be able to flirt with any of the other Rangers while in armor?

Why not? It's fun.

When's Five Pennies' birthday?? Wanna celebrate this rancid man 🍆

12 January 1970.

Does shroud's death touch trigger TBR? Did Ace get TBR'd when they died?

Normally it kills people, but in Ace's case, yes that happened.

What would Danny think of Across the Spiderverse' art styles? Any favourites he has? Any styles he wants to try?

I mean the Spider-Punk style is really cool.

What's Danny's mindscape look like?

The sky, with clouds and grand vistas. Normally sunny and warm, until things gets bad.

What was the WolfPack's juicy gig that was coming up in rebirth?

Working for Psychopathor, he pays well.

Who sees Barbie, who sees Oppenheimer, and who sees both/neither?

Argent drags the Rangers to see both, no argument.

Is Chen aware of the extent of Ortega's reliance on tw painkillers? And if so, has he tried broaching the subject with them?

Yes and yes.

Is there any particular reason you mentioned a Cessna in rebirth? Have you ever been in one, or did you find out about them while researching small planes?

Never been in one, but flying small planes is a bit of a hobby for many in countryside sweden, and that's the one I've always heard talked about so I grabbed it out of thin air.

Will we be able to reconcile with Mortom if they betray us when we're sidestep stuck?

Yes, if you want to.

Can we be friends with whatever or whoever took control of either of the body's?

Depends on what or who it is.

Would Arde be open to sibling hugs/hangout time with Step?

We'll see. Other regenes are complicated.

Following up on that, how does Arde view other regenes, both escaped and unescaped? Do they consider them siblings, former comrades-in-arms, strangers with similar experiences? Did they feel the same toward cuckoos?

It depends. It can be all of them, just like one human can have different views about other humans. But cuckoos are dofferent, they were always in a weird spot in the farm.

Will the regenerator also regenerate the nanovores? Are their biological components considered whole?

It won't really affect the nanovores that way.

you mentioned unromanced!danny might have a crush on someone in b3. is it vera? 🤔

Not saying yet.

If Argent ran into her family while she was out and about, and they were interested in speaking with her for whatever reason, what would she do? Try to avoid them/escape? Pretend she doesn't know them and interact with them like they were random civilians?

Pretend she doesn't know them.

How does she feel about it afterwards? Happy to see them, however brief? Saddened that she has to maintain some distance?

She would be sad and depressed.

If Sidestep hasn't been discovered how likely do the rangers think the new villain is locus? I'm guessing Argent hasn't considered it since she can flirt with the villain.

Not very likely, due to the fighting style. Locus was never that physical.

Don't remember this being asked yet, we've seen glimpses of Sidestep's nightmares, but what about the rest of the cast? On both sides of the law.

Sidestep might learn of them in book three, but all of them got nightmares. Not gonna out them here.

What made Ortega go "Huh", while they were spying on Jake at the dinner? Was he discussing plans of inviting the new villain to Hollow Ground?

Hehehe a very good guess.

Did Arde and Shroud escape the Farm around the same time?

Yeah.

We know what Chen's family thinks of his sexuality and can make a guess about Ortega's but what about Danny, Argent and Mortum (double for the latter cause of gender identity)? Are all their families in the dark? Would they take it well?

Argent really didn't show any interest back then, so their family is in the dark. Mortum's family is VERY much in the dark, about the transition as well. Danny's family would have suspected something like that, they didn't talk, but oh boy, they were worried Danny was one of "them".

What prompted Vera to get boosted?

It was an accident.

will there be chances for us to tell characters that we were sidestep? minus mia, perhaps, but not saying who, are there chances for very strong reactions to that bit of info?

I think there will be more chances to open up in the future. And there would be some strong reactions.

We know that in Mitchell's files, there's usually a recorded conversation/letter/video of that specific subject. If sidestep was an independent hero back in the day, what kind of content does Mitchell have of them?

Probably surveillance camera footage.

Back in the day, when sidestep was living in the street, did they perhaps end up sleeping in the independent suburbs Vera comes from?

Maybe, they squatted all over town.

During sidesteps vigilante days if them and Ortega were flirting was their relationship ever speculated about in the media? By gossip mags or fansites?

Oh yeah, though it was always more of a "crack pairing" since it wasn't deemed too likely, and why would you ruin a good friendship?

What's the mob bosses crew presentation scores? And what's their style choices?

I think they're all in the 20-30's, ZaZa being the highest, and Ward the lowest. Not sure exactly what their style choices would be, none of them really stand out that way for me.

Exactly what kind of imprisonment for Five Pennies are we looking at here? 🐞 Is Gerard mandated to go through experimentation, or to work? Is he just imprisoned in max security and kept in isolation from other prisoners, given what happened?

From what Sidestep knows, it was max security prison, probably with a bit of isolation there since he was a former hero.

I don't know how to ask this, Vera in her pigeon form shits on people?

No. But she might ask other pigeons to.

Will we get to see the FEZ charter expire within this series?

It is planned to end before that.

Who were the six heroes besides Elyise who died during the Nanosurge?

I don't know! It's just a number.

How many vigilantes were killed in the nanosurge? How many civilians? Officially reported or otherwise.

Probably a handful of vigilantes at the most, while helping with evacuation. I would say about 400 people or so were reported dead, but considering the fact that there's no good statistics for inhabitants in LD, and that there will be no bodies, the number should be seen as a minimum. It could be a lot higher.

In a previous ask, you said "HG goes out more often, but rarely as themself" What kind of facade/persona/disguise does HG project? Who do the people that know them as a civilian think they are?

HG has several... personas? False identities? They like to portray themselves as an academic, often a therapist, or a local historian. Something they can bluff easily with a few threads, nothing science related. On several occasions they have used Tina's Aquarium as an "employer" since they know a lot about fish and aquariums.

What were the demands that Sky-Raider was shouting at the LDPD? Does he shout demands often?

I think that might been about backing off and letting him take the armored van and leave. He likes to be loud, and has speakers.

If you're puppetstuck and Sky-Raider breaks the puppet out from the hospital, it's mentioned in the text that Ortega actually gets there. Did they manage to do something or just helplessly stare at Sky-Raider while he was flying away

Spoilers.

If not spoilery, how does Sky-Raider's armour work/look like? I'm trying to imagine it but I'm picturing Dr. Octopus' ironman version

Hmmm. I am bad at designing, I leave that to the artists.

Since Sky-Raider is kinda a social butterfly, do we know any of the villains/friends he usually hangs out with?

Still working on them.

Who should Sky-Raider be more concerned about, the Marshal or an Ortega whose datefriend has been kidnapped (or any kind of Ortega rllly)?

Both. Why not both?

Should a Dr. Mortum that kidnapped step be concerned about Ortega?

Oh yes.

Argent worries about what Sidestep's reaction will be when she regains her original face? She thinks they won't find her beautiful anymore?

She won't look like she does now, so yeah, she's worried about that. She built her ideal face, to her nothing can live up to that.

there's a scene in rebirth where step reminisces in the gala about a memory that they are quite sure isn't their own, where they are talking with a psychiatrist asking them questions as they stare at the sky. is step being an Unreliable Narrator(TM), and this is actually one of their own memories? and have we met this psychiatrist/have they been mentioned in any lore?

Good question. You won't get a clear answer. But I will say that Sidestep does have transplanted memories as a regene that were not spoken of in Rebirth.

Did the kingpin before HG took over also "make the ground crack under the feet" of some of those they wanted dead?

If you are talking about the kingpin before Hollow Ground's oldest brother, no. If you are talking about the current Hollow ground, yes.

Question about a theoretical situation. If we show up in Chen's footage after Argent's bodysnatcher incident and Ortega never runs into us in the cafe. Would Chen ever see us while reviewing the footage? If so what would he think/do? Or would he never review the footage until he sees us at the dog park?

Chen would have something bothering him about it, but it would only be after the dog park it would click into place and he might review the footage.

What does Sky-raider actually know about the person who broke out from the hospital? Did he recognize the tattoos instantly?

Sky-Raider knows about Re-Genes...

Will we ever get to read what Chen wrote for the HB funeral speech?

Maybe, if I feel sad enough to write it.

Could Dr.Halabi recognize step as Ortega's friend? Or she doesn't know their face/how they look like

Dr. Halabi knows things.

If step was mortumnapped and the rangers (Ortega) are freaking out big time, is she gonna stay quiet as a mouse or may she hint they're okay.

Now see, that's a big moral quandry for her.

[Payment info](#)

[Aug 2, 2023](#)

Apparently Patreon has done some billing location changes which might cause trouble for some and make banks think it's fraud. Please double check, if your payment didn't work that might be the reason and you need to contact your bank!

[Time for new questions!](#)

[Jul 24, 2023](#)

Alright, I'm enjoying my vacation in small town america, but we still need some questions for this month! So have fun!

[Control \(Argent POV\)](#)

[Jul 17, 2023](#)

(Lady Argent came second in the poll, here is her POV just before the auction. Flirting gender neutral villain)

Lost Diablos. Underground. A former bomb shelter rebuilt into a base, not by my hand. Finders keepers, which is easy when you pick up a keycard from the ground and asks it where it belongs.

No, I lie. It's more complicated than that, but detective work never made for interesting memories. A necessary evil, staying alive means staying smart, and by now I'm very good at staying alive. With a little help from my friends.

"Hey," I say, to the still air and the silence that surrounds me. "Let's agree to be on our best behavior tonight?"

There's no answer. There never is. Just a feeling of anticipation and the faint stinging feeling of nettles and ants. Stripped down to the silver, my clothes are safe from collateral damage as I stretch my body, going through my daily workout. Not to build muscles this one, that's for show in the Rangers' Headquarters. This is for me. Control. Connection.

Right now, the control is simple. I'm well rested. Well fed. Any confused feelings are pushed to the side and buried in the ocean with my innocence. When I breathe, they breathe with me. The hunger and pain is a distant memory, half a pig bought at the butcher's for a fake barbecue have taken care of that for the evening. Wouldn't dare to do this unless I was as sated as I could be.

Pressing my hands against the concrete wall I focus on the texture, testing our connection. There's no nerves to my fingers, but I feel too much all the same. Every nanovore cell is a potential nerve cell, inside and out. I drag my fingers, dialing down the painful rough bumps until the texture is all that remains. No need for temperature right now. Feet feel the weight as always. Enough for balance, not enough to feel if someone stepped me on the foot. Not that there will be dancing, at least not of that sort.

"Just be patient, we'll have some fun eventually," I say because I can feel the nettle tingle of anticipation up my arms. "But until then I need everyone to be on their best behavior, okay?"

Treating nanovores like toddlers probably are not the way to do it, but it's easier to think of them that way. No impulse control. Wanting everything right now. Prone to temper tantrums.

At least I'll be wearing armor, everything is easier when they're not exposed.

Getting into the Oryx suit is a struggle. It's stiff and unyielding, a far cry from the soft skinsuits I normally wear. How she ever managed to wear those boots without having the ability to form your feet into the needed shape I'll never know. It takes me five minutes of walking before I start getting the hang of them, and fifteen more of exercises to make sure I can handle fighting. Bad grip. The hooves have a smaller area than I'm used to. Sacrificing power for the aesthetic, no wonder she lost.

[wide eyes.the girl goes down.red blooming rose in her chest.others run too late.smell of blood even from this distance.anger.fury.HUNGER.]

"No," I say, looking down at the horned helmet in my hands. "Simmer down. We don't DO that unless absolutely necessary." But will it be? I'm about to infiltrate an auction filled with villains. Would anybody really miss one or two of them?

No. Slippery slope. I won't.

Breathe. I can feel the pressure of the Oryx armor surrounding me. The pressure of the nanovores against my skin. Not stinging. Not itchy. Numb the connections. Numb my brain. I hit the wall as hard as I can. Seeing the concrete pulverized in a small crater brings me back in control. Everything works. Just the right amount of sensation not to overwhelm. Not more.

The helmet fits over my head as if it was made for me.

By the time I've reached the underground entrance to the Boulevard Casino I am already in character. The hooves works like high heels, getting the right rhythm adds authority and poise. There's no facial expressions in the helmet, but the horns add an exclamation mark to every movement of my head so I'll make do.

"Oryx?" The guard recognizes me at least, which makes things simpler. "Didn't think you were still in town?"

"Came back recently," I say, glad that there's a vocal modulator in the helmet. "Retirement grew boring, thought I'd have some fun."

"You've got the money to do so?" He holds out his scanner, and I pull the chip out to present it.

It's a decoy, holds about as much money I'd need to buy dinner. But the act of fumbling with it in my armored gloves lets me feel the warm puddle of circuitry that's in his hand and connect to it.

Simple. Read data. Show value. I don't have to worry about the first, as long as I can make sure the second shows what I want it to. How much would be enough? Ten million should be enough to get me through the door, and some odd numbers at the end for realism. The scanner beeps happily under my tickled attention, showing what I want it to. The guard nods, pleased with what he sees.

"Welcome to the Boulevard Casino Ms. Oryx. I hope you enjoy your stay."

"It's been a while," I say, leaning back slightly so I can look him in the face. "I plan to make the most of it." And then I'm through the door.

I walk slowly, body nearly on autopilot as I shift my eyes to see what kind of security they have. My little friends accommodate my every wish, revealing wiring and connections, leaving me to fit everything together. I can taste the hidden violence of lasers resting in their slots, the electric tingle of the floor, the quiet assurance of gas and fire-retardant foam. Focused around the entrance, but even as the corridor opens up into the beautiful underground vaults of the casino, I can feel the threats surround me.

Looks like I need to cut the power before I do anything. Now, what kind of backup do they have for that? I stop by the bar, flash my chip for a drink with a straw, which is not a childish affectation among villains with helmets. I don't plan to drink it, but it gives me a relaxed air as I prowl the walls, looking for the arteries.

Electrical wiring is always easy to find, lit up like a Christmas tree, just like Charge. They would have loved to be here. Would probably even have said yes if I asked. No questions asked. Too many notes taken. I'm better off alone, I've built too much trust to risk breaking it, even over something as important as this. Besides, I don't need help. I can do this.

There are layers of backups to the system, but only one for the power. If I turn off the main power grid, the backup will come on. I could have countered that by going further upstream to one of the junction points and blowing everything, but my reach is not that far. Could I turn off the main grid and convince the backup that it's still running?

Yes. I probably could. It needs to trigger, and it's always easier to stop something than to start it. Most of the time.

I can feel my skin crawling, and my little friends are restless. Am I infecting them with nerves? No, they are picking up something I don't, a threat here in a roomful of villains. What a laugh. Of course there are threats.

Should I go check out the merchandise? No, that might give something away, better to float here and take in the scene. Figure out who would be a problem and who I need to avoid. Will someone step in to stop me, or will the chaos be enough? If someone does... what should I do?

I lean against a wall, seeing nothing but red. All the options are bad. I could restore the security system. Trigger the defenses but with no friend or foe. People would be hurt. Die. I look over at the young woman manning one of the roulette tables. Who is she? Why is she working there? Does it matter? It would be she that gets hurt, not the hulking monstrosity in the armor that's betting on black.

I can't do that.

The alternative is worse. I can feel them on my body. Nearly dormant. Resting. they've been configured, and unless something triggers this is how they will behave. A second skin. No. A skin. I look at the woman wrapped in bandages walking past. That's me, isn't it? But better looking. How bad do I want this?

How badly do I want to be whole? To have a restful night's sleep without waking up in pain and viscera? To be able to relax? Let my hair down? Have hair? Have a smile, a nose, a face again? Be a human, instead of a disaster kept in check by a finger on the pause button?

Nobody here can stop me from taking what I want. Not really. There are a few sealed armors, but I could crack them. Word or claws. I could... if I wanted to be sure. Turn off the power. Turn off the cameras. Lock the doors down tight. All the ventilation. And then let go. Empty the room. Such a mystery. Where did everybody go? A roomful of villains and workers in the basement of a criminal casino. Disappeared into thin air.

My face burns beneath the mask.

I could. It would be easy. Easier than this. Easier than control. Most people here are bad. Could the others be collateral damage? I breathe and wonder what my voice would be like if I got my real tongue back. My throat. Would I even sound like me? Look like me? I don't even have pictures.

Was I even real?

I can't shake my head, the horns would reveal too much, so instead I resume my scanning of the walls and the systems they hide. Focus on that, not on emergency measures that will never, ever be used. Control. Bite down on the temptation and swallow it. I can't allow to daydream, they might try to make it a reality.

Danger.

I hiss, there's a hand on me I did not see coming. A threat, but I allow myself to be pushed into a room away from most eyes except the ones hidden behind that familiar helmet.

"You," I hiss, pulling free, hands up to ward off attacks though they raise their own in mock surrender.

"I don't want to fight," they say, nonchalantly looking around the room. Checking for eyes or ears? The fact that they're not fully focused on me makes me relax somewhat.

"Funny way of showing it." The grip hadn't hurt me, but if I had been Oryx it would have. Careless strength.

"I just wanted a chat, and considering your current persona, I thought you'd be happier in private... Argent." The last is whispered with an almost conspiratorial air and I can't stop the smile. Clever.

"I have to say," I reach up to run my claws over their helmet, curious if they'd let me. They do, which is interesting. Do they know I could lengthen my fingers easily through the cloves? Could grab that helmet in my hand and squeeze? Crack it like an egg? well, maybe not the last. It's robustly built and I still can't feel the systems controlling it because something's running interference. An AI too advanced and hostile for a friendly chat? "You've got balls for calling me out."

"You know I do," they retort, touching my helmet in return. "I like the new look."

"What do you want?" I ask instead of flirting back. This is neither the time nor the place. Too much is at stake for sexy banter.

"Don't tell me you're here for my sake?" They throw out a fishing line, dangling tempting bait I'm not sure I want to indulge in.

"Did you think I was here for you?" I can't hide the smile in my voice. So full of themselves. That makes everything easier. "You're not that important." Shots fired, now let's see what happens.

"Ouch." They place a hand on their chest, feigning a shot to the heart. "That would hurt if we weren't surrounded by so many other luminaries."

"You think I'm here to arrest someone?" I shouldn't have phrased that like a question, stupid mistake, will they pick it up?

"You're hardly the type for a fancy gathering." They tilt their head in judgment. "Though I suppose you're more dressed for a night out this time. The accident with your dress last time was...unfortunate."

"At least you left me your cape." Ah, they think they will make me lose my temper. Good try, but it will take more than that.

"It was probably better quality than the dress," they say in that distorted voice. I can pick up the mocking tone regardless.

"Asshole," I hiss. "What do you know about fashion anyway?"

"That you seldom get what you pay for." They laugh and I realize I played into their hands. Again. Got touchy.

"You'll have to repay me for that one day." I force myself to say it calmly, no anger in my voice. Just a quiet promise.

"I'm looking forward to it." Too intimate to be a threat. A promise perhaps?

"It won't count if you steal it, and trust me, I'll know." Would they buy me something for their own money? If I asked them too? "Do it right."

"We'll deal with that later; right now, I'm more interested in why you've shown up here in disguise." They dismiss my question, and I wonder if I got too close there. Almost touched something real. Something as dangerous for me as for them. No time for that now.

"I'm here on personal business," I say, cutting that discussion short. Can't allow myself to reveal anything.

"I did think you had your own plans." They look at me, I can feel the eyes through the helmet. "The question is what those are."

"None of your damn business." I say it coldly, this discussion is dangerous. Can't allow to let my fun interfere with my mission.

"So, who else of your little friends are lurking around?" They lean closer, wary now. Trying to read me.

"I don't need them."

"Or you don't want them to know what you're up to?" Damn. They are too close to the truth again.

"If you say so." I shrug, projecting indifference. "Are you going to blackmail me about it?"

"They wouldn't believe me anyway," they scoff.

"True. Ortega has faith in their friends." The name slips out, and I look for a reaction. How close are they? The fight at the museum smelled like a grudge matched before I interfered.

"Friends are a liability." They shrug, showing as little as you do.

"Is that really how you feel?" I tilt my head, unsure if it's a lie or not.

"You don't?"

"No." Is that really true, though? Nobody knows the truth. If they did they would be. Liabilities.

"I thought you didn't lie?" Too clever.

"Where did you get that stupid idea?" I do my best to project offense. "You don't know me."

"You always seemed so straightforward."

"That's your problem." I don't let my relief show. Straightforward. Good. Keep thinking that.

"It is." They keep looking at me through the helmet. "You're turning into quite a big one."

"Likewise. But not one we have to deal with right now." I don't have time for this, and I certainly don't have the mindset. This is no time for whatever it is you two have.

"Truce, then? Is that what you're suggesting?" They pull back slightly, and I can read doubt from their stance.

"For now." That's all I can allow myself to think about. The clock is ticking.

"Oh really?" They make a sort of a half-blow, offering me their arm. "Then let me be your escort for the evening."

"That's not funny." I look at the arm, but try to read the intentions. What are they up to?

"It's not a joke." They retract the arm, an awkward move that leaves them looking like they're the one at disadvantage here.

"So you're serious?" I cross my arms, was that actually a genuine gesture? What the hell?

"I suppose it's a bit hard to tell beneath the helmet." They gesture helplessly to it.

"Then take it off," I suggest, stepping closer. They faltered, that means you've got the advantage now.

"Says the woman in the horned helmet." They lean in as well, matching your move "I like my anonymity."

"I wish I knew what that felt like." I run a finger along the edge of their helmet, as if I could map the face under there.

"True, silver skin is not the most discreet." There's a note of sympathy in their voice I can hear even through the distorters.

"Stop being nice," I snap, but I don't step back. "I don't need you to patronize me."

"I'm not patronizing you." It doesn't sound like a lie.

"I guess it's fine then." As much of a peace offering as I can give right now.

"Does that mean you accept my invitation?" They hold out their arm again, with an almost childish hopefulness I can't help find charming.

"I was here first." But I accept the arm, it's good enough camouflage for the time being. "Where to?"

"Where else," they say with a laugh, heading to the place I want to go. "The auction."

[My writing schedule info!](#)

[Jul 10, 2023](#)

Alright, I realized that while I have talked a bit about it on the discord, it's better to have it collected here too. I am now officially a full time writer, though I also have to preface that I am starting that with travels and vacation. This is the first summer we have felt comfortable traveling both due to economic, pandemic and health issues, and so we have had quite a filled schedule. Thanks to my severance pay from work, we can finally afford to visit family in the US, and catch up on things like belated 90th birthday for my partner's grandmother, and a wedding.

So, June was spent visiting parents (who live far away in Sweden), having friends from the UK over and traveling with them (so fun and exhausting), and in a week or so we are leaving for the US for a month. Will be traveling there too. So, not much writing has been done, but lots of planning and taking of notes, which is the part you don't see but will hopefully help me later.

I will be back in Sweden towards the end of August, and thus you can assume that proper writing will start September 1st since I think jetlag will kick my ass. Not to mention the fact that I am on the autistic spectrum and an introvert, so all this interacting and hanging out with people is more work for me than work. Can't wait to be left alone with my writing.

When it comes to the first demo, I have settled for having a limited character creator and having each ending path have their own first chapter demo as I write them. That way you will be able to see what I am doing earlier than if I would wait until every first chapter was done. I have around 55 000 words written already on the first one (guilty ending, stuck at the rangers) but it needs to be filled out with choices and variables. I picked this one to start with because it's one of the more complicated ones, some of the rest nearly writes themselves and requires no code considerations. And you'll get some impostor information early ;)

Thank you so much for your patience, and I am so utterly grateful for your support. This is going to be a wild ride!

[QnA for June is here!](#)

[Jul 9, 2023](#)

Alrighty, took a few days longer than planned due to a stomach bug (oh summer, never change). I will finish the next lore post (the second choice in the poll) as soon as I can!

.....

Are Argent's nanovores always silver or could she have taught/told them to adapt to human skin tones? If she could have, when she was creating her face and body did she make a choice to remain silver based on inspiration from black and white images like those of Old Hollywood actresses?

Argent's nanovores do look like silver in their protective/reflective configuration. She has no control over that. If she had, she definitely would have chosen a more discrete color and tried to look human.

If Shroud had tried to eat Sidestep before the crash, would she have "seen" all the imposters?

Oh hell, for everyone's sake let's hope that Shroud never gets her hands on Sidestep, that will not end well for anybody in Los Diablos.

Would it be possible for Ortega to turn villain, since this is something that's already in their particular cards, without joining Sidestep in villainy? Doing their own thing separate from the Rangers, but still rivals with Sidestep due to their personal choices?

Hmmm. This is an interesting question. I'm not sure. Probably not in the scope of the book, but I can see it happening.

We know Argent is "meh" with civilian!step, but in a hypothetical case, would she have been attracted to vigilante/hero Sidestep?

The more daring/showy ones, sure. She likes style, and civilian!step did their best to be as mundane and boring as possible for quite some time.

Out of the dozen or so people who have gone through the HB experiment, how many do we know?

I would say that three has been mentioned in the grander story.

If Chen had known about Argent's true nature would he have let her join the Rangers or would he've deemed her too dangerous?

Oh she would have been seen as too dangerous. Might have arranged for her to be taken in too, she should be in an isolation facility, if she ever loses control the consequences will be disastrous.

More Catastrofriend questions. Given that it used to be a person. Was what it became just a fall of a slippery slope it was playing with, a conscious choice on its behalf or forced upon it?

It was very much a slippery slope, eventually you can't climb back to humanity even though you might want to.

Did the sleepwalker die as a direct result of the heartbeat experiment, or were they killed after they were found post-experiment-disruption?

Are you sure they're dead?

Was the Farm/SD aware of the weird incidents that occurred at the HB apartment? Were they involved in any of them?

That is major spoilers! Not gonna say a word. Or this might be a big red herring and there's nothing weird there at all. You just have to wait and see.

Will main characters die only if Step tries to have them killed (either by their own hand or delegating) or could they accidentally die as an unforeseen result of a chain of events?

Will any of the planned RO deaths be caused by the SD?

I can't speak for the detail plotting of book 4. However, my goal is to have those kinds of death be the result of character choice, even if that's not who does the deed.

Have Spoon and Blaze met before?

Yeah, they have!

Did the person who created the rat king do so for a personal reason/objective? Or, was it a project conceptualized by the company/association/person they were working for?

It was a project for an organization, and it might be seen as a poof of concept.

Will Sidesteps who missed sniffing out Chen's crush on M!Ortega get a chance to do so later?

Oh yes.

If Sidestep's eyes are green, did drinking void's blood make them even greener and shinier?

Yes. It is a distinctively unnatural green.

What did the voices say to Chen post-HB? Did all HB survivors experience that lingering effect?

The voices whispered of guilt and failure. Every survivor was similarly haunted, being touched by it meant being changed.

How much in percentages is Ortega's nervous system metal vs flesh?

I would say maybe 30% modded?

In the new lore post Chen says "Even knowing what sometimes happens to boosts as they die"— what specifically is he referring to there?

Some boost powers go out of control when the wielder dies. A flame user might combust, others can melt or wither, on occasion even explode. This is mostly true for boosts with strong elemental/destructive powers.

"Part of it was probably still the voices in my head. Whispering."

Whose voices were Chen hearing? Were any of these (1) Sidestep, (2) anathema, or (3) the Anathema that steps meet in their visions/memories?

1 and 2 and many more. Chen carries more bodies on their conscience than most.

Can we please give Chen a hug? Platonically?

I hope Sidestep gets to that point.

Given that in the regene copy ending Ortega seems to be already having doubts, deep inside, about the conclusion they reached, how long will we be able to draw out the fakeself situation?

Not sure, we will see how the story goes.

Has Shroud picked up on sidestep/another Re-Gene being a Re-Gene based on the way they fight/based on certain behaviours? If not, could she?

I don't think so. She doesn't have that analytical mind.

Has Shroud ever heard about sidestep as in the Re-Gene, not the hero/villain?

Yes.

How long has she been on the run?

This is a trick question, ennit?

Does she know/has crossed paths with other runaway Re-Genes? Would she even care about crossing paths with other runaway Re-Genes?

She would stay as far away as she could.

Is the farm actively looking for shroud? She doesn't seem to have been mentioned in the epilogue even if she is "revealed" in the auction fight.

You don't know. But the Farm doesn't like runaways...

Is shroud considered the prize project of another farm handler?

No.

Did Ortega and/or Argent find out who shot Chen?

No. There are some suspicions, and by that I mean Ortega blames HG.

In one of the crash endings Ortega can jump onto a truck and then walk upright on the roof of the moving vehicle. Do they have a mod upgrade or suit feature that allows them to do this (magnets perhaps)?

No, Ortega's just like that. It's a superhero universe.

How big is Mortum's lab, and how many rooms does it include? Are there any particular ones you'd be comfortable with listing?

Mortum's lab is big and sprawling, I haven't made a map or anything, right now it's as big as the story needs to be. And most of it is secret.

When the tracker found the now-missing telepaths, was it the result of a precise, methodical plan, or was it more of a discovery based on chance, like the result of a "carpet bomb" strategy?

It was planned. Mostly.

If what happened to Argent had happened to the other rangers plus Mortum, would they've fared better or worse than her in controlling the nanovores' worst impulses?

Everyone but Mortum and Herald would have fared worse. Both of them would have been on her level.

What's Nocturne's civilian name?

I don't know yet!

This is probably a stretch but - was the Heartbreak apartment built atop a former cemetery/burial site?

Not to anybody's knowledge, but a lot of people died during the Big One.

How rare is having bodysnatching powers? Under which boost category would it fall? Have The Rangers ever seen that power before? Since dampeners don't work on it, do they have any means to protect themselves/other people from it?

That is very, very rare. It would be under the telepathy umbrella, under one of the other branches. It hadn't been seen before, and so far there's no known protection. It is very different from mental/physical control.

Does the Los Diablos Police Department have any spooky reports (official or not) from officers who patrol the Heartbreak building? Or any rookie scary stories about the building?

Oh yes. It has acquired quite a legend by now.

Do 'active' Regenes get 'new' memories from the communal memory jar? Or are those only reserved for freshly harvested Regenes?

It is for fresh regenes, and regenes who have been wiped/recycles. New memories are not added once the re-Gene is functional.

What other responsibilities does the telepathic tracker have other than tracking telepaths?

General reconnaissance and scouting.

What did Locus think about vigilante!sidestep?

A bit if an idol, she wanted to be like that.

In the current timeline, has Locus heard about villain!sidestep?

No. Clever question.

When HG and Sidestep mind-dive each other, Sidestep can unlock the “protected” variable. Was something unlocked in HG’s mind? Did Sidestep leave a trace / close / open anything in there?

Any interaction between telepaths, even as strange as Hollow Ground, is bound to be a two way street.

Building on that - does being "protected" mean that it will be harder to open gates?

If you're lucky perhaps. I'm not going to go into details there.

Now that in some endings Ortega's seen more of Step's skin, have they noticed the tw self harm scars?

I mean, yeah. Ortega is not stupid. And there probably is a conversation forthcoming about that if Ortega ever dares.

Would Daniels parents have preferred it if Josh had survived the boosting process and Daniel hadn't?

A bit, but the boosting was the biggest issue here, not who actually lived through it. Sure, Josh was older, but if the roles would have been reserved, his parents wouldn't have treated him much kinder.

Was Ljungstrand part of the Green Sky cult (or of any of its branches)? Or did they know/were friends/colleagues with anyone who was?

Nope and nope.

Did Ljungstrand keep any tabs on the going-ons with the Green Sky cult and/or its branches?

A bit, just like you do with any threat/strangeness/competitor. But that was never his main focus.

If Argent had not dissuaded Ortega from flirting, what would've happened?

Either they would have become a happy if slightly tempestuous couple, or the world's worst exes. Or Ortega would have disappeared one day...

Does Ortega know Vera? Anyone else in the Rangers know her?

Ortega is definitely aware of Dove, she's done a lot of work in Los Diablos. The same goes for the rest of the Rangers. She might not be a top tier villain, but she's not a newcomer.

Would Armadillo's armor prevent them from getting nommed by Shroud's death touch?

Yes.

What is Armadillo's favorite food?

Sausage, especially spicy ones, preferably barbecued.

Is Armadillo's pain gate functional?

Oh yes.

Was Armadillo's own escape in any way motivated by rumors of others escaping? Such as Sidestep?

Not rumours.

Is heartbreak's body still at the heartbreak site?

if so - are they the one who is "dead and buried"?

That is a good question. What happened to the body? The building was subject to an air-strike, it might have been destroyed. Or recovered. Or parts might be left under the rubble.

If given the opportunity, would Armadillo remove their tattoos or their blue hue?

Since they don't have that choice, it is a moot point. Wondering about things that will never happen is not really Arde's thing. It is what it is.

Does Arde know that I love them and would kill/die for them?

Nope, Arde is not a telepath.

What kind of thievery does Vera specialize in? Tech? Art? Something else? Anything and everything?

Essentially everything. It is both to make money, she has a lot of dependents, and she likes the challenge.

Does HG know about who and what Vera's partner really is?

No. HG knows of Armadillo, but thinks they are a normal boost.

Who would you pin down as more expensive between Ortega and Step, given the former's mods and the latter's artificial creation?

Ortega. At the point of Sidestep's creation, Re-Gene brewing was a routine (if very expensive due to deaths) process. Ortega is still one of a kind.

Is Regina psi sensitive?

No.

Does Armadillo bake bread in their spare time?

Yes.

What was the first non-Farm thing Armadillo ate after they escaped?

Gas station hot dog.

Has Hollow Ground met Armadillo or just Vera in person?

Hollow Ground have met both.

Will there be an option to have our ROs give us a special nickname? I.e "sweetheart" "love", "insert preferred pet name here"?

Yeah, that sounds sweet!

Would Charge still have survived being the Void's obsession in the HG AU scenario? (Where Step gets recruited by HG's organization instead of Ortega)

I dunno. Might have become turned and become one of the Green Sky.

Actually, to add onto that, would the Void have gotten taken down without Step there to play higher-dimensional origami with them?

There were some who might, but chances are that wouldn't happen. It was the underestimating that killed Void, and Sidestep was a very rare combination of lethality and looking harmless.

Since you (Malin) implied Void blood is connected to Mortum's gun:

Is Void blood important because it's crucial to the physical functioning of the gun (i.e. the disintegration/reintegration process)? Or...did it help Mortum come up with design? Perhaps it gave them the perspective shift/insight/knowledge Mortum needed (but wouldn't have gained through other means) to create such a tool?

I would say it is more of the latter.

In the guilty hospital scene, Sidestep can taunt a romanced Ortega by saying they actually think Step being a villain is hot, which pisses Ortega off. Is there any kernel of truth to this, though? Does Ortega think dating a (non-massacre/"afraid" relationship tag, at least) villain is, actually, kind of hot?

I mean, yeah. It is hot. Sidestep knows Ortega too well.

Can armadillo actually just curl up in their armor and roll around as a mode of transportation?

Nope. Not more than a normal human can make somersaults.

What's HG's opinion(s) on rats? (As in the animal.)

Very neutral, they don't think of them much or have an opinion.

If HB never happened, how much longer would Sentinel have served as a Ranger before retiring?

Probably for a year or two longer, Sentinel was gearing up to retire, his wife was pushing for it to happen sooner, but it's such a big part of his identity. Heartbreak was the final push, but something else would have come along eventually.

Is Ortega's Sidestep Scar reflective of which HB scar Sidestep gets? Or is it independent? Are there variations at all? Or just one big Sidestep shaped hole in their psyche?

It is mostly independent, for Ortega there are three main variables. 1) Did Ortega see Sidestep putting the gun in their mouth? 2) Did Ortega see Sidestep [spoiler] 3) Did Ortega [spoiler].

Is Argent's current height a good approximation of how tall she would've been had she not been caught up in the Nanosurge? Or is her natural height different than what she constructed herself to be?

Oh Argent is taller now. Not massively, but a few inches.

Are there any scenarios in which one of the Rangers would willingly apprehend and hand over Sidestep to the Farm?

Yes. Not gonna tell you who or why.

How far has synthetic skin technology come as far as disguises/subterfuge? Are people able to create detailed masks/facial portions that move and feel and work like natural skin, even to a degree that it could fool facial recognition?

Yes. This is a thing that exist. Both facial recognition and fingerprinting is not seen as a very secure way of verifying things, with the medical tech available there are ways around that. Sure, it costs a bit of money, but just like cracking passwords is a thing, so is cracking biometric information.

Does the nutrient goop for the Rat King come in more than one flavour so Sidestep can give them a little treat? (I'm just a little sad Sidestep can't really give the Rat King little food treats like one could with a regular rat.)

The Rat-King sadly has no concept of taste (or touch) for their own body. However, they can experience these things through others, especially through a powerful telepath like Sidestep. So if Sidestep wants to give the Rat-King treats, they need to eat them and let the Rat-King tag along and experience the sensations. A delicious cheese sandwich, some crunchy nuts, peanut butter, there are a lot of things the Rat-King loves. Same with pets. Just think about it and pet your own hand or arm. Seriously, Sidestep is the biggest enrichment to the Rat-King's life.

Has Ortega never worried that being so open about their hostility toward HG might push Step to further keep their secret out of fear of being judged for their family?

Now that would be a smart way of thinking, but Ortega assumed that since Sidestep was a vigilante, they were already on the outs, and they wanted to make sure Sidestep knew they weren't afraid of Hollow Ground.

How many plans does the farm and LD government have in preparation for the dissolution of the FEZ?

A couple. They are betting on one in particular.

We know that bad emotions make Argent control nanovores worse, but strong good emotions like love and affection make controlling nanovores easier?

Nope. That's almost as bad.

What is Herald's opinion on rats and mice?

They are kinda cute? He's not afraid of them.

Did Ortega's father know about Regenes?

Yes, but not in great detail.

Regarding the threat that step believes is coming - is the identity of this threat mentioned in Patreon lore, the books, or not at all in any form?

It is hinted at in the surrounding lore.

Is HG open to giving hugs/cuddles to Step if they ever come to see them as family? 🐼 Would they ever try to thread them if things have been difficult between them lately?

HG is very much for physical touch, so that would happen. As for the threading... that will depend. It is a reflex, though not always acted upon.

HG claims to "make the ground crack under (the) feet" of these people who wronged them. How many people have fallen to such a fate?

More than a few. Enough that people feel it's not an idle threat.

Which (romantic) relationships would get a thumbs up from an HG with a Sidestep with 'sibling' status? Which ones would get a siblingly word of caution?

I mean all the Rangers would be worth a word of caution. That's risky behavior. Mortum would get a thumb's up.

If sidestep becomes an associate of HG and begins to work together more and more with them, I suppose that their inner circle of close associates will notice the resemblance and some rumors will pop up. Will HG shut down these rumors? Will they say sidestep is a relative (if they have a sibling relationship or something)? Or will they tell that the resemblance is just a coincidence?

HG is not afraid of family rumors, they would most likely encourage them.

How does HG's organisation work, are there different levels/ranks and if so what duties would come with the different ranks?

I have not decided that in detail yet, still working on it.

Is HG aware there is a mole in their midst?

Nope.

If an unthreaded sidestep works with HG, will HG eventually realize that they did not actually manage to thread Step? How will HG react too learning this?

HG will notice if Sidestep breaks the thread parameters too often and obviously. How they will react depends on their relationship.

Is the mole in HG's empire someone we've met before??

No.

Is Psychopathor in the same place that Themmy is?

Similar enough.

What did Hood see in Anathema that made him want to sponsor them through obtaining Rangership, besides their powers?

A kind heart and a will to do better, to be better. To help people.

If Sidestep agreed, could Ortega as Marshall also have sponsored them through the process while bypassing some of the official checks(like background checks)?

Ortega would certainly have tried. They didn't have as much pull as Hood did at the time, and things had become more formalized. They might have managed, or it might have led to suspicions being cast on Sidestep.

For the author -- As a writer, I'm just wondering what is a rough estimate of how much money you make from each book? 💰

I've had Choicescript downloaded for a long time and considered writing a game on the side, but I heard that Choice games takes a huge percentage of your pay cut. So I'm just wondering to see if the payout is worth my time learning Choicescript 🤔

Alright. Let's talk money. If you choose to publish with Hosted Games, there are two chunks taken out of the price of the book. The first one are the platform fees. That goes for everyone selling through places like Steam, the Apple store or the Play store. Even if you buy the license and self-publish, there's no escaping that. That's just internet life. Of the money that remains, my royalty rate is 25%. This might sound low, but compared to for example the comics scene or the book scene, it's higher than what I've got in either. You don't get rich from writing.

So what do I get for this? I get access to the CoG fanbase. I get someone who handles all publishing to all different platforms, who does sales, who pushed bug updates, who handles all the actual code, stores saves, keeps track of the myriad cover formats and sales copies. I also got editing/sensitivity reading but that's not included in all Hosted games I think. For someone who is a writer with NO knowledge of programming, that is huge. I would most likely have to pay someone to do all that for me. For me, it is worth being published by Hosted Games. Especially as a Swedish writer without a fanbase publishing my first game in english, I needed to be a part of a company where there would be people willing to buy the story without being told what it is first.

If I had been a programmer first, perhaps I would have made a text game and published it on itch.io. If I had friends who were programmers, perhaps I would have partnered with them and made something else together. But I have worked with people and published things before, and that also splits the money in many parts. The lure of Hosted games was the fact that I didn't have to rely on anybody but myself to make the game/story, and I could understand how choicescript worked. And I wanted that initial first wave of people to get the ball rolling, because I believed in what I was writing, I just needed to get it in front of people.

And that is the problem with looking at percentages and prices. If you sell something for 10\$ (after platform fees) and publish it yourself, and you sell 100 copies you have 1000. *If I sell something through hosted games, and instead sells 1000 copies due to bigger exposure, I have 2500.* If I sell the game cheaper, for 5\$ but manages to sell 2000 copies instead I still have 2500\$ but an extra 1000 people have read it and can talk about it with their friends. That's why I had Rebirth's price so low initially compared to similar length games.

So do I make money? Yes I do. And combined with the patreon, I make enough to live on. Without the patreon, it has been a nice income boost, but it would not have been enough to live on. I'm the sole provider in our household, so I need more than if I was on my own. I also now have a 1/2 time employee with help of some government subsidies (he's autistic). He's helping me with some other projects that will see the light of day eventually. Am I representative of the average choicescript project? Hell no. Am I the top earner? Hell no. Am I in the top twenty? Probably.

So don't learn choicescript to make money. That ain't gonna happen with any creative project unless you're very well connected or lucky. Make a choicescript game because you find it fun and an interesting. Because you want to tell a story or make cool mechanics. Just like writing books or making art, this isn't a shortcut to financial security. That said, I have sold a LOT more choicescript games than I would have ever sold books, so for me this is a lot more economically viable.

If Ortega hadn't had such a negative experience with nanovores in the past, would Argent have told them the truth about herself?

Probably. She suspects that Ortega might know, or at least guess something close to the truth, but as long as nothing is said out loud, they can both pretend everything is fine.

How good were Hood's shields? 🙄 If you had to give force/subtle stats, what would they be?

Hood's shields were good, but nothing special. You could get by them with either 70% subtle or 75% force.

We know the reasons why Blaze doesn't like Ortega, but is there anything specific about Vincent that Ortega hates/isn't fond of?

Nothing about Blaze personally, mostly because Ortega picked up (but misunderstood) the tension with Chen. There was also the case of wanting to be the top dog, they were natural rivals in many ways.

What would you say were Thunderhead's stats?

Thunderhead would be around 60% Force and 80+% Subtle. She would be less skilled at single target manipulation than Sidestep, but better at influencing crowds, mass amounts of people.

Is the static of the mind of someone with epilepsy - is it like a shield, a barrier "surrounding" someone's thoughts? Or is it that the static is the thoughts, and they're simply in a "frequency" telepaths are incapable of accessing?

It is more of a disturbance of the frequency. Like when you are trying to listen to one radio but it constantly searches for channels and most of them are static. It's impossible to stick to one.

Is this the same for someone on the numbers drug?

The numbers are more of the barrier or shield. The best description would be that it lowers the saturation of thoughts, so everything turns gray and misty and it's hard to make anything out.

Theoretically, if Sidestep had 100% in Force/Subtle, would that be sufficient to overcome the epilepsy/numbers drug? Or would that take a completely different skill that Sidestep doesn't possess/isn't aware of? Or is it simply not possible period?

Everything is possible. Like with many things what's needed is to understand what the issue is and how to counteract it. It's less of a high number and more that more knowledge is needed.

If it is theoretically possible, was Ljungstrand capable of this? Could he read the mind of someone on the numbers drug?

No.

If the Regenerator were to completely "free" Argent of her nanos, would that affect her technopathy abilities in any way?

They might become stronger since she wouldn't have to focus them on the nanovores most of the time.

A few questions on dampeners: do they work like radio waves?

Yes, I would say that's similar enough.

do they block telepathy/psionic abilities alone, or do they influence other things as well? Can they interfere with things such as cellphone signals?

They can interfere with certain electromagnetic fields. This includes cellphones, certain radio frequencies and some mod implants. This is one reason they are not widely used all the time, and there's little warning signs where they are used, just like there are for people who use pacemakers in strong electromagnetic fields.

Frequent use of the numbers drugs can have nasty side effects; can dampeners cause any damage to people too? do they "feel" similar to telepaths as the numbers drugs? Which one has the potential to be more powerful/effective at blocking telepathic influence?

Dampeners are loud white noise, painful and unfocused. Numbers are a dead, grey mist where nothing can be detected. Dampeners can cause damage to people with mods who can be disturbed, like pacemakers or other implants.

Where were the Guardians during the gala attack? Did any of them make an attempt to get there to help take down the villain?

They weren't at the gala, and the attack was over too fast for them to interfere. If there had been a hostage situation or taken more time, they would have arrived/been deployed.

Do sidesteps gates serve the same purpose pre-Heartbreak and post-heartbreak?

Hmmmm. Yes.

Going back to this love-oblivious Sidestep question: what about Blaze? 🙄 Would he be more subtle or forward about potential flirtations? Can he be poly?

I don't see Blaze as a poly person, he's too secretive to that I think. Not saying it can't happen, but there would need to be deep trust involved. And he's more forward when it comes to flirtations, he's not overtly subtle.

During the heartbreak event in rebirth, it's said that all nine gates were opened. Whether or not this actually occurred during the hb event itself - is it accurate to say: at some point during the hb experiment to steps capture, all nine gates were opened. This allowed something to enter sidestep. Sidestep closed the nine gates, which kept said entity trapped within these gates.

I would say... partly correct.

Weird question, but can Step read the minds of crustaceans?

Nope.

Are there any animals, singular or species, that understand any human languages fluently? Has Sidestep ever met them?

I honestly don't know. Not fluently. Human language is not the end all of communication.

How would you rate the HG trio's tech savviness?

Nocturne is the one who's good at that, not the other two.

Will we have a talk with ROs/Rangers about our civilian identities? I imagine the Squatter/Friendly squatter one will be particularly dramatic or amusing depending on the step

Yeah, we are at that point when things like that might start coming out. Not for everyone though.

How many boosts like Argent are there, who became a boost despite not taken the boost drug?

More than you'd think. There's at least a dozen, probably more with smaller boosts.

So... the auction scene... is Shroud getting that hand back?

Nah. That hand is gone.

How did Jake eventually come to be a hitman? How early on was Nocturne's public reputation negotiated to be what it is? Did either of them prefer something else at the start?

Jake fell into it because he was good at it. His powers added to that, and he didn't mind a fight. He'd spent his youth doing other, safer but less paying jobs and liked the respect that came with stepping up like this. Nocturne's reputation is carefully curated, she is exactly how she wants to be. She's in charge of it.

Has HG worked with or met Skyraider?

Oh yes, he's useful on occasion.

Question- how would Nocturne react to suspecting a serious threat had immediately seen through her facade, but not saying anything, in a first meeting? What's her approach towards them from then on?

Danger, danger. She would keep them close and either win them over or decide whether it would be safer to eliminate them. She's not as nostalgic as Hollow Ground.

Did Vera want to be a hero in the past? If money wasn't an issue, would she still want to be one now?

Vera sees herself as a hero. For her, the city of Los Diablos and the companies that run it is the villain. She's from one of the "autonomous suburbs" that has been incorporated in Los Diablos as the city has been rebuilt. Her parents and the rest of her family still live there, and there's a constant struggle to keep as much of their independence as possible. They have their own schools, firefighters, a small hospital, water treatment plant, power plant and other things needed. For the longest time they resisted paying the expensive "fees" to be connected to the greater Los Diablos area, but for the last decade they have had no choice. This is a big financial burden on the local council, and one of the reasons that Vera does crime. In her view, it's only fair that the companies and banks "subsidize" the costs. She had high hopes that the current Mayor might be someone you could talk to this about since she has a similar background, but it turns out she's in the companies' pockets.

Would Vera and Rosie make a private gossip group about Step? 🐼 There's a lot of interesting stuff in there... especially if they're dating a Ranger. Who of the henchmen would join?

Gossiping about a telepath? Rosie might do that but Vera wouldn't be that stupid. She would say nothing she didn't want found out.

Will there be a chance to address Sidestep's chronological age with ROs/the Rangers? Of course they were an adult in all of the ways that matter (body/maturity), comparative lack of life and relationship experience aside, but it's interesting to think that the old Rangers were fighting alongside someone/Ortega was potentially flirting with somebody who had technically been "born" only ~10 years before. If you don't think it will come up in game, can you tell us a bit about what their feelings on the subject might be?

I'm not sure if it will come up in game, we'll see how discussions go. I don't really think this is something that will really be on the top of either Sidestep's or any RO's list of things to talk about? There's a lot of other Farm/Re-Gene trauma that will be more interesting to talk about once/if Sidestep ever opens up.

Can Sidestep buy cheaper versions of their own powered armor for the mob boss crew?

Not sure what kind of upgrades there will be in game. The question is not about can, the question is about whether it would be fun for the story and feasible to code.

In a similar vein, since Nocturne thinks HG's threading helped her survive Boosting, could Sidestep do something similar if any of the crew wanted to Boost?

That is interesting. Potentially Sidestep might actually be able to do that for someone.

Where does Vera fall on the wealth scale? Did this rescue excerpt significantly change that?

Vera would be around well-off to comfortable. A lot of her income goes back to the neighborhood, she's not one for luxury mansions.

Since Argent can rat Step out in Retri, is there a chance we might be able to snitch on her too and let the rangers know about her secret involvement in the auction?

The hard thing will be how to do it and have proof, without revealing yourself. Also, she could always use the excuse that there's nothing wrong with infiltrating villain spaces. Ortega does it often enough.

Will we be able to choose step's regene name or will it be based on our stats? Or is that too far in the future? And iirc someone asked if in book 3 we'll be able to increase/decrease our telepathy stats, will it be like in book 2 where its only our stronger stat or will it be like in book 1?

You will be able to choose it! But as always there will be some to choose between if you can't decide. You will be able to increase/decrease your telepathy stats more in book three. There are some traumatic events planned there that can move things a lot more than they moved in book two. In both directions.

In the last Q&A, you said that "Originally I had not planned on having any career variation..." In this case, I was curious which career path is the "original one" that every player would have gone down had you not decided to expand the scope? Furthermore, if it hasn't been asked already, why did you choose the villain career paths that you did?

I would say that the original book career path would have been closest to hero hunter. The one I had planned originally for the game was closest to anarchist. I choose the four paths I did just based on classics. There was a fifth, called "wrecker" which I quickly folded into anarchist because it wasn't specific enough.

If you mc crash and innocent breakout, what were the rangers arguing about before coming to sidestep's room?

Hehe maybe we will talk about that, but I think it's fair to say that it might have been about Ortega's recklessness.

In a hypothetical scenario, what would have happened with a guilty MC and Ortega if they hadn't crashed?

It might have come to blows, or it might have come to a talk. It would depend on choices.

Lord Ember seems to be more in touch/close/friendly with his associates, but he doesn't know Shroud is a Re-Gene. Do they get along? Does Lord Ember suspect anything? How's their relationship?

Shroud keeps everybody at arm's length, which is understandable. She's pleased being a part of the operation and being as feared as she is. Lord Ember has no complaints, she shows proper respect.

In Retribution if you choose to wipe or alter the shrinks memories it raises Ortega's suspicion of Sidestep. I'm curious as to why? Is Ortega speaking to Dr. Finch about us after the fact or listening in to our conversations or something? Because simply stopping therapy doesn't raise Ortega's suspicion so they have to be finding out something is wrong somehow.

Remember that Ortega is paying for this, so they do have some contact with Dr. Finch. And since Ortega is chatty, they picked up on things being weird if Dr. Finch suddenly blanks on who Sidestep is. Ortega did not listen in, that shit is private.

How did HG father die?

Heart gave out. HG suspects it might have been drug related, but their older brother who was present denied anything like that.

And if HG father had survived would that have affected what their criminal empire would have looked like?

Yeah. It would have been smaller, and a lot more focused. HG is the ambitious one here, or perhaps we should say, HG and Nocturne.

Since HG oldest brother survived the boost drug was his powers similiar to HG?

No, he had geokinetic powers, and was the original Hollow Ground.

Considering the younger sibling was their mother's baby, did their arrest and death affect HG and their mother's relationship?

Oh yes. That soured everything, and they never really reconciled before her death.

And was their mother worried about younger sibling stealing things, considering how young they were and that she had already lost her husband and one or two of her children?

Yes. If she had her way, the youngest sibling should have gone legit and got an education. They had the money for it now. Sadly, the younger sibling idolized their older brothers and wanted to be just the same.

Did the oldest brother have time to get to know their younger sibling? Did he feel more distance toward his new sibling considering even bigger age-gap?

Yeah, but there was more distance there since he was more busy, and the age gap was larger. HG was the designated babysitter.

What kind of stupid things HG has done because of their family scar?

Especially when younger, lots of stupid revenge schemes, making sure that there was nobody who could get one over on them.

What kind of roles do non-SD re-genes have?

There are many roles needed on-site for the Farm. There is training, medical treatment, assisting scientists and even things like construction or cleaning. Cuckoos are technically not part of the SD, and there are scouts who fulfill similar roles. Some are trusted enough that they are part of the patrols that makes sure the Farm is isolated and not threatened in any way. Other regenes have proven to be very good at helping newly decanted regenes to integrate into their powers and roles. They function like teachers, though the scienteists see them more like service dogs.

What happened to the Mortum's gun if Sidestep got captured at the auction?

Probably stolen by someone in the chaos.

What are some of the first rules among re-genes that new re-genes learn from the older re-genes?

How to speak and how to never, ever show humans that you're more than what they think you are.

Is it possible to gift HG Ortega's recorder Sidestep picks up after the puppet car crash?

That might be possible, yes.

Can we still lose/raise Mob boss and anarchist's leadership/political influence in book 3 and 4?

Oh yes, that hasn't really come into play much yet.

If Sidestep forced Jake to feel through their painful memories, how badly Jake was shaken by it?

Quite a bit. That's not something he's used to.

What was Mortum like as a child?

Quiet. Focused. Studious. A bit shy. Very polite, though that might be due to the circumstances.

In auction attack if Sidestep makes guard attack the guests Mob boss Sidestep thinks that it will openly damage HG reputation. How badly did that actually affect HG reputation?

Oh that is a BIG hit. The trust has been broken, as has the illusion of safety. HG is supposed to keep the peace, not have guards volatile enough to crack and start shooting at people.

And what was HG and Nocturne's reaction to Sidestep who attacked their casino openly and causing a lot of damage?

Anger and fury. Nocturne wants Sidestep's head for that. HG is more forgiving once they meet.

Out of curiosity how did streetmart sidestep interact with their contacts in their hero days? Did they wear a mask or is this something up for a headcanon?

I will leave that to headcanon.

You mentioned before that nobody likes Shroud. Is it because of their powers and because they might have eaten fellow re-genes?

Especially the latter. Shroud was used against other Re-Genes, and they remember.

Also did Shroud choose her current name? If so, why did she choose on her current name?

She did, she wanted the whole gothic vibe, partly because alluding to a corpse makes her skin less noticeable, and allows her to wear veils and bandages and cover up.

You mentioned before that HG decided to trust in Nocturne, because it was a first time they met someone who could understand their way of thinking. What way of thinking did HG see in Nocturne?

Someone who saw the big picture, how things fitted together, and what to do with it. Also, a deep, lonely callousness and a need for contact.

Is it possible to Sidestep crash at Ortega's birthday party as their villain persona?

I mean that will be one path!

What kind of powers would Ortega have gotten if they had taken boost drug instead of getting modded?

Probably would have died, I think I have answered this in the past with different things, but as the boost drug is unpredictable I will answer again. It might have been something like flight, or better physical capabilities.

Did Ortega's mother have any thoughts about sidestep's new villain entrance?

She didn't watch the gala, and she's not planning to.

Before Sidestep escaped first time had there been any other escapee and if so how recent?

There has been occasional escapees both before and after. The latest before Sidestep's first escape was maybe six months earlier?

And final question. Was the farm setting in the OG story too? Did it change much from the OG story or is it pretty much the same?

The Farm was not a part of the og story and regenes did not exist. It had an entirely different setting.

In regards to Ortega's debts and them basically being an indentured servant superhero, is that something we can use to convince them to go villain?

I mean it is a big argument both for and against...

And to add onto that... if any of the Rangers were to go villain, would they choose a new alias or stick with their current ones? Or is that spoilers?

Some would stick (Charge, Lady Argent), some would change (Herald and Steel).

Ortega has mentioned that their pastself might have had problems with being in a queer relationship. How exactly would a younger Julia/Ricardo react to knowing that they might end up in relationship with another woman/man?

Excited but also scared. Mostly of how other people (especially their father) might see them.

Is it just their nightmares that Sidestep telepathically broadcasts? Or other dreams too? Like for example... *ahem*, the hrny dream about Ortega?

I think the nightmares are stronger and more invasive for certain reasons.

Will we be able to learn more about the gates in Sidestep's head without opening them?

Yes.

Anathema is transgender if Sidestep is, right? Is the same true for Hollow Ground?

No.

I'll preface this one by saying that I'm not expecting or asking for another RO, but it's just something I've been curious about. In writing romance options for Sidestep, was there ever a point in time when you were considering having another re-gene as an RO?

No, originally you wouldn't encounter any in a calmer setting until the last book. And I felt that would be too late to get any chemistry.

Have the media and the Rangers assumed that the new villain's "disintegration touch" is a boost power?

Well, the clever ones can guess that this might be a Dr. Mortum project (you bet there are armor spotters out there), and Dr. Mortum already had a reputation for building a disintegration gun. So that's what most people think is the cause, a weapon Mortum built into the armor.

What did Ortega's friends think of their closet key being some weirdo they picked up off the street? Did it effect Chen's distrust and resentment of a male Sidestep?

I mean Ortega was rather weird themselves. It makes sense in a way, peas in a pod and all that. And yes, it definitely added to Chen's distrust.

Will Ortega figure out on their own that they were effectively Sidestep's new handler, and would it change how they view a romantic relationship with them?

That won't be something Ortega realizes on their own, but it might be something Sidestep tosses at them. Ortega is just incapable of seeing Sidestep as someone who would need or obey orders, and they certainly wouldn't see themselves as having been in a position of authority.

If HG had been Sidestep's first real human contact would they be better or worse at acting human?

I would say different. HG could have helped a lot with threading, but Ortega's forthrightness allowed Sidestep to try things out in their own time.

What are Sentinel's kids names and did Sidestep know them?

I haven't decided yet! Sidestep doesn't know them, they were born post Heartbreak.

Will it be possible to play with a high suspicion Ortega in a "I know you know I know you know" sort of way?

Yep.

What time of year does Rebirth start? (winter, spring, summer, fall)

I am working on a timeline, it will be up eventually.

When a re-gene is tattooed is it done in sessions or all at once? Does it hurt like normal tattooing, or is it more printed on the skin?

Since the re-gene is out cold during the application, there is no pain, and it's unknown how many applications. There seem to be more of a printing process involved.

For the drivers, in a strait street race who is more likely to win Dr. Mortum, Ortega, Bo or Nehal. Whos more likely to win if they cheat?

Dr. Mortum if it's in their own car. If everyone has the same type of car, Bo would win.

What did the wider villain community think of our museum debut? What was the talk in those circles the day after, and how did it vary based on how we may have gone about it?

It depends on the outcome. Blowing it up got applause and got noticed, stealing things was more routine, just another thief who got into a scrap with the Rangers. If the fight was showy with monologue that would have got some applause, there's a lot of people who would want Charge taken down a notch.

Have any of the Rangers (current or previous) gotten into dumb situations with their powers when they've been drunk?

I mean yeah... Ortega has shorted out more than one place. Herald knows better than to drink and fly now. I would say that the only ones who NEVER got into something like that when drunk was Sentinel, Argent and Chen. Both Sentinel and Argent needs a lot of focus for their powers, and doesn't get drunk because of it. Chen on the other hand can just park his armor and not drink and drive.

Who do the staff at the Rangers HQ think our character is? Is there an official story that's been told?

It depends. If Sidestep works with the Rangers, they have been presented as a retired consultant (vigilante). Otherwise they are just yet another one of Ortega's friends, who then turns out to be connected to other Rangers (especially if RO's).

Similarly, what's the employee rumor mill like regarding our character? Do those rumors change depending on if you're pursuing a romance route with any of the Rangers?

It is the romance routes that really makes the rumor mill start. That's always of interest to office gossip, especially if it's someone like Herald. It depends a lot on how Sidestep is and how often they are there, but people will speculate and make up rather outlandish things, especially when people are trying to keep things secret.

Step says "they wanted to see how much I could take" referring to the SD after their recapture, did they do like classic torture? Like physically harm them or was it more like telepathic testing pushed to the extreme?

It varies depending on your headcanon, but it was both. The telepathic powers were the most interesting, but the body was a way to get there.

Would a huge range and strength make them more likely to label a telepath as Omega or would it be more like a special ability?

That would enter possible Omega territory, though people are wary of assigning that label.

Did the SD know that Step (the hero) was a re-gene before Heartbreak happened? Or did they just grab Steps body after they fell because they were someone who was affected by HB and they wanted to do tests and then they were like, "Hey! It's our escaped cuckoo! What a surprise!"

The latter. It truly was chance. "Hey, a free telepath". Nobody had thought that a regene could become a hero!

So double boosts are rare but what are the chances of a double boost getting the same or a similar power to their first boost? Like they got double fire powers or something?

I would say that is the most likely, and would work very much like growing stronger through a traumatic experience.

Step seems to have survived a LOT of stuff, like they should definitely be dead by now, medically speaking. Since you've said most boosts sort of get secondary powers with their boosts, is it possible that Step got increased durability/endurance? Or do they get by sheer will alone (and maybe some superhero science?)

I would say that this is a superhero world, so there are a lot of suitability just in that. But yeah, I think Sidestep would count as having a bit increased durability/endurance. That is a trait that the Farm always tries to encourage in their regenes.

Mitchell's guide to the Catastrofiend video 2, is whoever is in the cell a Puppet for the Fiend? Or is it possible that they are possessing the Fiend?

Nope. The Fiend doesn't possess people.

In a lot of HB texts, eyes are mentioned a lot but there's a focus on there being no mouths. Is this a literal "I have no mouth and I must scream" coming from HB? Was the HB entity actually trying to do harm (like evilly) during the Incident or was it just trying to get people's attention?

The lack of mouth is entirely intentional. As for Heartbreak, we're going to learn this in Revelations, so I won't go into that here.

The camera mentioned in the Mystery's of the West Coast, was that set up by the person who's keeping an eye out for telepaths for the Farm? Since the person in the story mentioned that psychics would probably be drawn to the HB site.

Good spot. It was indeed connected to that project.

Will the return to the HB site be a solo adventure or will a certain....zappy person come with us? Or maybe they'll find us there? Honestly though, I don't care who comes with or anything, the way you write about the HB site is soooo good and the vibes are terrifying. I'm so excited, like it's the part of the next book that I'm the most excited about!

I think people can come with, we'll see what vibes I want to bring.

Also, for the hell of it, do they graffitied eyes at the HB site tend to...move?

Nope. It just looks that way.

The stuff with the Core being messed up and the kidnapped telepaths, is it a world affecting issue or just a Special Directive/Re-gene problem?

I would say it's a SD issue mostly.

Does flying everywhere have any consequences for Daniel's health? We've mostly seen him land out of politeness and when trying to blend in; does he actually never need to walk, or does he still need to get a certain amount of steps in to keep his legs in shape?

Yes. This is Danny's biggest issue. He could very easily suffer the same issues as astronauts in space, and has a rather grueling training regiment to keep in shape. He knows he should float/fly less, but it's easier to do than to not do it.

Can you elaborate a little on what happened during the blazesave? I assumed that Rat King deployed the grappling hook themselves, but Blaze says "I got it." Why would they need help with the hook, I'd assume it couldn't be operated externally anyway? What did they say to Blaze specifically? He asked about a voice he heard, not just a sound, so I assume they communicated with some sort of words and not just feelings/emojis?

The Rat-King managed to scream loud enough so Blaze picked them up, he wasn't sure what he heard, it was more of a feeling that his mind translated to words. What the Rat-King needed help with was the aim, to move Sidestep's arm upwards so they could fire. They could not override muscular control and take over the armor to that extent.

Will there be similar options in the future for a suitag Sidestep to try to commit "suicide by hero," so to speak?

Most likely.

How do the best-little-partners-in-crime stay mentally stimulated when they're not in direct contact with Sidestep?

They are a little bored then, and spend a lot of time playing among themselves. If they have the option, they try to work out how to operate the armor (it was a surprise they were working on). They might also be playing with any rats in the base (the tunnels are great!) or antagonize visiting rooftop seagulls (luxury base).

Height, nickname, and fashion are all great customizations added in Retribution. Will there be similar additions in Revelation? Are there customizations that you considered/wanted to add, but either just didn't or couldn't because of coding limitations/etc.?

I think it's less about could, but seeing a use for them. While I see the baseline hair/eyes/etc as something needed to make a character feel you, the others have more weight in the story. If I come across things that makes sense in the code, I will add them.

Do you anticipate there ever being an option to either work on or worsen Sidestep's chosen vice? Or will references to them be affected by scar/gate levels? How did you settle on the ones that made it into the game?

I do plan on having Sidestep be able to deal with the vice, but I don't think it's going to be a number game. It will probably be more like *if vice = "sober" for someone trying to break a alcohol habit and so on. And I settled on some common ones that I personally have (except smoking, that was my dad).

Thank you so, so much for this game and all of the hard work you've put into it. Along with it just being super fun, what with all of the different variables to consider and the huge differences between different playthroughs, and the world being interesting and the characters being lovable (every single one of these assholes is living in my head rent free rn) it's also just so... Cathartic? To be able to play this fucked up and often deeply relatable character who can still get things done and have people who care about them, to be able to make the choice to try to get "better" or just keep moving? Idk if that makes sense but yeah! I hope that you're doing well and taking care of yourself, thanks for always taking the time to answer questions!

Thank you so much! I am taking care of myself, haven't got as much written as I want yet because I promised myself a summer vacation for the first time in years and I am mostly keeping it. Will be going to the US for a month in a couple of weeks to see family, which will be fun. In the meantime I am collecting scenes like a magpie and writing down variables and paths. Hopefully that will make the actual writing smoother once I start for real.

How exactly does Chen's military rank work? I recall him being a Sergeant in Sidestep's memories, but he's a Captain now as of Retribution. I'm under the impression from his patreon story that he was discharged before becoming a Ranger, so he no longer gets promoted up in ranks or can become an officer in the army. Or, is it some hand-waving thing since he's technically a federal agent? Maybe never even left the army?

He was promoted to captain (honorary) when he became Marshal. He's technically still in the army, he's in a weird spot being a federal agent and all. One might say that he's assigned to the Rangers.

Is it a huge coincidence that the The Farm, where the clones are grown and trained at, has the same name as the CIA's facility that trains their intelligence operatives?

It does? I honestly did not know that! So yep, a coincidence!

Do the ROs have their own wikipedia page? If yes, who edits and fact-checks them? And how would they feel about it?

I would say they probably do, and it's the Ranger's media team that makes sure that everything is up to date.

What are all the martial arts each individual ranger knows and which do they each prefer to use?

Ortega: Aikido, jiu jitsu, boxing. They know bits of a lot more, they've been picking up moves from many places but those are the main ones.

Chen: Learned to fight in the military, very utilitarian ones build for situations that can appear in combat. Close to LINE and MCMAP. A bit of Krav Maga.

Argent: She is completely self-taught, but her style has a lot more in common with knife fighting and fencing. She has had several martial arts coaches since joining the rangers, including swordfighting. She doesn't stick to a single one though.

Herald: It would be better to say he knows self defense than martial arts.

Was sidesteps DNA used to make more regenes/boosts?

Yes, but Sidestep is the only survivor.

Who would win in a fight between ortegas father and a fighter or tactican sidestep? Does height play a role in the fight? How tall is ortegas father?

I would say that Sidestep would win, because Sidestep truly doesn't fight fair. Even a short Sidestep. Doesn't have to be tall to break a knee. I would say that he was tall as well, probably an inch shorter than Ortega.

Will Marcia ever meet Elena or ortega? If so how would their interaction go?

Ortega is likely, and Marcia will be charmed. Heart eyes all the way.

Will Marcia potentially become a mother figure toward sidestep in the future?

Up to Sidestep.

If ortegas father was still alive what would've been his thoughts on his son/daughter dating a villian more specifically a regene?

Absolutely NOT!

Furthermore, what would be his thoughts on sidestep beating or punching ortega? Would it depend on sidesteps and ortegas gender?

It would depend on that, yes.

Could sidestep been holding back when they were ever fighting or sparring with ortega or any of the other rangers past or present?

Of course! That's all headcanon.

In Retribution Ortega mentions that sidestep has never killed, does this mean sidestep has previously killed and simply chosen not to disclose this to Ortega? Or is Ortega in some sort of denial?

Sidestep never killed openly. Some situations are weird, like the Void, but Ortega didn't see that as killing. Whether Sidestep has done that and not let Ortega know is headcanon. But Ortega is also looking at the past with rose-colored glasses.

Rats only live 4 years or so. So our best girls are already old wise rats by rat standards right? How long can they live as they are now? Who would want to take over the world without them X'D also what do they think of normal rats these days. How do local rats feel about their presence?

Technically, the Rat-King should be long dead. However, they are older, and show no sign of cognitive decay. It is possible that there is something in their setup that allows the brain to remain healthy for longer. It does include cleaning systems for protein buildup and neural cleansers so it is quite possible that they have many, many years ahead. They do enjoy talking to normal rats, though they do feel weird. They think differently now, and have a wider perspective. The local rats like them.

What is Vera's and Sky-Raider's opinion on the different villain paths Sidestep can choose to take?

Not sure yet, I am still feeling out their personalities.

Why did Vera decide to take the boost drug?

She will have to tell you that, I'm not going to reveal it in a qna.

What kind of leader did HG consider their oldest brother to be?

Strong. Driven. Stern. An inspiration, though that cracked towards the end when he saw that their brother was human.

What do Vera and Sky-Raider potentially think of Rangers low reputation?

Just funny in a kinda rival sports team laughing at their old rivals kinda way.

Were Vera and Sky-Raider in the Los Diablos when the Nanosurge and Heartbreak disaster occurred?

Vera was, Sky-Raider wasn't.

Does the old man know HG as the Kingpin of the Los Diablos or as supposedly normal criminal/someone tied to a criminal world but not ruling over it/real name?

The old man have no idea HG is the kingpin.

Could the Farm be able to create a Re-gene with powers like Jake's intangibility, Vera's pigeon-control/shapeshifting, or HG's red-threads? What boost process would the Farm try to use to get powers closest to those three particular powers?

Yes, but not intentionally. Jake's is probably easiest, applying pressure/pain would be a good trigger for escape. The other two are too weird, maybe having the regene be boosted inside a chicken coop or something. Not hygienic.

If Argent were to use the Regenerator, would there be anything she would be reluctant to lose of her current form/abilities?

Yeah. She loves those parts. The durability. The blades. The strength.

Do pigeons consider Vera "one of us" when she's in pigeon form or is she kind of a Weird Pigeon that looks like pigeon, but doesn't feel like one?

Hmmm I would say that they do notice the uncanny valley, but it doesn't scare them.

Could Sidestep's telepathy be able to recover HG's memories of their younger sibling?

Yes.

What would have happened if Lady Argent had recognized Sidestep as the one who possessed her during the first meeting at the Rangers HQ's?

Violence. A fight with Ortega who would leap to Sidestep's defense. Possibly with the rest of the Rangers.

What villain impressions, similar to ones she can have about Sidestep, Mia would have of the Rangers if they were villains?

Depends on what kind of villains. She would be scared of Argent probably. Maybe of Steel. Herald might get the doubtful is he really a villain at the start, while Ortega would be interesting.

What was Nocturne's opinion on the last mayor? What did she think of his assassination?

Crude but useful. His assassination was an annoyance.

How would Locus define what a hero is?

Someone who tries to help people at the expense of their own safety and happiness.

How would Nocturne and Jake define what a villain is?

Someone who doesn't care about hurting other people or breaking the law to take what they want.

In one Q&A it was started Ortega is afraid of losing Sidestep, does that only include losing Sidestep in a physical sense (death, capture, disappearance) or is Ortega also afraid of losing their connection/bond with Sidestep?

Mostly the first, but increasingly the latter.

What kind of boss did Deadeye consider HG's oldest brother to be compared to HG?

Better. Easier to read. Less afraid of causing waves.

What kind of person did Nocturne want to reinvent herself as?

Someone confident and strong, without doubts and worries.

How would Herald react to an MC named Kestrel, or any other bird? Or a bird themed MC if that could be possible?

I mean birds are cool, of course people would be named after them.

in one of the endings of Retribution if the puppet suffers the accident and Sidestep returns to his own body Mortum realizes that there is something wrong with the puppet because they do not recognize the laboratory, but if Sidestep suffers the accident and mortum rescues him, that same puppet appears in Mortum's laboratory making coffee, so this same puppet managed to trick Mortum even without knowing the laboratory and without him finding it strange?

A puppet wrecked in the crash is in a lot worse shape than someone in a whole body. Both from shock, pain and other things. Just like Sidestep is a mess after the crash, but smooth as normal if their body is whole.

a prev Q&A mentioned Ortega plays guitar. Electric or acoustic?

Acoustic mainly.

My bad if this has already been asked but like Julia and Ricardo, what differences are there between f!Mortum and m!Mortum? Personality, experiences, or otherwise

I feel that there are less than between Julia and Ricardo. The path of a scientist/academic combined with a journey into gender questioning and transness leads to a more whole person than Ortega clinging to the binaries.

In truth or dare story sidestep mentioned leaving someone behind. Have we met or will we be meeting that person?

Yeah, possibly book four.

Considering Sidestep has come back from the dead from the rangers' perspective for almost a year, was there any heartbreak anniversary since we've met Ortega in that dinner? How would that go with Sidestep around? Especially for Ortega and Chen? Will there be one in the upcoming book?

That was the one day of the year Ortega stayed in and just didn't talk to anybody. Chen did pretty much the same. Not sure if we will touch on that in this book, I need to check the timeline where things land. It's not impossible.

Did Sidestep know about that Heartbreak movie that was on the table the interviewer talked about in the short story? Would Ortega and Sidestep talk about it? Or is it up to headcanons?

That is headcanon.

How would chargestep as a couple spend their time and at where since Sidestep came back? Dinner at Hoots was one time thing and Ortega's place has only become an option towards the end of Retribution. Was there any car trips?

It is a bit up to headcanon, but I can imagine several ways to hang out. Car trips are always fun and nicely air conditioned. If Sidestep can get over the fact that they can't quickly walk away in case of an argument. For fun, having a wealthy Sidestep being the one with the car for once. Same with motorcycles. Both riding with Ortega and having your own. There are a lot of fun roads around Los Diablos. Walks suits them both if the weather is cooler. Like the meeting at the beach, they are both restless and likes to be on the move. Streetfood dinner and outside bars, some beers under the moonlight. Maybe even dancing when nobody's watching.

If Sidestep never had met Ortega since their comeback, how would Chen react seeing them on Boneyard? '

Shock. Chen would thought he saw a ghost. Might not even have tared to approach.

Will we have an option to reject Hollow Ground just because they're Ortega's archenemy?

Oh yes. Let's be loyal and petty here.

Is there a reason why we can't say "I don't kill civilians" in Ortega conversation after the villain reveal?

I'll have a look at that, might be an option that needs to be there. The good thing about no saves yet is that things like that can be easily adjusted.

If I remember correctly, there was a mention of telepath scientists and/or handlers in the Farm disappearing. Was it because since they can read Re-genes' minds and saw they're not mindless weapons and had issues with that fact or was it related to other telepath disappearances?

It is related to the latter.

Are Ortega and Chen aware of the telepaths disappearing? I assume not or they would warn Sidestep about it. Is Hollow Ground aware of it?

No on all three counts.

Would Argent go to see the Barbie movie?

Yeah! And drag Ortega along.

Are there any escaped blue Re-genes who picked up a hero or villain career?

Yep.

Does Argent prefer not to drink because of the nano friends? Or are there other reasons as well?

It is mostly the nanos.

Considering months have passed since our villain debut, was there any encounters with Charge and/or herald that was not in the book?

I leave that to headcanon, I can imagine smaller ones that never came to blows.

How did (especially high approval) Argent and Herald react to Ortega's faker theory? Did they have a discussion about it?

They have talked, but I want those revelations to be in game. So you have to keep sweating.

What does Mortum think of Chargestep? Especially after the villain and/or re-gene reveal?

It feels rather self-destructive for both of them, but love can be that way.

Sorry, one last question. If a telepath got to an extremely high strength level and they completely dropped their shields, would they be able to hear things like the brain telling the lungs to keep working or other subconscious stuff like that? Or not exactly, because they're not "technically" thoughts?

Technically they are not thoughts, and in fact we are taught to dismiss these thoughts inside our own mind. Thus it would be very hard for a telepath to pick them up in another. However, Sidestep is already manipulating those in others, like in the fight with Argent when they are influencing her brain to stop breathing until she faints, or seeing things that are not there. Sidestep just doesn't think of them as thoughts.

Because they were the Marshal did Ortega have to speak at Step/Anathema's funeral? Did they choose/were allowed not to if it was too much? What would they have said? (obviously pre Vernon smackdown unless that happened early on in the funeral)

There was a planned speech from Marshal Charge, but that got canceled after they saw in which shape Ortega was. Nobody in their right mind wanted to give Charge a platform at that moment, the mayor at the time held the speech instead.

I'm sorry if this has been asked before (still happily going through all the QnAs from the past few years) but does listening to music (especially loud, over-ear headphones) help Step block out telepathic noise?

Yes, it does. It's a bit like listening to one song to stop an earworm you can't stop thinking about.

How do the HG trio feel about the more ruthless sides of their jobs?

None of them would have got this far if they had issues with that. They're not nice people.

What's Vera's relationship like to other birds? (E.g. Corvids, sparrows, *seagulls...*)

It depends. Small birds are ignored, predators and seagulls are hated.

What was it about LD that made Jake think adapting to it was his biggest challenge to date?

Foreign country, different customs, lots of weirdness that was starting to become it's own thing. Los Diablos is deeply weird in certain areas, both because of the Big One, boosts and mods being common and open, and the rampant capitalism.

I've been thinking about that one scene in Retri- say if Hollow Ground found out Step (who they'd come to love as family) was killed and cut up/sold for parts. What would they do to the offending parties, especially considering the parallels to their youngest sibling dying + not even having their body to bury? Would they make a grave for Step? If yes, where would it be? What if the perpetrators were members of their own empire?

Would HG wage war with the Farm if they killed Step?

Oh Hollow Ground is very willing to go to war for family. A grave the least they would do (probably near their property). It wouldn't matter if it was the Farm or their own men, whoever was behind it would pay.

About Ortega's, Argent's, Herald's, and Steel's identities: what does the public know of their names? What about other heroes/hero teams? (E.g. The Guardians, other Ranger teams)

It is not open to the general public that Ortega is Charge, but at this point it's not really a big secret. What I would compare it to are those rock stars who are masked (Ghost, Lordi). The average man on the street might not know who's behind the mask, but it's not hard to find out if you're a fan or want to do some digging.

Chen both has it easier and worse. Since he's wearing armor, most of the public sees the armor as the hero, not him. Could stick anybody in there. However, being the Marshal means that he needs to interact with the government as Captain Wei Chen, so he's pretty well known there. Nobody would recognize him in the streets though.

Lady Argent is Lady Argent. She can never escape that. Her "Angela Smith" name is being kept secret, but the closest to her know.

Herald doesn't wear a mask, so he's easily recognizable even as a civilian, especially since he flies a lot. However, everyone knows him as Herald. Very few know the name Daniel Sullivan, even his civilian friends only knows his hero name. A few might know he's called Daniel, but not his last name.

How did Thunderhead play into what her namesake implied, given she was actually a telepath?

She didn't play into anything, it was her name and she explained nothing. Strangely enough few people questioned her authority.

When Argent accidentally eats a person because of the nanovers. Does the body and mush actually end up in her stomach or does the nanovers somehow have their own little bodies with tiny digestive systems?

The nanovores transform the biological material to new nanovores. That is the mechanism that can allow them to swarm. There is leftovers, but it doesn't end up inside Argent. but as an unrecognizable biological film covering the surroundings.

When Argent eat anything at all does it end up in her stomach or just magically disappears into the nano's?

Some ends up in her stomach, some is eaten by the nanos before that in the mouth and upper throat.

I am right now struggling with writing a scene were two close friends have a fight were both are just being unreasonable. And i just... have this huge trouble getting it down on paper. The arguments feel strained. And i was wondering, do you have any specific advice?

Try to avoid having a set path or endpoint for the argument. If you already know how it will end, you keep writing to get there, which means that the actions and words might feel stiff. Instead, focus on the start. Why are they arguing? What feelings are they bringing into things? When I write arguments I only write dialogue. Nothing else. Just words. No indication of who's talking at all. I try to get into the flow and the anger, not focusing on making a scene, but trying to get moments. I keep writing, reusing similar phrases, trying to be mean, angry, horrible, rerunning the same moments with new words. I usually end up with something ten times as long as what will eventually be used, and cuts it down to the key arguments and phrases. Then I add the other surrounding writing. Sometimes an arguments ends in a reconciliation. Sometimes it ends in walking away. Sometimes it makes things worse. Sometimes it doesn't end the way I planned it, but that's characters for you.

What was the rangers (the old ones sunstream, anathema, etc) first impression of sidestep.

Anathema felt kinship, they recognized the skittish alienation of someone unused to people. Sunstream was nervous, there was something slightly off about Sidestep that she didn't know how to deal with. Sentinel was impressed, that was someone who would go far.

Why is the farm or the head women of the farm (forgot her name) so focused on sidestep? Sidesteps been causing nothing but trouble for them and costing a lot of money too. They might also leak information abt the farm as well. The farm has like hundreds of other regenes that are just as organic right? What makes our sidestep special?

I will resist my urge to say spoilers and pull the veil back a bit on that. First, there is the fact that Sidestep is a telepath. As has been mentioned in the book, telepaths are becoming quite rare. Second of all, Sidestep has had a growth curve that's near exponential in power. That is both a danger and an opportunity. Third, Sidestep exhibited new, unexplained powers during their last escape, and nobody can agree exactly on what happened. Fourth, Sidestep is at this point the only survivor of a particular experiment the Farm is increasingly desperate to get right. Fifth, nobody just walks out on Regina, she doesn't take kindly to that kind of behavior.

How did ortega feel about the fact that sidestep looks exactly like HG little brother/sister? Did it not affect ortega at all? Ortega seemed very chill with it or were they just putting on a mask?

Oh it affected Ortega greatly, especially at the start. It was a shock, but Ortega has a great poker face, and Sidestep had no reason to understand any of the reactions as to something other than how they looked (too young, ugly, pretty, scarred, whatever their particular hangups was). However, as Ortega had more time to think about what was going on, they came to respect Sidestep for breaking away from the family and turning vigilante.

During the scenes where we could possibly tell our ROs that we've been sexually violated before during the farm days, everyone seems shocked except Chen? Is there a particular reason for his reaction or nah?

Chen has been in the army. He's a lot more cynical how people can behave when they have power over others. He's also less prone to showing shock as openly as the others.

What's the rangers and (HG, nocturne, jake, Mortum) favorite food?

I think I have answered something similar in the past, so let's see what I pick this time! Ortega: Chicken mole enchiladas. Chen: Congee with chicken and ginger. Argent: Fettuccine Alfredo. Daniel: A roast beef sandwich. HG: Cioppino, though any seafood is good. Nocturne: Baked potatoes with bacon and chives. Jake: Some sweet and salty pork barbecue. Mortum: Macaroni au gratin.

Very weird question, do any of the rangers have a ideal type of a partner? (Ortega seems to like ppl that are assertive and talks back from my impression lol)

Very vaguely, Ortega likes people who stand up for themselves and to them. Chen likes people he can be quiet with. Argent likes people who impress and intrigue her. Daniel likes complications and danger.

What are the Ro's favorite weather? Does Ortega hate the rain? Does the cold give Steel have trouble with his mods in cold weather?

Ortega is not a fan of rain. Even disregarding their mods, heavy rain meant staying inside as a kid, and that was never fun. They prefer sunshine, and have a high tolerance for heat. Chen is not fond of cold, it is uncomfortable because his mods gets colder faster than he does, and that can hurt. If he was in colder climates more often, he would have to use mods with internal heating, to make sure they wouldn't hurt him. He likes rain, as long as it's not too heavy. It's meditative and clears the air. Argent doesn't like sunshine. The heat can be painful, and she reflects a lot. She prefers overcast, some light clouds and she is thriving. Daniel doesn't like rain. It's miserable flying weather. He likes winds though, there's something exhilarating about a windy day. Mortum truly doesn't care about the weather, except thunderstorms. Those are bad, and can lead to damages. If he had to pick, a sunny day with a light breeze would be good.

Would the regenerator work on Steel or Ortega? Would they ever consider using it?

It would certainly work on their scars. Most likely not on their bodyparts, at least not as it is right now. I think neither of them would risk it right now, Chen might have to think a few times.

What would have happened if HG had seen sidesteps face before Heartbreak. Would they have investigated? Tried to get in contact? Done what Ortega feared that they did in Retribution? Would HG have saved sidestep if they'd found out about them earlier? Rather then the Farm taking Sidestep would HG have sent an ambulance to take Sidestep away? To integrate them into their family slowly while Sidestep recovered?

If HG had seen Sidesteps face earlier, they would have investigated and tried to initiate contact. Ortega is really nervous that they did that in Retribution. HG would not have been able to act fast enough to do anything.

How would Savannah react if in some point Ortega showed up/find out or had to take us to our base?

Nervousness. Probably a bit giggly. Offended and would not let them pass unaccompanied.

Their charm probably wouldn't work on her...but would she notice that Their sappy is working on the MC? and what would she think about it?

She might notice, and it's not her job to have opinions on their boss's love life. But also... really?

Does Savannah like the criminal gang?

Yeah, she likes them well enough.

What She think of each one?

Pelayo is professional and polite, Nehal should be in school, Ward is kinda scary and ZaZa is a charming scoundrel.

Can we have more interactions with them? her being our fancy secretary for our villain group

Hopefully! There's a lot of things to fit in one book, some side characters are sadly doomed to that fate.

I don't know if this is still open or not. I'm sorry if this has already been talked about but like, are any combo of romances possible? I'd love to do a M!Mortum, Chen, and NB!Step romance just because I like chaos, curious about if that's possible. For some reason I get the impression that the two might get along? I assume it's not possible though if you were trying to do an F!Mortum or F!Ortega with Chen considering his sexuality.

When it comes to polys I honestly don't know until I have tried to write them! Mortum is a wind card here, I haven't written them with Chen yet so I don't know how they would do it off.

One other question I had was if Mortum could allow Ortega or Chen to take the 'villainous' path considering their proficiency with technology. I believe that in Retribution we can ask about modding, so they might be able to keep the upkeep.

Mortum would certainly be very helpful in their villain path... if such a heel turn could ever be trusted.

In the path where one of HG's goons is wondering how to cut up Sidestep to sell off... how much of that did Ortega hear?

Enough to want to take them out.

So uh, has Skybright dated before? Is she into romance at all?? Can I give her a smooch? 🥰

Skybright is secretly very engaged, but she's keeping her relationship secret. She thinks her superiors would not approve. In the meantime she continues to live happily with her flatmate. Just gals being pals.

How did you conceive of the HG trio? What were they like when you first drafted them? How have they changed since?

I truly don't know. Hollow Ground was there in the book, but Nocturne was just arm candy and Jake had little personality. The rest just happened as I was writing and answering questions about them. Every new fact that popped up required more grounding, so you might say they grew organically. There was no pressure to have them in a specific way in the story, so I could go with what felt fun. They were not intended to be a polycule, but that just happened.

[1.2.2 Dignity Regained](#)

[Jul 4, 2023](#)

(The rest of the Dignity is Overrated snippet, Dove rescue, guilty Ranger capture. Around 6000 words. PLEASE NOTE: The original snippet (<https://www.patreon.com/posts/1-2-2-dignity-is-84628779>) is updated with new content too! I suggest rereading it first, it's more info about who hired Dove)

.....

(reprising last of Dignity is Overrated because the end of it has changed)

.....

"You're still getting paid," you point out, fingers sore.

"If I had known exactly what the cargo was, I would have done it for free." You're not sure that's true, but she likes to believe it.

"Not cargo," Armadillo says again. "You really need to start thinking about your words." The ASL key lets you unlock more nuance in their speech, using Dove's understanding as a dictionary.

"I'm sorry." She lets out a breath and rummages around in another suitcase for a coverall as well, marked with a new logo you're not familiar with. A moving firm? "And could you not cut me down when there's people who understands what you're saying?"

"Enough of family that they'd be hurt by your words as well." They use the gender neutral, that's common among Re-Genes. Other people call you it.

"Shit." Her mouth creases in a worried smile, and she looks directly at you again. "So I didn't misread the situation then. You're like them." She nods at Armadillo.

"You didn't," you admit, still shaken by the unexpected acceptance by the Re-Gene. "Cuckoo. Infiltration unit." And normally beneath notice for someone like Armadillo.

"You didn't tell me they made those, Arde." She looks over at them, and they shrug.

"I don't tell you much. That's safer."

"They're not wrong." You hold out your hand. "Once I get my call, you can forget you ever met me."

*if verabhired

"What?" She acts shocked, her hands as mobile as a Re-Gene's. "You know I'm good at my job now, don't tell me you wouldn't have work for me in the future?"

"Depends on how expensive you are." But she's got a point. If you plan on expanding your influence, you need more allies. Even if they are freelancers.

"Oh, trust me, I'm expensive, but I'm worth it."

*if (((oht) or (cht)) or (hght))

The chuckle is gleeful, and you catch a stray thought that you don't think she intended. She got paid alright, but not just by your crew. There were others putting up money to get you out of here as well, just how much money did she make tonight? "And I'm willing to work for a cut if I like the job enough."

*else

Her smile is confident. "And I'm willing to work for a cut if I like the job enough."

"Or the employer, I suppose." You meet her gaze.

*if oht

Is this what Ortega meant? Did \${he} hire her? And did \${he} pay more or less than your crew?

*if hght

You also catch a whiff of an assumption on her thoughts. That you are one of Hollow Ground's. It makes your eye twitch, but you don't bother correcting her thoughts for now. The fact that Hollow Ground also paid her is interesting. Looks like whatever caused the crash was not orchestrated by \${hghim}. No sense breaking you out then.

*if rt

You knew you could trust \${hghim} to come through for you.

*else

Unless it's easier killing you when you're not kept by the Rangers. You did see \${hghis} face.

\${swear}.

*elseif hght

She's associating you with Hollow Ground. Did \${hghe} also pay to get you out of here? Even without digging, you can sense that's the truth. Interesting. Looks like whatever caused the crash was not orchestrated by \${hghim}. No sense breaking you out then.

*if rt

You knew you could trust \${hghim} to come through for you.

*else

Unless it's easier killing you when you're not kept by the Rangers. You did see \${hghis} face.

\${swear}.

*else

Someone else paid her. That much is clear. But you can't pull out exactly who, at least not without digging deeper. And you don't have the focus for that right now, not with your legs screaming at you. Someone she wants to pretend was never involved. Someone she prefers not to think about.

You're not sure you like unknown friends like that.

"I am discerning with my employers, life is too short to suffer assholes." She shrugs and opens one of the containers, searching for what turns out to be a burner phone. "And you knowing the truth about Arde makes things easier." She hands you the phone.

*goto hirefuse

*else

*goto unknownhire

*label unknownhire

"What?" She acts shocked, her hands as mobile as a Re-Gene's. "Here I am rescuing \${villain_name} and you don't even want to know who hired me?"

*if known_telepath

"I'm a telepath," you remind her coldly. "Do you really think I don't already know?"

"Oh, I didn't think about that." She keeps a straight face, but you can feel her thoughts take a skittish turn, like birds take off in the presence of a cat. Truth be told her thoughts are harder to read than most, something distinctively bird-like about their tangled nature. But your gentle prodding makes the thoughts you are looking for surge to the surface while she's rummaging for a burner phone in one of the containers.

*if verahghired

"Though I suppose it's not that secret. We work for the same boss after all." She hands you the phone.

*elseif veraohired

"I didn't ask any questions, your secret is safe with me." She hands you the phone.

*else

"I wonder if he did, or if he counted on you finding out." She hands you the phone.

*else

"I can make an educated guess." You know it's useless to sound too curious about these things, if you're lucky your lack of interest might draw some more information out of her. She doesn't seem to know you're a telepath, a careless thought will reveal more than her words.

*if verahghired

"Well, having friends in high places pays off." She shrugs and opens one of the containers, searching for what turns out to be a burner phone. "And since we work for the same boss on occasion, we'll probably run into each other again." She hands you the phone.

*elseif veraohired

"I can imagine. Must feel nice to have people willing to break the law for you." She smiles and opens one of the containers, searching for what turns out to be a burner phone. "It's almost sweet, if you ask me." She hands you the phone.

*else

"Oh, I really doubt that." She chuckles and opens one of the containers, searching for what turns out to be a burner phone. "Not gonna lie, I could hardly believe my ears." She hands you the phone.

*goto hirefuse

*label hirefuse

"Thank you." You take the phone, keeping your face cool and collected.

*if veraohired

Why her? It doesn't surprise you that Ortega would know people who could break you out, but is there anything more between them? You press against her oddly structured mind, but you don't find anything deeper. A job. She likes Charge. Flashy. Never been in direct conflict. Paid well.

So that's it. You look down at the phone, suppressing a grimace. Ortega's willing to spend a fortune on breaking you out, as long as \${he} doesn't have to sully \${his} hands to do it. A message as clear as any where \${his} loyalties lie.

A final favor. You shouldn't expect anything more.

*elseif verahghired

Hollow Ground. Looks like whatever caused the crash was not orchestrated by \${hghim}. No sense breaking you out then.

*if rt

The feeling of relief is as surprising as it is welcome. Trust. Not something that comes to you lightly. It made no sense that \${hghe} would betray you after you agreed to work together, but you're used to living a life of paranoia. Trust nobody.

But maybe this time you can make an exception.

*else

Especially not paying a small fortune to do it, you know that tangling with the Rangers doesn't come cheap. Easier targets if you're more interested in money than personal grudges. Maybe Hollow Ground actually spoke the truth about working together.

Unless...

You force yourself to keep quiet, despite the spike of paranoia driven into your heart. No sense breaking you out if \${hghe} was responsible for the crash. No reason to... unless it's easier killing you when you're not kept by the Rangers.

You did see \${hghis} face.

*elseif verachired

Are you understanding the implications of her thought? You look down at the phone, pretending to study it while you try to unravel her thoughts without being noticed. Being hired in secret. A great amount of money, but not enough to go up against the Rangers. Not enough to take the risk. Unless...

She truly thinks that the person who hired her was the Marshal himself. Cautious. In disguise. But this is her job, and birds are chatty. Easy enough to check with some presumably innocent bystanders when he left.

Is she right? Did Marshal Steel really pay a criminal to break you out?

It sounds preposterous. But she believes it.

Was that why she took the job? Because it would give her blackmail material against the Marshal?

No. Because she was curious what kind of person would make the Marshal take that kind of risk.

*else

*if wealth = "rich"

You're not too concerned about her fee. Pelayo did the right thing, you can afford to lose a bit of money in exchange for your freedom. Being rich has it's perks.

She never even questioned if she would be paid, you're working in the same field, of course she would have paid attention to your exploits.

You can afford her.

*if (((oht) or (cht)) or (hght))

The fact that more than one person wants to pay to get you out of here is just icing on the cake.

*elseif wealth = "well-off"

This is going to cost you. You don't blame Pelayo for hiring her, money is no good if you won't be around to spend it. That's why you've been saving up, for moments like this.

He did the right thing. You can afford her. Barely.

*if (((oht) or (cht)) or (hght))

Part of you are annoyed that she'll collect money from more sources than you. The other part is quietly amazed that there are others willing to pay for your release.

Should you be grateful?

*else

You can't afford her. You don't know how Pelayo talked her into it, but you know the state of your finances better than he does.

You're going to owe her your life and your freedom. Does she know? You brush your mind against hers as you look down on the phone.

*if (((oht) or (cht)) or (hght))

Yes. Yes she knows. But since she's already collected money from other parties interested in your release, she won't lose out. It was worth giving the impression that she might be working for cheap to sate her curiosity.

*else

She does. You work in the same field, she knows what you've been doing, and while she can't chart your expenses, she can make an educated guess.

You can't afford her.

And yet she agreed, knowing that a promise of future payment and favors might hold little weight when it comes to villains. Why did she do it?

You're not sure. Maybe she's not sure herself.

"Do you want some privacy?" Vera gestures to the phone. "You know, for calling for backup."

"I have no way of scanning for bugs, this entire truck is probably wired. Possibly recording us." You look at her, but from the widening of her eyes that doesn't seem to be the case. "Whatever privacy you'd give would be just for show. Let's get this over with. Where are we?"

"Below an underpass, not far from old Jefferson Park." She looks over at Armadillo. "No traffic this time of the night. You mind taking a look around for anything off? My birds are sleeping this time of the night." Her gestures look more worried than her words reveal.

"I'll make sure everything is secure." Armadillo stands up, letting out a pained breath as you can see their skin ripple as the change rushes over them.

It's fascinating to see, this close up. The metal plates shifting through the skin, the skin turning rubbery and hard. Everything locking together with a soft, inorganic sound. No tattoos on the armor, just a sleek shine, wet with bodily fluids, not oil.

It hurts. Especially the changes to the head and skull. You can feel it even through the quiet void of their thoughts. It hurts a lot, but the pain-gate shuts it down to bearable levels.

You miss that feeling.

"Sorry," Vera offers, and you realize that she knows it hurts. Armadillo has told her. Has trusted her with something Re-Genes hides from humans at all costs. Their weaknesses.

*fake_choice

#Their humanity.

Re-Genes are tools. Not soldiers. Weapons. You are not supposed to feel. To hurt. To admit to things like that means you'd risk being seen as broken. Defective.

Broken Re-Genes don't live long.

The fact that Armadillo has trusted Vera with this means that they doesn't see her as a human. As a threat.

But as family.

#You never dared. Not even to Ortega.

You never dared to let on how much things hurt, even with the pain-gate. Pretending it was a scratch was easier than dealing with being seen as weak.

Ortega did that already. Worried. Fretted. Wanted to help. Take care of you.

It was a dangerous temptation. You never dared to fall for it. Not back then.

You're not sure if things are different now.

#You remember how hard it was to admit things like this.

You remember how hard it was to admit that you hurt. That you weren't perfect. That you might need help.

You remember the fear of rejection. Of being seen as weak.

You remember realizing that maybe you were allowed to. Be weak. Be helped.

You remember Ortega's hand, pulling you to your feet.

*if ((veraohired) or (oht))

\$(!{swear}). It's the same now, isn't it?

You thought you had grown beyond being helped. Grown beyond \${his} will to help you.

"I'll be back soon." The signs are more quiet in their deployed form, reduced to the minute gestures you remember. Vera picks them up regardless.

"We'll be here," Vera says with an upbeat sign.

Armadillo moves to the back of the van, a pale glow lining what would be their throat and chest. Sensory? Offensive? You're not sure, this is a configuration you haven't seen before. The light dims as they slip out.

Leaving you and Vera alone.

"I'll check the scanners up front," she offers, giving you some small amount of privacy. "Arde will keep an eye out, but it doesn't hurt to make sure."

"True." You don't doubt that, a terror-beast who has stayed on the loose long enough to make human friends won't be sloppy. And, even though your mental powers are near exhausted, you would pick up on an attack before it happened. You hope. "Let me know if you pick up something suspicious."

"Will do."

She slips up front, and you allow yourself to drop back on the bunk with a groan of pain once you're alone. You can feel your body shivering with the effort of staying conscious, the pain nearly overwhelming now that you don't have to keep your mask on.

Show no weakness.

There's blood in your mouth where you bit yourself as you were thrown out the window, and you bite yourself again to bring clarity back. No fainting. No throwing up. You can't afford to. Not yet. You can do this. Breathe.

Breathe.

[i]"It looks clear."[/i] Vera's voice through the speakers.

"Good," you say, though you don't know if she'll hear. A reminder nonetheless that you need to stay focused.

*gosub henchcall

You put the phone down, rubbing your hands together. You had clenched it tightly enough that it's left marks in your palms.

[i]"Arde will keep an eye out from a distance."[/i] Vera's voice crackles. [i]"They'd rather avoid more people seeing them."[/i]

"Makes sense," you say, now certain that she can pick up sound from here. Probably listened in on everything.

It takes a minute or two before she makes her way back inside with you, carrying what must be a portable console for the van's scanners. "I don't think there will be any trouble, but you never know."

*if tech_savvy

"I hope that's passive listening devices," you try to make out what they might be from what you can see of the console.

"Of course." She sounds affronted. "We've gone quiet, nothing getting broadcasted that's out of the ordinary."

*else

"You've done a good job keeping Armadillo from the limelight," you say, trying to remember what you can about them. Not much. Dove is well known, her partner... less so. "I would never have suspected anything out of the ordinary."

"I could say the same about you." She smiles thinly. "I had no idea."

"Paranoia is useful in our line of work, I suppose." You try to relax, but it's hard. All you want to do is faint.

"I would say any line of work in this town." She keeps en eye on the scanner, and for the first time you get a whiff of awkwardness from her. Small talk is harder than action.

Don't you know it.

You wait for your ride in silence.

*page_break

Finally, Vera looks up with a smile. "There's a car approaching. Still some distance away, but moving slowly. You think it's your ride?"

*if boss

*goto veraboss

*elseif rosie

*goto verarosie

*else

*goto verabo

*label verabo

*if known_telepath

"Yes," you say with a sigh of relief.

*else

"Better be," you say, though you know the truth.

You can feel Bo's approaching thoughts. They're always slippery when he's driving, hard to mistake for someone else. "I'll give him a call, let him know what to expect."

"Yeah, don't want anybody going trigger happy on us." Vera puts down the scanner, you can feel her tension.

"Not going to happen." You call Bo, and he picks up right away.

[i]"Approaching destination, boss. I see a parked truck Looks dead, but my scans says otherwise."[/i]

"That's us," you say, once again reminded why he works for you.

[i]"You're not alone?"[/i] Bo's voice is cautious, you can sense his suspicion. Is this a trap? Are you a hostage? Why the reason for this convoluted pickup?

"I'm hurt," you admit, brushing away his suspicions like cobwebs. He's a cautious man, that's what kept him alive and out of jail so far. "Badly. I've had help getting here, don't worry about them. They're professionals."

[i]"Shit. I'm pulling over now."[/i] He hangs up, and you can feel the nervous anxiety.

You groan, letting go of the phone as you gesture to Vera to open the back. If Armadillo is playing hide and seek, you need a second pair of hands to carry you out. "You got a stretcher in here?"

"Sure do," she says, standing half behind the door as she avoids the lights of the approaching van. "As long as your driver plays game."

"He will," you assure.

Bo does pull over, just as instructed. You can feel the hesitation, he doesn't like this one bit. Smells like a trap. You can feel the quickly suppressed urge to draw a weapon.

"It's fine," you call out through the open door. "Just a bit indisposed. Going to need some help to get out of here" You gesture to your legs.

"Shit," Bo curses. "Wasn't sure if you were involved in that crash downtown." Interesting. You didn't tell him any details, looks like he's good at adding things up. "You're sure you're okay with showing me your face, boss?" He's trying not to peer into the darkness, but he's curious.

"We're at the point where I need to reveal some secrets," you admit with a sigh. Luckily nobody questions why he believes you so readily. Trust is an easy thing to pull forward, especially when it is about something he already wants. Be a part of something. Be trusted.

"Well, thanks for trusting me." His eyes go to Vera, who is pulling out a lightweight stretcher. "Looks like I wasn't first on the list."

"No," you admit. "\${puppet_name} knows."

"That ain't \${puppet_name}." Bo frowns. "Where have I..."

"Hello there, Boris." Vera gestures to the stretcher. "Mind giving me a hand with getting \${chim} on here?."

"Dove." Bo sighs, but acquiesces. "Didn't know you were playing search and rescue?"

"I would like to say I'm making my dad proud," her smile is crooked. "But this is truly just for the money." She is lying about that. Interesting.

"You two know each other?" You can sense no threat or ill will from either of them.

"Yeah," Bo admits. "Been her driver a few times. Not in years though."

"Got a regular partner now," she says with a shrug. "No need to hire extras as much." And less risk of discovery for Armadillo.

"Glad to hear you weren't at each other's throats." You make a pained grimace as you look at the stretcher. "You're going to have to lift me over on it. Try to be gentle, my legs are a mess."

"Not sure there's a gentle way to do this," Bo mutters. "It looks bad."

"It feels worse. Just get it over with."

You just about manage to hold back a scream as they move you to the stretcher as gently as they can manage. Not gently enough. You nearly pass out, whatever reserves of strength you had are almost depleted.

In comparison, moving you over to Bo's van is easy. It's not going to be a comfortable trip, but at least you're almost back at your base.

"I'll be off then," Vera says, jumping back onto the street. "I suggest you get a good doctor who can keep their mouth shut, this wasn't exactly good for your legs."

"You mean unlike jumping out a window?" You can't stop the sarcasm.

"Fair," she laughs. "I'd say send me the bill, but please don't."

"Don't worry." You lean back and look up at the ceiling. "Not the worst accident I've been in." Gallows humor has never failed you. "Get us back, Bo."

"Alright." Bo closes the doors, leaving you in the dim light. Neither you nor Vera said goodbye. You doubt this is the end of it. Too many things you need to investigate once you're back to normal.

Armadillo. You can't just forget that ever happened.

[i]"Uhm, Boss?"[/i] Bo's voice through the internal speakers. [i]"I didn't want to say anything in front of Dove, but I actually don't know where I'm going."[/i]

"Fine. Leave the speakers on, and I'll guide you. Should have let you know months ago." Just in case. Being cautious is good, but sometimes you need a helping hand.

You've been so reliant on your puppet. Hopefully once you rest, you'll be able to slip back in. You've got work to do.

The van starts rolling, and you grit your teeth at the vibrations. On the road.

*page_break Finally

*goto fusedrive

*label verarosie

*if known_telepath

"Yes," you say with a sigh of relief.

*else

"Better be," you say, though you know the truth.

You can feel Rosie's approaching thoughts. Tense. Nervous. She's not used to driving such a big van. "I'll give her a call, let her know what to expect."

"Yeah, don't want anybody going trigger happy on us." Vera puts down the scanner, you can feel her tension.

"Not going to happen." You call Rosie, and she picks up after a few signals, sounding out of breath and frustrated.

[i]"Shit! Sorry boss, nearly dropped my phone. Scared the hell out of me. Is that you in the shady truck?"[/i]

"That's us," you say, trying to stop yourself from smiling. "Just pull over."

[i]"Alright. So I should be expecting others? Just checking, I don't want to punch anybody that don't need punching."[/i] Rosie sounds relaxed, but you can hear the unspoken question. Are you a hostage? Why the reason for this convoluted pickup?

"No need to punch anybody. I'm hurt," you admit, brushing away her worries. She's protective of you. Huh. You must be in worse shape than you thought, the feeling doesn't annoy you. It's almost touching. "I've had help getting here, you don't worry about them. They're professionals."

[i]"I get it. Will be there in just a sec."[/i] She hangs up.

You groan, letting go of the phone as you gesture to Vera to open the back. If Armadillo is playing hide and seek, you need a second pair of hands to carry you out. "You got a stretcher in here?"

"Sure do," she says, standing half behind the door as she avoids the lights of the approaching van. "As long as your driver plays game."

"She will," you assure.

The light under the overpass is dim, the headlights almost blinds you as the doors open. Rosie shuts them off immediately, but you don't need eyes to see. Good, you're seeing nothing but spots. Vera was smarter, keeping in the shadows of the door.

"Is that you, boss?" Rosie peers into the dimly lit van, confusion coloring her thoughts.

"A bit worse for wear," you admit as you brush away cobwebs of suspicion and doubt. Of course this is you, just without your armor. "As you can see."

"Not used to seeing you this undressed," she says with a nervous smile. "Feels a bit indecent."

"We'll both live." You reinforce her confidence. This is \${villain_name}. She knows this now.

"Of course," she looks you over, shaking her head. "Damn, who the hell messed you up?"

"A car."

"Seriously?" She barely resists tapping one of your casts as she climbs into the truck.

"Not my proudest moment. And I wasn't wearing my armor."

"See," she straightens her back, "I wouldn't go outside without if I was that soft. No offense boss, but you could have died."

"I am aware of that," you say, not sure whether to be offended or amused by her worry. "But I didn't. And you get the bonus of seeing my face finally."

"Yeah," she says with a grin. "Somewhere behind the bruises. Speaking of..." her eyes narrow in Vera's direction. "What are you doing with her?"

"She broke me out and got me this far." She recognizes Dove, which makes sense.

"Hey, I could have done that!" Rosie sounds hurt.

"Breaking into the Rangers' headquarters?" Vera chuckles. "Don't think so. You were never subtle, Riveter. And I don't think you could have taken them head on."

"Of course I couldn't." Rosie scoffs, taking a step towards Vera. "Unlike you, I know my limits."

"And that is why we don't work together anymore." Vera crosses her arms. "No hard feelings."

"None." You know Rosie enough to know that's a lie. "It's not like I'm lacking work. And whoever that big lug is you're running with now seems to work out fine."

"We need to get me out of here," you interrupt before the argument can escalate. "Before anything happen."

"Shit, yeah." Rosie looks down at the stretcher. "You look about ready to faint, boss."

"I'm planning to. Just not here."

"Of course, I'll get you back to the base." You can feel Rosie light up at the thought that you did not trust Dove enough to have her take you home directly. But you trust her.

"I think both of you will be able to move me to the stretcher and not make things worse." You're going to have to arrange for a physician as soon as possible, you're not sure how much more damage has been made by your less than gentle escape.

"Alright, Dove," Rosie looks to Vera with a faint smirk. "Please don't break my boss more than \${che} already is."

"I'll be gentle," she retorts, ignoring your sour look. Your escape has been anything but so far.

To your surprise, they both manage to move you to the stretcher with minimal pain. At this point even breathing hurts, so it's a small mercy. Carrying you over to Rosie's van is easy enough, and there's enough space for you to lie in the back even though it smells of oil and mechanical parts. At least you'll be somewhat comfortable on the floor, as long as there's no sudden turns.

She tends to be a careful driver.

"I'll be off then," Vera says, jumping back onto the street. "I suggest you get a good doctor who can keep their mouth shut, this wasn't exactly good for your legs."

"You mean unlike jumping out a window?" You can't stop the sarcasm.

"Fair," she laughs. "I'd say send me the bill, but please don't."

"Don't worry." You lean back and look up at the ceiling. "Not the worst accident I've been in." Gallows humor has never failed you. "We can deal. Get me out of here Rosie"

"Sure will." Rosie closes the doors, leaving you in the dim light. Neither you nor Vera said goodbye. You doubt this is the end of it. Too many things you need to investigate once you're back to normal.

Armadillo. You can't just forget that ever happened.

The ringing phone tears you from your near faint, and you answer with a grunt of annoyance. Of course it's Rosie.

[i]"Alright, we're on the road."[/i] Rosie sounds worried. [i]"Where you want me to take you? Looks like a hospital might be a good bet?"[/i]

"No need. Just drive me back to my base. I'll guide you there. Use the speaker function on the phone, I don't want to get into another accident."

[i]"Nice. More secrets."[/i] She sounds almost cheerful. [i]"And don't worry, I drive safely."[/i]

"it's the rest of the traffic I'm worried about." You put your phone on speaker as well so you can rest your hands. "I should have let you know months ago. Now, turn right at the next intersection." You really should have let her in on a few secrets. Just in case. Being cautious is good, but sometimes you need a helping hand.

You've been so reliant on your puppet. Hopefully once you rest, you'll be able to slip back in. You've got work to do.

The van turns, and you grit your teeth as you brace as best you can. But it feels good to be on the road.

*page_break Finally

*goto fusedrive

*label veraboss

*if known_telepath

"Yes," you say with a sigh of relief.

*else

"Better be," you say, though you know the truth.

You can feel Pelayo's approaching thoughts. Someone else too. Ward? Of course. "I'll give him a call, let him know this is the right truck."

"Yeah, would be funny if he accosted some poor truck driver taking a nap." Vera puts down the scanner with a smile.

"I think we've had enough close calls for one night." You call Pelayo, and he picks up right away.

[i]"We're close, boss. There's a parked truck up ahead, is that you?"[/i]

"That's us," you say, trying to keep your relief from showing.

[i]"Anything I need to know before pulling over?"[/i] Pelayo sound tense. Did everything go according to plan? Are you sure you're not being watched? Is this a trap?

"Everything went according to plan, but I'm badly hurt," you admit. "Worse than you expected, I think. Otherwise you wouldn't have planned this kind of rescue." You give Vera a look, and she shrugs. She feels guilty though, her thoughts reveals what her mind doesn't.

[i]"Sorry about that. I'm pulling over now."[/i] He hangs up, and you can feel new worries taking root.

You groan, letting go of the phone as you gesture to Vera to open the back. If Armadillo is playing hide and seek, you need a second pair of hands to carry you out. "You got a stretcher in here?"

"Sure do," she says, standing half behind the door as she avoids the lights of the approaching van. "You never know when you need one."

The familiar van makes a U-turn, then reverses close to the truck. Not too close, and Pelayo leaves the engine running as Ward steps out. Cautious. You never know when you need a fast getaway.

"Boss?"

*if boss_secret

"It's me, Ward." You give a tired wave from the floor. "Bit underdressed at the moment, you know how it is."

"Yeah." A quick glance between you and Vera. "Looks like things really were worse than we thought."

"I'm still alive. Broken bones will heal. Will take more than a crashed car to take me out." You try a lighter tone to brush away some of the mental cobwebs of suspicion. You are still \${villain_name}, even without your armor.

*else

"It's okay, Ward." You give a tired wave from the floor. "And you can tell Nehal that she was right. Should have gone in my armor."

"Yeah, no kidding. What the hell happened?" Eyes going to your legs.

"Car crash. Things got complicated."

"Shit. So it did turn bad." Ward raises a hand and gestures to Pelayo. You recognize it. Area secured.

"I'll fill you in later, let's not talk business here." You let out a pained sigh. "You wanna help me over so I can get back to the base?"

"Sure." Ward steps forward as Pelayo gets out of the van at last. "Wanna give me a hand, Dove?"

"You didn't pay me enough for manual labor," she says with a faint smile. "But I'll do this one on the house."

"Huh." Ward gives you a look. "Looks like you've been making friends, boss."

"That's one way of calling it." You can't feel Armadillo's thoughts out there, you're hurting too much to pick out thought-voids. But you feel watched.

"I'm always up for rescue missions," Dove says with a wry smile. "Would make my dad proud." She says it as a joke, but you can sense that she means it. It feels good to do good. Too rarely a thing in Los Diablos.

"Be careful," you caution as they move to shift you to the stretcher. "These casts are not for show."

"I can be gentle." Ward gives Pelayo a pointed look. "Don't worry, let's get this over with. I want to go back to sleep."

You bite back a groan of pain as they shift your aching body, and then carries you over to the other van. Pelayo moves to help, and together they place you on the hard floor inside. Not the most comfortable, but the smell is familiar.

"I'll keep the boss company," Ward says. "You get us out of here."

"I'll be on my way then," Vera gives a small salute. "If you've got other jobs, I can always make room for interesting opportunities."

"I'll think about it." Your line of sight is cut off as the doors close, Ward reaching up to turn on the small ceiling light.

*if base_secret

"Turn on the mike, I need to be able to guide you to the base."

"Sure will," Ward flips the switch and a crackle of static connects you with Pelayo in the front seat.

[i]"Where to, Boss?"[/i] He sounds relieved to have you back safely.

"Just get on the road, I'll guide you as we've gotten some distance from here."

*else

"Don't worry," Ward says as he flips the switch to activate the mike to the front, so Pelayo can keep you updated.

[i]"Should we be worried about being followed?"[/i] Pelayo sounds staticky but annoyed. [i]"Not sure I trust her not to be curious."[/i]

"Just get us on the road for now. We need to get some distance."

"Alright." The van hits a steady pace, taking you far away from here.

*page_break Finally

*goto fusedrive

[Back from vacation, time for your questions!](#)

[Jun 26, 2023](#)

Well, have had british friends over for vacation and travel, and then there was midsummer with all the associated parties so I have pretty much been offline for two weeks now, apart from checking news on twitter. So, this month's call for questions is a bit later than usual.

Hope you're doing alright, June has been one long heatwave here, so it's going to be fun to start working again... right now I miss the air conditioning of the factory.

Please feel free to ask about whatever you feel like!

[1.2.2 Dignity is overrated](#)

[Jun 15, 2023](#)

(1.2.2 sometimes things happen in the dead of night. 4000 words, a snippet with few variables and no choices. Trying out voices to see what works.)

There is silence, and then there is movement. You're not sure what wakes you first, but going from sleep to adrenaline pumping awareness is a sign of a threat. A rattle. In the corner. The lights are on but dimmed, a small mercy you hate to think you have Ortega to thank for. \$!{he} knows too well about your issues with darkness. Right now, the dim light is letting you see the cart resting against the back wall, out of reach. Not that it would help you escape, you can't move your legs, and escaping on a rolling cart from the Rangers' Headquarters is beyond even you.

You see nothing, but you could have sworn you heard something. A pile of towels. Basic hygiene stuff. A bedpan, an indignity you need no reminding of. But... did it just move? You slow your breath, pretending to be asleep, eyes half closed. It's crooked, almost over the edge of the cart now. Upside down, thoroughly disinfected since last use. You remain still, and there! It moves. Inching towards the edge, then over it. It lands with a loud metallic clatter, and you don't bother to pretend to be asleep anymore.

"Who's there?" The shadow is small, you squint, this doesn't make sense and then a pigeon jumps down on the floor. A light clack of claws on hard vinyl. It tilts it's head in an eerily human way, and walks across the floor towards you.

"Coo," it says, a calming sound which has no effect on you.

"Stop," you command, scared because you're helpless here, and this doesn't make sense.

*if tech_savvy

A stab of panic, is this how the Special Directive comes for you? You've never heard of them using pigeons, but how can you be sure?

*else

Wait. No. It does. You know of this pigeon. You know of this woman.

The pigeon reaches the center of the floor and starts to shiver. It's disconcerting to look at, the way the shadows twists and grows, deeply sea-green, uncomfortably like a nightmare as they grow and there's a visceral pop as the bird is gone, and a woman dressed in gray and black crouches in its stead.

*if tech_savvy

She looks up, head moving bird-like and you can see the echo of the pigeon in the way she looks at you. Narrow face. Black, wavy hair pulled back in a messy bun. A body all angles and limbs. The large glasses frames her but you don't make the mistake of seeing them as a fashion accessory. They look as

high-tech as Dr. Mortum's, and the skinsuit has the telltale shimmer of adaptive camouflage not currently in use. Expensive. Not Special Directive equipment. Too personal. Quirky.

"Don't worry," she says, voice a hitch deeper than you had been prepared for. "I'm Dove, I'm paid to get you out of here."

*else

Dove. Vera Saleh if you remember your data correctly. A boost who can turn into a pigeon, and if the rumors are right, control them in various ways as well. A mercenary for hire, an assassin whispers some, but from what you've seen, she's more of a thief who likes to nurture a bad reputation.

*if thief

You recognize your own.

*if massacre

She never struck you as someone with a taste for killing.

The question is what she's doing here. You don't get the feeling she's here to kill you.

"Dove. Not someone I imagined running into here."

"Oh." She looks up in surprise, head moving bird-like and you can see the echo of the pigeon in the way she looks at you. Narrow face. Black, wavy hair pulled back in a messy bun. A body all angles and limbs. The large glasses frames her, out of place with the high-tech skinsuit. "You know who I am."

"If you're here to steal something, I'm sure we can work something out as long as that includes me." You try for a smile, this is an opportunity you don't want to miss.

"Actually that's what I'm paid for," she admits, voice a hitch deeper than you had been prepared for. "Getting you out of here."

*set vera true

"Paid by whom?" You know you shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, but old reflexes die hard. There's a limited amount of people that know you're here, and even fewer that might be interested in your release.

*if verabhired

"Pelayo." She smiles thinly. "Paid well too. Speaks well of his judgement to bring in an outside operator, they'd be busted if they tried to pull this off themselves."

"Don't underestimate my crew." You watch carefully as she runs her fingers over her wrist unit.

*if tech_savvy

Getting into the system? She needs to if she's going to have any hope getting you out of here. But how did she get in? Being a pigeon helped, you suppose.

*else

You trust she knows what she's doing, otherwise she would not have gotten in.

"I'm not. But neither am I underestimating this place. Even for me, it's... tricky." She looks up as the lights flash green, her mouth twisting in a small smile. "You can give them a call to arrange a meeting spot later."

"If you have a secure line, I will." You don't doubt she does, she seems competent. "So how are you planning to get me out of here? I'm not exactly mobile."

*else

"Client confidentiality, I'm afraid."

"I'll meet them anyway once you deliver me to them." You watch carefully as she runs her fingers over her wrist unit.

*if tech_savvy

Getting into the system? She needs to if she's going to have any hope getting you out of here. But how did she get in? Being a pigeon helped, you suppose.

*else

You trust she knows what she's doing, otherwise she would not have gotten in.

"Not delivering you to anybody other than who you choose. Orders came with the job." She looks up as the lights flash green, her mouth twisting in a small smile. "So you'd better have someone you can call once we're out of here."

"That can be arranged." Someone not wanting you to know.

*if tech_savvy

That makes you nervous. But as long as she lets you go, you can deal with the unknown later. When you're out of range of the dampeners.

*else

That narrows things somewhat. Someone wants this favor to cash in later, probably to brag about it in person. Or hold it over your head.

"So how are you planning to get me out of here? I'm not exactly mobile."

"Well, it will hurt," she admits. "I can't help that. And I need to get you over to the window in the hallway."

"And then what? You'll turn into a pigeon and fly me away?"

She breaks into a pearling laugh, moving over to the side of your bed. "Nope, can't do that, but I've got a friend on the outside. Would set off every alarm here if they went inside, but once we're out, they'll take over."

*if tech_savvy

"Huh." That makes sense. Most scanners are in the entrance and elevators, she avoided those as a pigeon. Or got in elsewhere, perhaps a window left open though you doubt the Rangers would be that sloppy. The suit she's wearing is probably dampening her signature to a level that can be dealt with by a low-level interference field.

*else

"Huh." You have a vague memory of an associate, another boost who prefers to stay in the background. Someone used to the shadows, letting her take the credit. That might explain the mixed rumors about her.

"I'm going to have to get your legs down. Sorry in advance, I bet it's gonna hurt." Her face twitches in sympathy. Empathy or experience? You wouldn't bet on the former, that's counterproductive in your line of work.

"Don't worry," you say, bracing yourself as she approaches. You want out of here badly enough that you'd crawl through the door yourself if you had any hope getting through security. It's only when she steps close you catch the way her eyes widen, then narrow and feel a cold shiver running down your spine.

You forgot that you're not exactly dressed.

She looks down at your arms. [b]Sees[/b] your tattoos, and you don't need to read her mind to understand that she knows what you are. \${swear}. You had instinctively dived so deeply into \${villain_name}'s persona that you forgot you're not wearing armor.

"Oh, you're one of them." Her face has gone flat and unreadable.

"So?" You don't know what to say, without reading her mind you can't sense her intentions. There's no sign of disgust as she touches you, carefully releasing your legs from the wires. You suppress a hiss of pain, pushes it to the side. It's not relevant.

"I get why you needed extraction fast now. Despite your injuries." She moves over to your IV and the monitors keeping track of your health. She adjusts her glasses as she leans close, pulling out a small round cylinder that she attaches each sensor to as she removes them from your skin. No alarms.

*if tech_savvy

Looks like she's feeding them a baseline signal, eventually people might notice the unnatural evenness of your vital signs, but it doesn't need to last long.

"Don't worry, I'll get you out of here." A quick pat on your shoulder, just two fingers. Tap. Tap.

"I'm a bit bigger than the stuff you usually swipe." You talk because your stomach has grown cold, your shoulder itching with old memories. How. How did she know how to do that? Say that? Is she? Like you? No. She said 'them'. You want to ask, but you want out even more.

"I can carry you for long enough to get to the window. My dad is a fireman, I know how to do this." Her smile is thin, private information offered without hesitation. "The problem will be getting you up on my shoulder."

*if tall

She looks you over. "You're a big one."

"Don't worry about hurting me." You reach up with your arms, you don't want to be here a second longer than you can help. Any moment now, someone can walk in on you. You wouldn't bet on her in a fight with a Ranger. "And I've lost whatever dignity I had at this point."

"Okay." She looks down at her wrist again, taking a deep breath. "Sorry in advance, and please don't scream. Sensors are blocked, can't account for ears."

"Don't worry." You grit your teeth as she bends down, touching your bare skin. With a great heave she gets you up on her shoulder, in an ungraceful approximation of a fireman's carry. It hurts, she grabs hold of one of your casts for balance, and you want to scream.

Instead you release a breath like a hiss, tasting of blood and broken ribs, bracing yourself as she walks over to the door, footsteps heavy and stumbling. She can't do this for long, that much is obvious.

You hope she's right about the fact that she doesn't have to.

Outside, the corridor is unknown and white. You were unconscious when you were brought here, but as you approach one of the windows you see a familiar skyline. It feels good to know you really were in the Rangers' Headquarters, and that this wasn't some elaborate lie and you were back at the Farm. The relief is great enough that you wonder how much of you had believed the worst all along.

She places two round plugs next to the window, punches in a code, and it slides open without alarms going off. It's breathtakingly high, but luckily she turns you away from it as she signals to someone outside.

"A flier?" You can't stop your question, only now realizing that the hospital clothes isn't really conducive to a nighttime flight.

"Not exactly." She gets up on the window ledge, and you hold your breath, because you can feel vertigo clawing at your gut. At least if you fall here, you're dead. Too far up for even a chance at survival. "I'm in position, ready for catching in three, two, one..." and then she pushes away from the window in an awkward jump.

Falling freely.

The fall is long enough for you to remember last time. Still blanketed by the dampeners, the city is mute, unseeing. You wait for the terror and the memories, but all you feel is hollow numbness and anticipation. Same. Different.

A loud bang, more earthquake crack than explosion. You open your eyes to sky and windows, a shadow shoots up from the street, blacker than the night, four arms outstretched as it intercepts.

Impact.

It hurts, but not as much as it should, like hitting the mat in the gym is more merciful than asphalt. Still enough to tear a scream from your throat, your voice sounds weird, like sound carrying under water, and then whoever grabbed you lands, the air rippling from the impact.

You almost faint.

The figure holds on to you, while Dove slithers out of the grasp. Tall, seven feet or more, hunched over, smelling of rubber, mustard and... bread?

"To the truck," Dove says, hands doing half of the talking. The impact of each footstep hurts more than being caught mid-air, which is wrong, but the four carapaced arms hold you gently against the broad chest.

It's not a suit of armor. You fight to keep conscious because the dampeners are fading as they run. Organic metal. Integrated in rubbery flesh. Not scales, more lamellar, like a pillbug. Hard on the outside, softer on the inside where you're pressed against it's chest. A long stride. Claws. Breathing calmly, the mind...

You slide over it like glass, high-grade psychosurgery and training leaving you with little to grasp onto in your state. A thought-void, though you can hear it breathing.

You're being carried by what you can only guess is a terror-beast. One of the Special Directive's living weapons, Re-Genes crafted for war and little else. You panic then, Dove tries to hush your scream but you throw yourself against it's mind and it...

...lets you in.

Calm. No pause in the running. No tightening of the four arms other than to keep you safe. Safe. Safe. That's the feeling forcibly projected at you, rusty like an unused muscle, a door not opened for years. Safe. You. Are. Safe. Protected.

"...inside!" Dove's voice returns and she ushers both of you into a large truck, covered in beer commercials. The door slides shut, and the inside light switches on as it starts rolling. She's driving, you can feel her distant mind focused on making a safe getaway, driving slowly, waiting until she's elsewhere to change the projection on the sides of it.

Tense. She's nervous, but there's no deception there, if she's being used she doesn't know it. She was paid to break you out, but after what she saw it became more personal.

Huh.

You pull back from her mind because the greatest potential threat is still in this room, putting you down on a bed. There is plenty of room in here, and from what you can see at a quick glance it's equipped to be lived in, at least for a time. Not a room, but close enough to mistake for one.

The terror-beast has stepped back, and you can't look away from the shimmering form. The segmented back, the nearly insectoid face. It gestures at you, and you try to remember what it's saying.

It's been so long.

"Will change." The word change is a line on it's breastbone, not a zipper but the meaning is clear.

Unlike Dove's unearthly transformation, this is disgustingly mundane. The metal segments flare, then inches back under the rubbery skin, which softens and pales into blue-grey. It's... no, their frame shrinks, still a solid six feet, but proportioned like a human even though it could never be mistaken for one.

The skin is blue-gray, unlike yours, but the tattoos you share. They are only wearing skinsuit pants, colored like their skin used to be, so the bright electric blue lines are on full display. The pattern is bold and angular, thick lines towards the center, thinner towards the limbs, like cracks in dry ground. In the center you can see the bar code. Re-Gene.

"Have you taken a name?" you ask, with your voice because your fingers are rusty and filled with bad memories. "One you'd share?"

"Armadillo," they say, fist curling up in a rolling motion. "New name." Ah, that was the sign for name, the little finger wiggle over their chin. You had forgotten.

You didn't want to remember.

"\${villain_name}," you say, out loud because you don't know how to sign that in Re-Gene language. "Do you have clothes?"

"Sure." Armadillo turns and opens one of the suitcases on the floor. In this form, you can see the extra two arms flattened against their ribs, vestigial and thin, three fingers on each. They pull out a coverall and puts it on, bulky and unflattering, but loose enough to hide their bulk and extra arms. The face is human once more, and if it wasn't for the skin color, they'd look almost normal. It's odd to see a Re-Gene with longer hair than a stubble, it's thick and black, almost reaching their shoulders. "Fit?" They hold out another coverall for you.

*if tall

"I think so." They're built heavier than you, so your casts should fit.

*else

"They're a little big, but it's fine." Your casts are clumsy, this will make them easier to put on.

"A little help?" It feels odd to ask, but you don't think you could sit up even if you tried. Your body is aching, and all you want to do is faint.

"Will touch?" There are a lot of signs and words you don't understand, but the meaning is clear. They will need to touch you to get it on.

"Yes." You let out a sigh. "You can touch me. But be careful." What are you doing sharing information like this? "My pain-gate is non-functional."

"Ouch." They grimace as they come close, kneeling next to the bed. This close you can see patterns on the skin, not tattoos, not scars. Is this where the armor comes out? You try to focus on that as they help you into the coveralls. It's painful and undignified.

"Stop looking at me like that," you snap as the zipper is pulled up and your tattoos are hidden from sight. "I'm not as weak as you think I am."

Memories crawling back like ants, cuckoo, bred for other things than war. Small. Weak. Pitied. On the outside looking in. Always alone.

"Not weak. Out here." There are more words you are not picking up, an eloquent flow of fingers mixing with the terms you know. "Escaped."

Re-Gene language was never something intended to happen. You were not supposed to speak, only accept orders, and answer them briefly. You were different as a cuckoo, you had to learn how to speak properly to fit in. In some ways that made you a traitor to your own people and their traditions.

Knocks and taps traveling from cell to cell, passing messages from knuckle to ear. Taps and touches at closer range, a language of incidental movements and scratches happening under the noses of the guards. None of them knew. None of them even thought to ask. They all assumed they controlled the terms of your lives.

They had no idea what went on inside your heads.

"How long have you been out here?" You mix the words with what gestures you remember, though you know they understand you far better than you do them.

"Five years," they say, a dismissive finger gesture speaking of bad memories. "Living with the Bird for four."

"Bird? Ah, Dove." Yes, no reason for you to be able to grasp specifics there. "She knows, then?"

"Not all." They look towards the front of the truck, it's traveling fast now, making turns. "What. From where. Not how."

"Do you trust her?" You brave the pain and cast your mind outwards for a moment, searching for threats and intentions. Sleeping people, unawares, nothing to trigger the feeling that you're being followed or observed. She's a nervous beacon in the front seat, focused on the road. It's a complex mind, not terribly shielded, but oddly tangled like the minds of birds. Like walking into a room blind, not knowing where the furniture is. Unfamiliar and strange.

"Trust? Yes." There's no hesitation there, a fist on their knee to drive home the point.

"I'm going to need a phone," you mumble, because you need to call

*if boss

Pelayo

*elseif rosie

Rosie

*else

Bo

so you can get a lift back to your base. This is a mystery you can't leave alone, but also one you can't pursue right now. You need painkillers and sleep, and be able to slip out into your puppet body as soon as it's safe.

"Should stop soon." They point towards the front. "Bird's got phone."

As they say those words, you pick up the same thoughts from Dove up front. The breath of relief passing into what amounts to a safe area, a part of the city where a different kind of authority rules. The truck stops, and a moment or two later, she steps into the back and closes the door behind her.

"Alrighty," she says, voice cheerful as she claps her hands together, quick gestures echoing those you saw earlier. Overlaying, not with Re-Gene language but with something else. "Another brilliant heist courtesy of yours truly."

"No heist," Armadillo protests, gestures sharp and with Dove's mind seeing them you finally put together the last piece of the puzzle. Sign language. That's why you had such a hard time understanding the nuances, Armadillo mixes Re-Gene signs with ASL. "People."

"True, true," she quickly backtracks. "Didn't steal a thing, we rescued a person. I suppose I will have to count this as my one good deed of the day then," her fingers echo her voice, making it easier for you to read the gestures. Didn't you learn this a long time ago? You wish you could remember.

"You're still getting paid," you point out, fingers sore.

"If I had known exactly what the cargo was, I would have done it for free." You're not sure that's true, but she likes to believe it.

"Not cargo," Armadillo says again. "You really need to start thinking about your words." The ASL key lets you unlock more nuance in their speech, using Dove's understanding as a dictionary.

"I'm sorry." She lets out a breath and rummages around in another suitcase for a coverall as well, marked with a new logo you're not familiar with. A moving firm? "And could you not cut me down when there's people who understands what you're saying?"

"Enough of family that they'd be hurt by your words as well." They uses the gender neutral, that's common among Re-Genes. other people call you it.

"Shit." Her mouth creases in a worried smile, and she looks directly at you again. "So I didn't misread the situation then. You're like them." She nods at Armadillo.

"You didn't," you admit, still shaken by the unexpected acceptance by the Re-Gene. "Cuckoo. Infiltration unit." And normally beneath notice for someone like Armadillo.

"You didn't tell me they made those, Arde." She looks over at them, and they shrug.

"I don't tell you much. That's safer."

"They're not wrong." You hold out your hand. "Once I get my call, you can forget you ever met me."

"What?" She acts shocked, her hands as mobile as a Re-Gene's. "Here I am rescuing \${villain_name} and you don't even want to know who hired me?"

--to be continued--

[Jun 10, 2023](#)

(Revelations, post crash, post talk with an innocent Sidestep in the hospital.)

Is it a nightmare if I'm not sleeping? Hell if I know, but every time I close my eyes, it comes back.

Black. Then bright.

Turn. Crash. Roll. Instincts taking over, nailing the landing without knowing fully what had happened yet. Hurting. Left skin on the pavement, both synth and real. Head clear. The smell of gasoline.

Looking up turned the world slow, all neural channels open, sound distorting, a figure trapped in the wreck. Still in the seat, the side door smashed, airbag deflating. Switch of perspective. Did I move? I must have. The other door opens. Tearing the airbag like a shroud, look at me Luis, that's one lesson I learned. Always carry a knife. Screaming. No answer.

Stuck.

Wedged within the twisted wreck. Legs mashed under metal, hard to see because of the seat. Can't see breathing. Can't see anything here. Need. Space. The seatbelt unbuckles, but the angle doesn't work. Trapped. Generator is in emergency shutdown mode, must have jostled something in the crash. Push past it. Override. Forced reboot. Shouldn't do this without the proper suit but dammit, can't wait. No time. The burn hurts, but the power runs true, and I brace one leg against the twisted door, trusting my skinsuit to keep me from tearing myself apart.

Tasting blood.

The seat gives away; with it gone, there's enough room to slide the body out. No. Not body. Gotta be a breath. A heartbeat. No. Ignore feelings. Push down. I know the drill. Another crack. Ignore the sounds, I'm doing damage, but ribs heal. Don't look at the legs. The bleeding is not life-threatening. Unless it's internal. Nothing to do about that. Push. Breath. Beg. Repeat. No result. No stirring.

Do it.

Skin. Need skin. Knife again, dammit, too many layers. Cut. What is that? Never mind. Calm down. Breathe. Find the right level. No stress. Even breath. There's a reason they trusted me with this. I can handle it. Easily. Like walking a taut wire. Lick your fingers. Need the fluid for a tight seal. Two fingers below the right clavicle. Two fingers on the left side, under the armpit, right where the pectorals end. Breathe. Release the charge. The body twitches in a semblance of life. Touch the throat, pray, and there's a pulse.

God is merciful today.

I lean in, push more air into the lungs, a pained cough, and there is breathing. I suck in air and cough myself awake.

In bed. Still. Being good. I raise my hands to my face. Everything aches. Bruises, skin, and pulled muscles. What the crash didn't do, I did to myself. Another lecture incoming, but they're wrong, and I'm right. I could handle it. I did. Even if I am paying for it now. I resist the urge to scratch the wire connected to my ports. It can't itch, it's all synthskin there, but my nervous system has never really discriminated between metal and flesh. That's why they put me through this.

A unique specimen.

Shouldn't have read that line, even though I made the joke that they meant my abs. Tastes even worse now after the talk with Sidestep. If they were talking about me like that in my files, what on earth did they do to them? No protection of name. No protection of relatives. No protection of humanity.

That. No.

How. Can't still wrap my head around it. Re-Gene. I feel nauseous, which I pretend is because of the medication. Half of me still thinks it's a lie, and the other half keeps backfilling information, moving facts from one box to the other to make everything make sense once more. And it does. I was so right but for all the wrong reasons. Could I have asked? Should I have asked?

No.

That would have been a bad idea. No matter who they were running from, someone digging into that would have been bad. I'd like to think I would have been trusted, but I'm not really that trustworthy. Too filled with secrets. Prejudice. God, I don't even remember all the shit I spewed. But they did. Because it mattered to them. Did I make stupid jokes too? Might have.

The knock on the door interrupts my self-flagellation, and I wave Wei inside with relief. "Any news?"

"No," he says, pulling over a metal chair to sit beside you. "And right now, no news is good news."

"You tell me." I let out a sigh of relief. That's the reason I'm staying in bed because I need to know my generator is in the clear. That all the neural connections work perfectly. If this goes bad, I need to be on top of my game, bruises or not. "I talked to Angie. She's running interference, scrubbing any details from the system."

"I'm not comfortable with that," he admits, but he doesn't protest. "She's not supposed to have that kind of system access."

"Nobody will know," I assure. "And I know you don't trust everyone here."

"I don't." He runs a hand over his short hair, sighing heavily. "But I would have liked to be trusted with this. How long have you known?"

"That she was good with computers?" I smile softly, making my words as innocent as possible. "You got shot. Argent and I tried to find out who. We both suspected someone leaking information and decided to keep her skills to ourselves."

"I wish you would have trusted me." He gives you a hard look, and you prepare yourself for an argument, but then he looks down. "But I suppose I can't blame you for keeping secrets."

"That's new." My head might be hurting, but I don't miss the look on his face. "So, what have you been keeping from me?" Secrets within secrets.

"You're too sharp," he admits. "Do you have any idea how frustrating it is that you keep acting like a clown?"

"Not my fault if you can't keep two thoughts in your head at once." I let my smuggest smile settle as I lean back. "So let me have it then, Wei. What have you been doing behind my back?" Always more layers than the surface; been friends for half my life, and I still find more.

"I need you to understand something." He looks down at his hands, unnaturally still. "I care about you. A lot." It is flavored like a confession, but not exactly news to me. "And you spent years trying to destroy yourself after Heartbreak."

"We all did," I protest. "I just choose to be more open about it."

"We all hurt," Wei clarifies. "I know that. But you were ready to die. I don't think you'd be here today if I hadn't forced them to take you back on the team."

"Forced them?" A piece of the puzzle. It had been out of character for them to ask me to return, even if it was just until the team got back to full strength.

"Well, me and Luis. They would have had to remake the team from scratch, and they weren't prepared for that kind of bad press."

"Luis always had too many friends." It warms my heart that they would care. Would do that. Even if the fact that they thought I needed it was annoying. "Wouldn't have been easy finding recruits."

"It's not easy anyway," he admits. "But I need you to remember that time. How you acted."

"I'd rather not." Though I'm falling back into those memories nightly now, car crash mixing with window fall, a loss I couldn't stop turning into a wreck where I could. Safe. Finally. Full circle.

"I tried..." Wei pauses, fights with the words until they find a shape. "I went looking for the bodies. When I was on sick leave, waiting to recover enough for my new legs to be fully installed. I found out there hadn't been any at the funeral, and I didn't like the sound of that."

"Neither did I." Vague memories of pain. How much had I been hurting? Going through the morgue, rolling out the bodies, demanding an answer. Never the right one.

"I was more subtle about it. Cremation never sounded right to me, and Anathema being dissolved was too convenient. Even knowing what sometimes happens to boosts as they die, I couldn't trust it." He chuckles. "Yes, I'll admit it. Part of it was probably still the voices in my head. Whispering."

"Heartbreak?" I can't know what happened to him. Any of them. I didn't hear shit.

"Yeah. I know I was traumatized, but I didn't have anything else to do, so it made sense to keep looking. Couldn't go anywhere, but I know people. And I have access."

"You pretended to hate computers for the longest time." I can't help but chuckle; I'm not the only one playing dumb when it suits me. "How many keyboards did you break filling spreadsheets?"

"Listen to me." Wei sounds deadly serious. "This is important. I found something. Or, well, something found me."

"What?" I pick up on the implications, thinking back. Was this when I was drinking myself to sleep at Owl's place?

"I got sent a file. An autopsy report. With photos. And a short film segment." He swallows, unable to continue in a steady voice. "It was Sidestep."

"What?" My mind goes blank, and even though my generator is in diagnostics mode, I can feel my heart race and time slow. An illusion because he continues unchanged.

"It was Sidestep on the autopsy table. Mask off. The suit mostly peeled off. They were cutting into them." A look of nausea on his face. "No mask for anesthetics. Can't remember any IV. They looked dead. The doctors talked like..." he presses a hand against his mouth, and I can see how he swallows down bile.

"Faked." I toss out the word like a grenade. "They knew you were looking and wanted you gone." Think logical. About what it meant then. Not what it means now.

"Yes," he admits. "But what I couldn't make sense of were the tattoos. Everywhere. And why it said Re-Gene reclamation on the autopsy report."

"It..." I let out a hiss, letting the words land in my gut. Ice cold. Control.

"I don't know if my source found the correct footage and it was intended for internal consumption or if they assumed we knew and didn't bother redacting the Re-Gene parts." Wei's voice has gone soft.

"Why didn't you tell me?" The pained sob is unintentional.

"Because you would have gone looking." He leans closer but doesn't reach out. "You would have had a thread to start pulling on, and you would have destroyed yourself unraveling this story. I know you. You would never have stopped."

"You're right about that." If I had known. If I had suspected. Even if there had only been a corpse, there would have been a creator. The place Sidestep had fled from. That had stolen them back. Even if it had only been a corpse, I wouldn't have stopped. And it wasn't a corpse. "They were there," I hiss. "For years. Trapped. Tortured."

"I didn't know." He's the one pleading now.

"I would have gone looking." I raise my voice, if not my hand. "I would have gone looking, and I could have fucking saved them!"

"You would have gotten yourself killed in the state you were in!" He matches my tone. Good.

"So what?" I laugh, teeth bared, swinging both feet over the side of the bed. He rises from the chair, taking a step back in return. "If I had got myself killed, maybe that would have gotten someone to react? Someone that might care?" I'm on my feet, anchored by a thin cable to the monitoring unit. Not enough to stop me.

"Stop." He puts his hands on me. Bad idea.

"Not this time," I growl, shifting my weight so he stumbles back, tripping over the chair. Out of balance. Good. I shove him into the wall behind him, one arm against his throat. "Do they know?"

"Yes," he hisses, throat constricted by my arm. His hands are infuriatingly gentle on my shoulders. "I told them."

"Good." I hadn't expected that, but I don't loosen my grip. It's a strange feeling to want to hurt someone I care about. I don't like how it sits in my stomach. "This is your fault."

"Don't you think I don't know what?"

"Is that why you've been so nice to them since they returned?" I lean close enough to hiss in his ear. "Guilty conscience?"

"What do you think?" This time he pushes you back, braced by the wall, modded strength. I don't resist.

"I think you should be going now." Because I don't know what I will do if he stays. The diagnostic machine is beeping erratically, the cord dislodged in your scuffle. Someone will come. I don't have long.

"I will give you time to calm down."

"Going to need a few years for that." I sit back down, fully in control though I want to scream. Wei knew. All this time. While I was making a fool of myself. While Sidestep was captive. After they returned. Wei KNEW. "You should go."

"I'm sorry," he says, and I believe him. "But when you calm down and think about it, you will know I was right." And that's where I lose it.

"Get the hell out," I snap, on my feet again, lightning arcing out, bulbs exploding, machines screaming.

The moment holds, and then the sprinklers start, and the door slams shut behind Wei. I stand there alone, letting the blue light lick my limbs, my Faraday skin keeping me safe from harm. Control. I shut down the generator, pleased to feel no pressure from doing so. Who needs diagnostics? Not me.

I sink down on the bed regardless, scorched patterns on the blankets, an exploded vase in splinters over the floor. Going to need an explanation for this; I know I'm not supposed to be able to run this hot in emergency shutdown mode. Could fake ignorance again, I suppose. Promise to submit to a full scan to see what is going on. Need to have another chat with Angie. She can fix this.

Fix.

I look at the door, trying to forget the look on Wei's face as he exited. Guilt. Fear. Is there any fixing that? I rub my face as I hear steps quickly approaching in the corridor.

Would I even want to?

[May QnA answered, and it's a long one.](#)

[Jun 6, 2023](#)

What would Nocture and Jake think if HG considers Sidestep as family and starts treating them as such?

It would depend a lot on the Sidestep. In general, Nocturne would be a lot more suspicious. She would focus on what Sidestep gets out of the deal, and while she wouldn't want to rain on HG's parade, she would keep her eyes open for any backstabbing. Jake would be more supportive, partly because he also misses his family a lot, and understands the urge to overlook a lot of things because of those ties.

What are the odds we'll get the option to flirt with more of our hero opponents while in the villain armor—whether out of actual interest or just to mess with them? :D Even if most of them wouldn't actually reciprocate, I'd love to see how they and their teammates would react to the flirting or to the media's take on it. (I feel like Steel in particular is *long* overdue to have his picture on the fridge.)

I mean writing villain flirting is fun, so I foresee more of it in the future. But, the different characters would respond a lot different to it. Argent and Ortega thinks it's fun and would play into it, but it would be a lot more confusing to Herald and especially Steel. I need to write them to figure out how things would go, but oh boy, it sure would be funny. Nobody goes out of their way to flirt with Marshal Steel...

Mortum speculates that the government considered restarting the LD Rangers team with all new members after Heartbreak, which got me wondering. In canon, the Rangers have come up with a grand total of two recruits in the eight years since Heartbreak, and they seem to still be struggling to find any more. Would it have been any more feasible to build a new team from scratch, or would they likely have had just as much trouble finding candidates?

I will be very quiet about this due to spoilers, but there are two things to consider: Were the standards raised after the HB incident and the rather blatant disaster? Is there some particular reason it might be useful to keep the LD Rangers on the verge of under strength?

On that note, do the Guardians require similarly strict background checks for members, or are they more flexible? Would the Guardians' founding members have been eligible to join the Rangers if they'd wanted to?

They are a LOT more flexible, in essence, as long as the Mayor can talk the LD council into putting their weight behind the candidate, anything goes. Blaze might have been Rangers material, Zephyr would have run too many red flags and would need someone really wanting them there. Locus would have been a candidate but would not have got the invitation, and Porphyry would not be a good fit with taking orders.

How does Vera actually feel about pigeons? Was she a fan of them before getting boosted? Did gaining pigeon powers make her like them more, or has it had the opposite effect? I guess what I'm saying is, would trying to bond over a shared love of pigeons be a good idea or a very bad one?

Vera's dad raised pigeons as a hobby, so she grew up around them and loved them. He raised both fancy pigeons and homing pigeons, and Vera had her own members of the flock that she took care of. She still love pigeons, and pigeon time is still the main hangout opportunity with her dad. So yes, a shard love of pigeons would be a good bonding opportunity.

Did Valentine's Day become kind of a... loaded holiday after the Heartbreak incident, for either Los Diablos in general or those personally affected? Would you advise that our MC's suitors save their romantic plans for another date?

Yeah. Valentine's Day is not a big thing in Los Diablos anymore. It was always a commercial holiday from the start, and being associated with a traumatizing terrorist attack is not good economics. So yeah, definitely pick another date.

Just how top secret are the details of Ortega's mods? Like, obviously they can't go around sharing the blueprints, but do doctors need a security clearance to see their x-rays or perform surgery on them? Can they go through airport security? Was it technically a security breach if, say, a tech-savvy Sidestep knew enough to jury-rig a fix when their mods malfunctioned?

Yes, the doctors are specialists and do need security clearances for anything but the smallest procedures. X.rays are classified, and if emergency medical procedures are needed elsewhere, it is dealt with after the fact by writing contracts and NDA's and driving home the consequences of revealing military secrets. Sidestep couldn't easily find info of Ortega's upgraded mods for that reason. Ortega just waves their Ranger clearance on airports. And yes, Sidestep was guilty of so many security breaches if they were tech savvy. Not that Ortega cared (or talked about it).

...On a related note, does FH's world have a history of government employees leaking classified mod specs to win gaming arguments? Or maybe arguments about hero power levels, if online gaming isn't a thing? (For context: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_Thunder#Classified_documents_leak)

Oh I read about that and chuckled. I would say things like that has happened, there might not be discords here, but there are forums. This is one of the reason the Free Western Territories is so distrusted in the east. Without the national emergency rules still in place over there, the west is considered far too lax with providing freedom to it's citizens.

I have a quick question about what the "trans" flag for nonbinary characters actually means. I initially assumed the "Do you consider yourself trans?" question was just asking if your character identified as trans, but that doesn't seem to be the case. As best I can tell from playing with it set, it seems like the flag measures whether your character transitioned with the goal of passing as a cis man/woman. Is that right, or am I misunderstanding? (To be clear, this isn't, like, a complaint about your not reading my mind or not accounting for every possible manifestation of trans identity! I'm just trying to figure out which option works best for my nb trans woman character who doesn't bother trying to pass, haha.)

The 'trans' flag is a classic example of what I call "function creep". Originally, this was a flag that only was about whether your character saw themselves as trans (in the classic sense), just as you thought. However, during playtesting and editing, many of the scenes originally written just for "classical" trans characters were also applicable to characters identifying in the "trans nb" spectrum (where I also belong). So, it has now become more of an all-purpose flag used for many gender related scenes and talks. It does not correspond directly to any specific identity, and in retrospect perhaps I should have remained it something vaguer. However, it is important to remember that the code, and the terms I use there, are mainly for my own ease of coding, and thus they are named things that are easy for me to remember. The fact that people can code-dive and look at things is wonderful and I encourage it, but please remember that any names that are not seen in the stat screen are not meant to be seen/understood/reflect on the character/reader. Often old names linger because I didn't want to risk a change introducing errors, and it was already something I was used to writing. For example, the "villainy" stat is currently shown as "Ruthlessness/Empathy" in the game while it originally was Villainy/Empathy, but I didn't bother going back to change the stat.

I started out coding Rebirth with a very fundamental/basic view of what I could do with choicescript. Thus the "sexualexperience" variable, and the basic way I used trans/nb as well as the ace, aro and everything else. I thought I could only do one thing, but as I learned more about writing interactive fiction, and how to use the code, I started to dislike that approach as it put characters into very restrictive boxes. So, in Retribution I moved on to more adaptive tags, and less descriptive states of mind. Thus you have a "hrny" tag that can be switched on and off to cover if you want descriptions of your character feeling sexual desire at this point in the game, rather than having to put your character in an "Ace" or "Demi" box. The "genderquestion" and "trans" flags are equally vague, and used more for the code than putting a label on someone.

Trying to code a more fluid character/relationship/identity feeling is complicated as hell, Retribution is not perfect, and I might rework some things again for Revelations as I learn and grow. Change is fun!

Was Sidestep always so insulting and aggressive to Ortega or is that new? Either way is Ortega at all bothered by it?

1. The degree will vary depending on the Sidestep, but there was always a degree of abrasiveness/claws there. But, here is the thing, I think this was not really intended as very rude or aggressive, or taken as such by Ortega. I had to go back and think, and I now realize that how these interactions and dialogues are read depends a lot on where you come from. I am Swedish working class, the way Sidestep and Ortega talks and snipes is pretty much considered friendship-building and a sign of respect where I come from. That's how people talked at work (honestly, a lot worse), yes, even to the bosses (at least the ones that started out on the floor). I realize that if one comes from a more polite society/surroundings it might sound a lot more awful than the intent was. That being said, both Sidestep and Ortega came from circumstances where insults were part of daily life. Sidestep grew up watching handlers talk, and Ortega had a background in extreme sports. Both places where posturing and aggression was seen as a way to assert yourself, and where politeness might be seen as weakness.

I think some Sidesteps might have mellowed, and some might have grown harsher to try to distance themselves. It depends a bit depending on what dialogue tree you walk down. But in either case, Ortega chooses to take harsh words as just words, which has very little to do with any real emotions behind them. Of course, this might also blind Ortega to the truth, that some Sidesteps truly are DONE with Ortega.

Did the Rangers know feral hobo Sidestep, or were they already tamed by the time they all met?

I will leave that to headcanon, but I think Ortega at least had a taste of early Sidestep before they learned how to fit in a little bit more.

Did Void know their power could be used against them like that? Was Sidestep's control of Void's power unique?

Void had no idea, and if they had suspected, Sidestep would have had a bullet in the head at the first opportunity. But that's the problem with great power, you grow lazy. And I am not sure I would call it unique, but certainly uncommon enough. And, above all, control without being awed/enamored/subdued. And THAT was unique.

Do some cuckoos work deep in-cover for some of their missions? Do they have missions that last longer, even months? If so, does the farm only give these kind of mission for trusted re-genes or do they have some other way of making sure they won't betray the mission or try to escape?

In general, deep in-cover missions are avoided. A day or two, yes, maybe a week, but no more. It is considered too dangerous, and they would risk losing the cuckoo. A longer mission would have to be of utmost importance to be approved, and surrounded with all possible safeguards.

Did HG siblings have stuff they liked to do together?

Yeah, especially the older ones who were closer in age. I can imagine some sports, probably basketball because that can be done easily on city streets. Things like street racing, or maybe music.

How often does HG have to re-thread someone who is difficult to keep hold of? And how often they would have to re-thread someone who is easier to keep hold of?

For an easy one, where the thread is close to what the victim already feels/wants, and they are not prone to asking questions maybe once a year or two. For a hard one, where the thread goes against what they want, and their mind is hostile/strong, it might be once a week.

Do re-genes have any kind of jokes? What kind? More in nihilistic side or do they vary?

Of course! A sense of humor is a very human thing, not that they show it to anybody else. I imagine they have much of the same jokes as normal people do, making fun of scientists/handlers, and the absurdity of their situation. Probably dark, slightly nihilistic, and very hidden in codes.

Do re-genes have some kind of rules among them, that if broken it might be viewed as betrayal? Like let's say, killing a fellow re-gene on purpose?

Yes, they have. Their lives are surrounded by rules, and one of the ways to take back power is to make their own. So yes, Re-Genes can become outcast among their own. Funny how they often don't last long in the field...

And how are newborn re-genes taken in by others? How do they learn their language?

The same way humans do, by spending time with others once they are decanted. They are in a state of "heightened learning" at that time, as the brain is trying to process and integrate with the AI-chip memories. They learn fast, much like small children. It is in the Farm's interest to mix/integrate newly decanted Re-Genes with older ones, they have noticed that produces better/more stable stock, though they are not sure exactly why. Some theorize bioresonance between AI-chips, it's amazing what ideas people will subscribe to in order to avoid seeing their subjects as human as they are.

Where did Sidestep come up with "side of angels" sentence? Is it just Sidestep being poetic or do the villains just call heroes side that?

Though I do not deal much with religion in the books, it still exists. I can see that term used in the media, or a fancy title on a book about heroic sacrifice. Sidestep's magpie mind picked it up somewhere.

How is Nocturne's mother doing? Is she happy? Does she know Nocturne is in Los Diablos?

She still lives in Chicago, and knows Nocturne has moved to Los Diablos, but they don't speak much. Nocturne pays for her stay in a home though, so there's that.

Is there a possibility of some Sidestep missing having other re-genes around them?

Yeah, I can imagine that. Sidestep's feelings about other (non-SD Re-Genes) will be talked about at some point.

Does Regina's goals align with the farm's goals?

What kind of organization only has one goal? Let alone is in agreement on how to reach it?

What is mob boss crew up to if Sidestep has different villain career?

Think Pelayo and Ward might still run with the Wolf Pack. Nehal's a driver for some other criminal, and ZaZa's always got offers for his services.

What does Vera and Sky-Raider like to do in their free time?

Still working on figuring out that.

What was the reason Ortega's and Special Directives past teamup?

Big threat. Probably stolen military equipment involved. Haven't decided the details yet.

How is Flipside doing? Are they still following what's going on in the superhero world?

Probably a little bit, but she's a bit busy with real life things at the moment.

Can Sidestep lose their villain base?

Let's put it this way: Some Sidesteps might have to downgrade to the tunnel base...

If Sidestep was rescued by one of the rangers is it still possible to break the ties with the Rangers/the rescuer?

Yeah.

In previous QnA you said HG would have found it impossible to ignore first time escape Sidestep if they had seen their face. Would HG had actually done anything or just had someone to keep eye on them?

Oh HG would have done something. 100%.

Did HG take the boost drug at the same time as their older brother? What was their older brother's reason for taking the boost drug?

Yeah, they all took it together (not the baby sibling). And the reason was power and desperation. They were in a position where they either had to accept that they might have to flee and abandon everything they worked for, or take a risk and maybe get powers to fight back against a superior force. They (and some of their closest lieutenants) choose to do the latter. Enough of them survived that it worked. And yeah, that was an event that was quite unlikely (and probably one reason the youngest sibling was marked for pickup).

One of the things that I adore about your books, that really gripped me from the beginning is how clear it is that Sidestep is an unreliable narrator, especially when it comes to their perception of themselves. And with various paths in book two doubling down on that (including the one where Mortum states it outright) I have to ask if this is a theme you enjoy exploring as much as I enjoy reading it? :D do you have any plans to make step confront their flawed perspective? beyond the plates currently in the air?

Oh I love an unreliable narrator, because so many people are that in real life as well. Not to mention the fact that it makes the reader feel clever and involved once they start noticing the different layers of the text. I have seen so many people have various "oh. wait. OH SHIT." moments when they finally realize that Sidestep is not to be trusted. I live for that. And it makes going back to reread everything so much more fun. Seriously, half the time I write for my own amusement when it comes to these things. And yes, there are plans for Sidestep to realize things, that's the best part.

We know that for a telepath most sidesteps seem weirdly oblivious to the astounding volume of people in their proximity with a crush on them. Are there any more hearts in their past they might have crushed under the bootheel of obviousness or self loathing?

Oh yes. So many people confuse their own self-loathing with some sort of objective opinion that the world should share. Sidestep is one of them, with the added drawback of being able to truly push people away with more than words. It's sad, but understandable.

If they were not constantly emitting a 'don't look at me' aura would Ortega also know the frustration of swooning serving staff oogling their companion at every establishment they patronize? My Ace self revels in the soapy drama of it all. The farm sure does seem to make them pretty, or is the mysterious stranger shtick just really working overtime for them?

What is pretty? What is charisma? What is attraction? This can vary for all the Sidesteps. Some really, truly do look good, with the scars only adding to the look. Some might be charismatic, in that I-don't-care way that truly confident people have. Some might go deep into that brooding loner in a corner that attracts so many people because it is so tempting to project yourself on a mystery. How much of this is created/built/innate in Sidestep will vary. Some might have been trained this way by the Farm, while others were taught to suppress personality and be blind and unnoticeable, and might take this path as revenge.

I'll keep it short and simple. How have you been doing, Malin? Hope the process has been smooth and fun!

Well, thank you! I am doing a lot better now. Finally have no day job to go to (though still paperwork to go through transitioning to self-employment I'll deal with this week). I am taking a week or so off from working now, in order to transition my brain into this new life. Or, well, I really do need that one week to fix up the garden and clean the house, because so much here has just been neglected due to work and I've got guests from abroad coming over in a few weeks. I'm trying to wean myself off too much online life, it is so easy to let the hours go while randomly browsing twitter or youtube. Sitting here answering questions is the first time I've booted up the computer in a while. Have done a lot of thinking, and really looking forward to being able to sit down and write and knowing there is nothing else I should be doing, and that I can continue the next day if I want to. Summer is all about transitioning into the writing life.

I have a very important question. Could the pain gate help with eating very spicy food?

Probably if you go up to the Carolina Reaper level, then it could do something.

What do Chen's protein shakes taste like? Vanilla chalk? Chocolate dirt? And has the other rangers ever drank it (ex. like on accident/a dare/hangover cure/no more food in the fridge)?

Oh don't get me started on protein shakes. Ugh. So. Ugh. I think Chen is partial to Chocolate dirt, it smells a lot better, and that does a lot. He has probably experimented with making his own too, at home. Whey protein is not that hard to get. But at work sometimes you just need something quick and safe. I think Ortega has probably stole one or two, and been blamed for the times when Argent just needed a quick boost. She would never admit to that. Daniel tried once and was like "why?". He would never touch it again.

Chen makes a shelf just for Sidestep in their fridge at the Ranger's HQ. How exactly did that work in terms of keeping the snacks in there? Especially for a Sidestep that hardly ever visits? Does Chen chuck out the expired food if Step never shows up lol? Do the other rangers ever take food from that shelf? (Betting Angie hehe)

You don't know things that expire, but let's face it, Angie doesn't let things go to waste even if she never lets anybody know what she does with it. She's clearing the fridge, don't question her methods.

What do the Rangers think of a step who suddenly starts buying and wearing expensive/high fashion clothes?

Ortega knows why (but is wrong). Chen will suspect crime, even if he doesn't suspect Sidestep is the villain. Argent legitimately doesn't give a damn. If pressed, she would say it is probably to annoy Ortega. Daniel is just happy that Sidestep is in a better position in life now than before.

What does Ortega think of a known telepath villain who names themselves heartbreak?

Depends on the suspicion label. In both cases, they suspect it is to mess with them personally.

There were a couple of really cool asks in the past couple of Q&As about villains painting their armor regene colours/reclaiming their regene identity, there's also likely going to a few intentional/unintentional villain identity reveals in book 3 as mentioned as well, so it got me wondering, Would there be villain regene reveals without necessarily revealing your identity? Similar to the auction scene with argent but more public?

That's a good idea, that might happen!

There's been some answers regarding argents technopath abilities, specifically in regards to be able to see sidesteps AI chip and the inner workings of the villain's armor. Could she still see the AI Chip through the armor? Or would it just blend in?

It would just blend in, and even if she focused and knew it was there, she would most likely think it was for amor interface purposes.

There's been a couple of couple of answers that have hinted at this possibility of this before as well as few scenes related to gates in retribution, but let's say, hypothetically sidestep has the possibility of becoming another heartbreak. Would that be more of a bad end, game over scenerio? Or something we'd have to live with the consequences of?

It could be both.

Only asking this because my steam randomly decided to update rebirth with a 900KB update and i couldn't find any posts about it, but will there be a patreon post once the new rebirth update is finished?

The Steam version of the game was lagging behind all the others in older updates, it sounds like CoG finally realized and fixed that! Nice! But I will of course make a patreon post about it!

As a recaptured escapee, was step used as an example to the other regenes about what happens if you try to escape/misbehave?

Oh yes, you bet that happened.

What would a stat of 100 in force of mind look like ability-wise?

The most powerful telepath alive, but it is all in how you use it.

Why does Owl like Argent?

Argent is a Carolina Reaper cupcake, how can she not like that?

What does Owl think of Herald and Steel?

Herald is a nice boy who will get himself killed. Steel is competent and knows what he's doing. She respects his sacrifices.

Do all the rangers have their own office?

Yes.

If Sidestep had been successfully mindwiped by the core, would they have been used for active duty again?

Possibly, yes. Might still be considered too dangerous, though.

Will we be locked out of a romance with Daniel if we're revealed as the villain?

No, what would be the fun in that?

Why does Vera hate Herald? Is the feeling of being nemesises mutual between them?

It is not mutual, Herald has no idea. It is a combination of powers and what she would call his "holier than though" persona.

What do Nocturne's instincts tell her about Argent/Steel/Herald?

Argent is dangerous but she's not sure how dangerous, and thus she is best avoided. Steel is a known player, the best Marshal in a while. Herald might be useful in the future, but right now best left alone.

Can you see there being an option for a voluntary re-gene reveal with all of the rangers at once?

Maybe. It doesn't feel in character now, but circumstances might change.

In the Void story you posted here, we saw what might be considered the 'AI-side' of Sidestep. Is this the case? And if it is, is it something we can catch glimpses of in the future books?

Exactly what was seen you have to decide for yourself. I won't say exactly what it was.

More interactions with villain fans?

Is planned!

Could there have been Farm scientists who were fans of Sidestep? How might they feel when it's discovered that the vigilante is a run-away re-gene?

Oh that would have been a SCANDAL, and for some it probably threw their whole world view out of order. This should not be possible, but since it is... what does that say about what they are doing to Re-Genes?

In the case of trans Sidesteps, are any of the ROs curious about what it means to be a transgender re-gene? I can imagine Mortum being especially interested.

I don't think any of them have specifically connected that to being a re-gene, but I imagine that Mortum will be the one to ask about it. Doesn't have the same kind of decorum.

If Sidestep's conscious is stuck in Ace's body. With high individuality stat can Ace comeback? If so will Sidestep and Ace merge into one conscious with both memories? Sorta like metamorphosis like in Cyberpunk 2077.

I don't know the reference, but you will have to wait and see! There will be many possible outcomes.

Hi! First off I'm incredibly appreciative of the ace/aro options, and doubly so of the secondary select of if "your character feels sexual attraction to people" for the demi option. Going through the Ortega romance apartment scene trying both the "demi/no sexual attraction to people" and "asexual" options I noticed there didn't seem to be unique text when selecting your character to be ace that I came across.

The "sexualexperience" tag I talked about above is defunct these days. So no, it won't trigger anything, mainly because I have discovered that people mean a lot of different things with labels, and using the wrong one tends to take people out more than not mentioning it at all. So yeah, it's not used for anything these days, it has been replaced by a number of new flags instead (the "hrny" is one of them).

What are the intended effects of the romance selects, and are there plans to incorporate them into the text more in future romance scenes? For example ace people who don't identify as demi may still have sex with their partners as a form of intimacy even if there's no sexual attraction, but it feels like the current ace route doesn't acknowledge that, or acknowledge your sexuality if you choose not to have sex.

I honestly have to see how things go as I write things. There are a lot of things you don't talk about your first night together, that might come up later in a relationship. I tried to make things feel as organic as I could in the moment, instead of trying to fit everything in. There is a longer talk about ace/aro and what that might mean about love and sex with various partners. I don't see that as something that can be handled in a simple tag or a line, it's worth a conversation. I am learning a lot about that side of the spectrum as I write, since I am not on it, but a lot of my playtesters are. It's complicated and multifaceted, and will not be forgotten. That I can promise.

For Sidesteps who got their legs broken, would getting their pain gate implant fixed be something to consider in the near future? they think about how it was 'taken away' in the hospital scene, and it seems practical to get it fixed given the business they're in.

That is an interesting thought. I think the issue here is that 1) this tech is very classified and not available to the public, 2) requires risky spinal surgery, and 3) the place it usually goes is badly damaged from the fall, it's not just an easy mod operation.

For more secretive Sidesteps, will there be opportunities for a strategic/insincere regene reveal to placate other characters that Sidestep knows are very suspicious of them being up to no good?

Sounds like a good plan.

Does Ortega actually care about fashion, like wears specific brands cause it's their favorite, wearing what's "in style" or do they just like to wear expensive and pretty clothing?

It is the latter. Argent is the one that actually cares about fashion. Ortega cares about clothes, and what they say about them.

Does the Void blood stay within the person who ingests it blood or does it affect their mind or anything else? Meaning if the Catastrofiend saw a Puppetstuck Step and the intruder in Step's body next to each other, which would it recognize as Sidestep?

Void blood breaks the blood-brain barrier. And well... the Catastrofiend was already plenty weird with the puppet, weren't it?

Did Chen lose his legs from the airstrike during Heartbreak or some else?

He dragged/carried Ortega away, intent of getting them out of the building before the airstrike. However, there was no time, so he shot them through the staircase into the cellar, where they both were trapped as the building collapsed. Chen shielded Ortega with his armor, locking it in position to let Ortega have enough space to breathe under him, but his legs got badly crushed under the rubble. If they had been saved, he'd never have regained full function and would have had to retire, so the decision was made to amputate and mod.

Would you ever write about Dreamweaver? Hearing that Sentinel got taken over (?) and Step had to help him out of it is super interesting!

Maybe!

Was Heartbreak close to being labeled as Omega? Or was it not labeled at all because no one knew whether it was a mod or a boost?

Not officially labeled, but it is one of the "unofficial" Omega possibilities, especially if it had been allowed to continue. It was still expanding.

I know people have asked about giving Rat King their own body and stuff but will there be potential for more Rat King using the armor shenanigans in the future? Step being able to exit the armor and then surprise whoever they're fighting when their armor keeps fighting without them in it sounds awesome!

Rat King armor shenanigans is a gift, and I have so much fun writing that.

How exactly are mindscapes formed? By experiences, I.E Heartbreak; vibes, I.E Herald; or interests, I.E HG? Can it be all three? I know it's probably up to headcanon but would Steps mindscape be more likely to involve the Farm since they spent so long there or could it be something that they long for, like the old Ranger's HQ or Tia Elena's ranch?

Mindscapes is all of them. Like physical looks. You have your body, sure, but also your clothes, how you act, how you talk, makeup and other things. The mind is the same. Mood. Vibes. Memories. Preferences. Intentional training. It can vary a lot, and when we get into that, you'll get some choices.

I know this is a thread for FH but I saw in a previous QnA that you started writing dialogue because of Hawke from Dragon Age and as a HUGE Dragon Age fan I was wondering if you have played all the games and if Da2 was your favorite? And did you take any inspiration from DA and put it into FH?

DA2 was my favorite, no competition, followed by Orgins. I was so let down by Inquisition I lost interest once the Hawke act was done. I think the inspiration I took was how important it is to have a fun cast that can interact with each other, with strong personalities, and their own views and goals. Also, the strength of leaving the unknown in the story, I always felt the DA series glowed the most strongly for me when we were still wondering about red lyrium, the architect, the corruption of the golden city in the fade and everything else you just tough but never learn the truth about. What I loved about DA2 especially was that you were just a refugee in a strange city with your oddball friends trying to make a life in a world that was increasingly hostile to everything you stood for. It felt real. It felt wonderful.

Oh, also the different Hawke personalities was a huge inspiration on how to craft characters.

Then finally, this isn't a question but I LOVE that you added the option of not being a known telepath into the game! Not only does it make Step less suspicious, I can only IMAGINE what the possibilities of doing the reveal could be in future, especially if they still think Step only has surface-level telepathy, so exciting!

Being sneaky is a legit career choice!

How weak would the Rangers+Mortum be to a Sidestep with really good puppy dog eyes?

We all know none of them are immune by now...

In past Q&As and extra stories you've hinted that Ortega would be the most likely to turn villain and some characters are already concerned about this possibility. If Sidestep didn't come back or they didn't meet at the cafe what would have been the straw that broke the camels back?

Concrete proof of some of their suspicions. An ally with enough tech to keep their mods going. The latter is important, Ortega is no martyr. They know how complicated their mods are and the work that goes into maintaining them.

If any on the Rangers turned villain who would be the first to go after them and who would be the most conflicted about fighting a former teammate?

We all know Herald would be the first... and also the most conflicted.

If an anarchist Step and Nocturne had similar goals would there be a possibility of them working together without HG or Nocturne betraying HG (if threading wasn't a factor anymore)?

Nocturne is unflinchingly loyal to HG, that has nothing to do with threading.

You've also said you are considering possibly allowing players to upgrade the villain suit in future, if you've got any ideas would these upgrades be the same options we had for the suit in Rebirth or would there be any new options?

Nothing specific yet, but it would rely on what I could realistically code in an interesting fight.

A lot of the Rat King bonding moments seem to occur when Sidestep fails or doing badly; will there be more opportunities to bond with the RK during less precarious or positive situations?

Yes, you already have some clues that the Rat King has prepared a surprise for you...

Did Ortega get gut punch moments from revisiting their memories of sidestep and realized just how they didn't value themselves and were convinced that Ortega would hate them for "what" they are after the regene reveal? Especially if Ortega called them a fake and even more so if they realized sidestep wasn't a fake afterwards but sidestep was long gone. ("I had a funeral?" Or "I couldn't be what you wanted, so.." etc. moments) Will Sidestep and Ortega get a chance to talk about it further? Will we have an opportunity to tell them about the Farm if we didn't in the second book?

Oh Ortega might have quick and loud reactions, but you get that they will replay past conversations in their head with the new information. And yes, you will have new opportunities to share.

in one epilogue Ortega says they trust their initial reactions more, but they have an initial reaction of thinking sidestep as a fake in other paths. I suppose this was intentional. What they thought "I trust my initial reactions more" is a general thought they tend to have or is it more of a thing they say to deal with the info they're struggling with if the question makes sense? I assume the latter but...

Ortega is used to acting without hesitating. It's a legacy of being very good at dangerous/violent things where a moment of doubt or hesitation might kill you. This backfires in interactions at times, where Ortega assumes, and then has issues backtracking later. The "faker" path will be an interesting one for Ortega to deal with.

Has Shroud consumed any of the farm scientists and/or handlers? Fellow regenes? If they have, I imagine they have quite the info about the farm. If regenes know about sidestep, does that mean she does as well?

Shroud has nommed on a lot of people, but sadly, information is not retained unless it is reinforced and actively remembered. Most things she absorbed is forgotten soon afterwards, useless to her daily life.

Are any of the regenes who witnessed Sidestep's birth currently alive?

Probably.

Does Sidestep not being a great team player have anything to do with the fact that cuckoos were resented by other regenes in some cases? Especially because they were a telepath and the "pet project"?

You bet.

Sky-raider was military. He probably worked with regenes as well. Does he have any prejudice or/and uneasiness similar to Chen and Ortega? I imagine him looking at this whole thing as a "damn what a mess" as he rescues sidestep.

Sky-Raider has worked with Re-Genes while in the military. There is a big bunch of spoilers there. No uneasiness though.

I always thought possession stuff was related to HB. But I'm wondering about another thing, since it's not affected by the dampeners does that mean Sidestep can possess Ortega? Or are they safe?

Interesting. Sidestep has never tried.

Does HG know about chargestep's romantic involvement? They now know Ortega knew Sidestep, who looked a lot like their sibling and I don't think they would really leave it alone.

If Charge and Sidestep are somewhat open with it, yes. HG likes being informed.

Has Ortega ever noticed Sidestep slipping to regene language pre and after hb and thought it as a nervous tick or something since they didn't have context?

Heh. Yes, there are some gestures there that are definitely Re-Gene in nature, and Ortega doesn't pick up on and takes as ticks.

If tech shortcuts around Ortega, does this ever cause troubles for Argent like fire does?

No. The nanos are not hurt by low voltage currents or magnetic fields, they need more powerful things to be affected.

Has Argent seen the AI chip on the villain like she's seen it on sidestep? Did she get any clues because of that? I assume she can influence it... Wait. That means she saw it in Shroud's brain as well. I imagine it won't be hard for her to figure out Shroud is a regene if Sidestep's regene secret is revealed.

Nope on the villain, the helmet confuses things. Could have seen it in Shroud though, but she needs context. Lots of various implants.

Does Ortega know how many languages sidestep knows? Will they have a "oh boy" moment once they realize the farm fitted a dozen languages into Sidestep's brain?

Nope, and yes they will be slightly envious.

The last one, I know I asked a lot. Do you have any advice for the writers who's stuck between languages? Being very estranged from writing in my mother language but not very comfortable with English either.

That is a natural state to be, and one you will pass through once you've written enough English. It will take a lot of words, but that's the only thing that can cure it. I generally avoid mixing languages and find that helps. If I write in english, I only read books in english. Once I need to switch to swedish (which I need to do soon) I will start by reading a lot of swedish books. One thing at a time.

Hi! Just wondering what advice you would have for someone looking to start writing? I know it's best to start slow. How do you just accept what you have down and then revise it later? I never do rough drafts when writing papers and such but I feel you obviously need to plan more what you're doing when writing fiction.

Nah, you don't need to plan. Especially not at the start. Look at it this way, do you have the experience to even know how to plan a work of fiction? You don't. And then you'll only follow others advice and it will be weird. Just start writing and see what happens. You don't even have to start at the beginning, start at the fun part! The one you want to write! The killer of starting to write is having this conception that things needs to be a certain way, so you end up spending months writing boring stuff to get to the cool stuff, and explaining things and background so when you get to the cool stuff, you're already bored of it. Just go for it. In media res.

As for making it into a finished work... well, if you're starting out, don't worry about it. Even if you write from the start to the end, by the time you have reached the end, you will need to rewrite the beginning because you have learned a lot and the story has changed. The important thing to remember is: FINISH IT! That's all. Finish the short story. Finish the book. Don't plan for a massive series, if it happens it happens. But you need to learn how to finish things. To hell with grammar, structure or characterization, finishing things is the REAL superpower. Focus on that and the rest will come.

Also, read!! Everything! Different genres, authors, ages. Go to your local library and walk along the shelves and pull out books with cool names or spines. Open them in the middle and read a bit. See how they start. Play around with books. Which ones are boring? Why? Put them away and read new ones. Here you don't need to focus on finishing things. Do shit like pick five books and compare their first chapters. Their first sentence. Try to figure out why books do what they do. What you like. Experiment!

How did you become the awesome writer you are now? is what I suppose I want to know.

Read what I wrote above about reading books. That's where everything start. Read. Explore. Imitate. Have fun. Be weird. Don't care. And give it time! I'm old. I couldn't have written this at 22.

In case of Anathema who is trans, how does their invulnerability factor into their transition and as such thoughts on their body and identity? Since I assume they couldn't get surgery, couldn't do T shots etc.

Yeeeeeeeah, that is something Anathema had to deal with. No magic bullet. Stuck in this body, no matter what. But, there are a lot of people who have transitioned and have no interest in going on hormones, or having operations. The "perfect" transition doesn't have to be the goal for everyone, it might just be finding a way to live with yourself and your own body in a way that makes you moderately comfortable. Sometimes that's enough.

During the Regene reveal to Ortega, you can call them out for calling Regenes "blue-skinned freaks" in the past, to which they reply, uncertain, "Did I really say that? I mean, I guess I could have". Did they really say that and just don't remember, or was this a memory implanted in Step by the Farm after Heartbreak? To make Step feel even more alienated and abandoned?

Interesting to consider, isn't it? Both are likely. People rarely remember asshole things they said when they didn't consider they were being assholes (because the other party was assumed to agree), and the Farm also had an interest in fostering a split.

Why is it only possible, as Puppet, to sleep with Mortum but not with Ortega?

Because Ortega was using the puppet for information at that point, and while in some cases they have caught feelings, that was a line they were not willing to cross.

How long did it take you to write the entire Auction chapter and how the hell did you pull off //so many// different paths and variables?? I'm so incredibly impressed!

It was the single worst part of the entire book, and one I have cursed so many times, and the cause of 70% of the bugs. It was a nightmare, and I shudder to think how long it took.

Speaking of the auction, I've been code-diving and wondered - why is Zaber referred to with Mortum's pronouns? Just for variety, or is there a story reason...?

I have some red herring variables in the game, just to make sure that just because a variable is linked doesn't necessarily mean it is vital to the plot.

How do you balance writing Sidestep as a consistent, semi-established character, with giving players choices? What is your process, or, what do you try to keep in mind when deciding on what choices to make available (or not) for the player, be they of story consequence or just conversation flavor?

I have several Sidesteps living in my head, and try to write scenes that fit them. That can't always be done, but in the end I just go with what feels right to me. No rules, only vibes. Some things have to be cut because they would derail everything, though.

Kind of in line with that, what kind of a Sidestep do you have in mind when writing? Are they more nebulous, or do you have a specific Sidestep or Sidesteps of your own that you craft the story and its possible paths around?

Oh there's a bunch of them. I often start with one in mind when I write a scene, and then adds choices and adjusts for the others. My OG Sidestep is literally the tiniest side path at this point, most people ain't that nasty.

You mentioned in the last Q&A that you will be writing full-time soon, what are you the most excited about and what worries you the most about that change? (Or, if you've already started, what has been the best and the worst so far about that change?)

So far I am just trying to get used to the fact that this is a change, and not a Temporary vacation. I am most worried about paperwork, insurances, missing anything and all the other things that comes with the freelance life that I had taken for granted as a worker with union protection. So there's a lot to arrange there. Other than that, I look forward to finally having time to do some of the other projects I have too, and push other things over the finishing line so they can be seen. Fallen Hero is just one of them. So I guess right now it is mostly happiness, stress and confusion. I need to get a schedule in place too and get an overview and a plan of things.

You've said before that you've added unplanned scenes or story branches that the characters surprised you with while writing. Have you ever ended up scrapping a planned plot point for the same reason—i.e., because it turned out not to work for the characters once you sat down to write it?

Hmmm Ortega dumping Sidestep for the puppet might count as that, the branching/repercussions just didn't work without a major rewrite not worth it for the few who would end up on the same path. I did also scrap the "simply not going to the HG meeting" path, because even though it would be in character, the branching was also overwhelming.

I love how Ricardo will change his appearance in response to literally a single joking comment from the MC. Obviously there's practical reasons why Julia can't do the same, but in a hypothetical world where hair length was as easy to change as facial hair, would she also grow her hair back out as soon as the MC admitted they missed it?

Maybe. There are hair extensions, but the short is also practical.

I've always found it funny to change my MC's hair color/style in Retribution so that they look identical to the puppet, even if they didn't previously. Do you think Ortega (or other characters who meet the puppet) would find that "mirror image" situation as strange/disconcerting as they do in Rebirth, or would it be easier to shrug off as a coincidence?

Easier to shrug off, a lot of people look similar in style to each other.

How easily can the Rat King distinguish between and remember individual humans, and has their ability to do so changed over the years? When they recognize the Rangers, is it solely because they remember them from previous encounters or partly because they're able to piggyback off of the MC's familiarity with them? (And in Ortega's case, maybe also the MC's ability to detect them at all?)

It has grown a LOT since interacting with Sidestep, because all of a sudden they have connection to people as more than targets.

Are Shroud's hair and nails safe to touch, or would that be just as bad as touching her skin?

Safe.

Does Sky-Raider celebrate International Talk Like a Pirate Day? Or would he resent the implication that he's not already, by definition, talking like a pirate just by being himself?

Oh boy. I am truly not sure about that. I really need to write him more to see how he leans into things.

Is there anyone with Methuselah style powers (lives super long time and/or just doesn't age) from history that's still around?

Not openly known.

If Thief Sidestep managed to steal the Regenerator before the auction started, what was Argent's reaction when she realized it had been stolen already?

Fury. And then starting to track down exactly what happened and where it might be kept...

Has Vera been gathering recordings of various villains/heroes to Mitchell? Or at least some of them?

Hehe. Now that is a very interesting source. Surely, Mitchell must have sources.

What kind of social life do HG, Nocturne, Jake, Sky-Raider, and Vera have?

HG and Nocturne are comfortable homebodies, avoiding a public social life except when blanketed by the armor of wealth. HG goes out more often, but rarely as herself. Jake is the one with a social life, and likes interacting with people. He's the one who goes to parties and has fun with friends, never really letting on exactly how high he technically is placed in the organization. It's useful to be just an enforcer (who happens to sleep with the boss and the boss's girlfriend). Sky-Raider is social, likes parties, likes to have fun. Vera is a bit more reserved, she prefers friends she already knows.

Does Mitchell have files on Vera and Sky-Raider as well?

Oh yes. One day I'll post them.

Did Vera or Sky-Raider enter the villain world with a splash like Sidestep did with their debut or were they more discreet?

Vera has always been discreet. She's happy sowing a lot of reputations around herself, only half which is true. She likes it when people don't know what to expect, and she likes playing into expectations. Sky-Raider started with a bang, robbing the top floor of a corporate skyscraper where they were holding a reveal for a prototype mag-coil launcher.

What would the Rangers, Dr. Mortum's, HG's, Nocturne's, Jake's, Vera's and/or Sky-Raider's d&d alignment be?

DnD alignments is a very flawed thing. While the order-chaos axis is pretty clear, the definitions of good and evil are not something I am happy with. I see it as more of a selfishness scale, with good being more altruistic and evil being more self-centered. That being said, a lawful good character can cause just as much suffering in the world (and think they are right in doing so) as a chaotic evil one. So this read this more as: Good=altruistic and Evil=Selfish. Ortega: True neutral, Steel neutral good, Herald lawful good, Argent lawful neutral, Mortum chaotic neutral, Nocturne lawful evil, HG neutral evil, Jake lawful neutral, Vera chaotic neutral, Sky-Raider neutral evil.

Does Ortega have any particular opinion or impressions on Jake and Nocturne?

Jake is a bruiser who is fun to fight. Nocturne is hot but dangerous.

What made HG decide to trust Nocturne with their secrets?

It was the first time HG had met someone who understood their way of thinking, and they felt a strong enough kinship that it was worth risking everything in order to gain something more.

How do the Rangers like to style/decorate their office spaces? Do all of them have their own office spaces or only some of them?

Ortega's is rather cluttered, and filled with lots of gifts, clippings, little personal memento and the odd plant. Chen's is open and airy, with a dog bed and a crate for Spoon. It is wheelchair accessible for bad days, and he's keeping the chair in the room. Likes the reminder for certain visitors. Daniel's is neat and ordered, he tends to keep track of his things. Strangely enough it also looks the most neutral and representative, not much personality there. Argent's is homey, and includes a comfortable lounging chair with a massage function.

What is Vera's opinion on HG, Nocturne, and Jake?

They pay good, and she suspects the relationship between them. She's always dealt with them professionally, and is keen on keeping that going. Lucrative.

What is HG's, Jake's, and Nocturne's opinion on Vera?

A reliable mercenary and occasional assassin. She has been trusted to meet HG and shake their hand, and has done nothing to make them rethink the relationship. She's a bit picky with assignments though, and is usually not the one they pick to get someone killed. Too much of a chance she'd say no.

How does HG like to style/decorate their office?

Nocturne decorates it all. It is to give the right impression, so it's dark, rich and opulent.

Did HG's oldest brother create a codename for himself or did he go by his real name?

He went by Hollow Ground, our current HG took that over after his death.

I recall in one Q&A it was stated Herald is one of the characters who can be most influenced/changed by Sidesteps actions/character, which characters can be from most to least influenced/changed by Sidestep's actions/character (if it can be evaluated)?

The least is Argent, followed by Chen.

What are Vera's and Sky-Raider's pet peeves?

Vera's is the lack of a city planning, and Sky-Raider really miss good ice cream.

If Ortega's unromanced by both Step and the Puppet, have they dated anyone since Rebirth?

Yeah, probably. But not to a serious extent.

Any chances of Ortega becoming Marshal again in-game if... say, the current one happened to be permanently put out of business?

There is always a possibility, especially as an interim Marshal.

Have Mortum and Ortega slept together?

Nope. And they both laughed at that question. Preposterous.

Did OG chargestep end up together?

No.

Lastly a non-FHR related question I hope it's ok to ask: is your partner still working on Remnants? I liked the demo!

It is in the works, and more has been written that is not in the demo! But there's been other work too, we are both busy people. Some other projects needs finishing first.

Herald's powers seem to reflexively protect him from hitting the ground hard, as the MC observes during training. Would the same thing happen if you, say, threw him hard against the ceiling or shot him out of a cannon, or is it only gravity *reduction* that comes naturally?

Gravity reduction is what comes natural. Stopping a fall is reflexive, but being hit into a car is not.

Apologies if this has been asked before. But What goes through Ortega's head if Sidestep freaks out and starts having a panic attack after making out in the alley?

I mean at this point Ortega knows Sidestep, and has probably seen a lot of panic attacks. Mostly chiding themself for pushing too hard. They should have known.

The dream you have when you say no to going to therapy, is it just a coincidence or does a LOT of the dream sound very similar to things that happened to Ortega? The falling and wondering why your suit didn't protect you (the jump that paralyzed them), the holding your guts in your hands (the Catastrofiend injury) "It feels like a bad channel on the radio, bleeding static into your life," (obvious), the fly buzzing at the window but not be able to move and swat it (in the safehouse during the Void thing). The whole thing talks about how these are memories but they feel alien soooooo.... Am I overthinking this? Or is this one of those times where you accidentally managed to get into Ortega's head?

I mean words are words and they are rarely accidental. And that is sure a lot of words strung together in a sentence. May I just add that I love how people are analyzing and thinking about things! Not gonna say yes or no, but hehehe.

What *are* #3 and #4 on Steel's list of what bothers him about the MC, anyway? The extremely suspicious training? The dishonesty? We know #1 and #2 are the telepathy and the resistance to background checks, and #5 is that he doesn't understand them, but he never went into the rest.

#3 is the suspicious military training, and #4 is the suspicion that Sidestep was/is a habitual liar.

You mentioned Regina was a scientist. What is she now (director of what), exactly?

That is spoilers.

Post heartbreak, has Ortega ever crossed paths with the "old man" without knowing it?

Nope.

Can shroud only eat the minds/memories of a victim that has an uninterrupted neural pathway between the point of contact and the brain?

Yep! That is needed.

Did Sidestep lose access to their own body/puppet after losing consciousness because someone else already took over and was actively blocking their access? (instead of being a side-effect by painkillers / shaken up as they thought?)

Oh that is biiiig spoilers.

Was the intruder previously unable to take over because Sidestep was conscious, or was the intruder just not strong enough at that point of time?

Or was the crash just that traumatic an incident?

Where would argent fall on the enhanced scale? Since she's not boosted at all, and not modded in the traditional sense?

Argent is special. I honestly don't know how to rate her, since she's a composite. High.

Has there been just one regene AI chip design during FHR, or has it undergone development during the years? If the latter, what types of improvements have been made?

The design has remained the same, but it has become smaller and more efficient over the years.

Does a regene's AI chip get recycled when a regene expires with the AI chip intact?

No, it is discarded. There has been attempt at reuse, both after wiping, and in the raw state, but it has not ended well.

To what extent are Nocturne and Jake aware of HG's past life, family history etc? What about their entourage? Like, do ppl in their circle have some ideas about who they were before they became a mob boss or at least how they got there?

Nocturne and Jake knows pretty much everything. HG is very open with them. As for other people in the inner circle, it varies. They know the sanitized story, not the dark secrets.

What (telepathic) precautions and measures did the SD take for the HB mission? Also, where they waiting for the Rangers to do the job for them and then claim HB after?

Dampeners in the ambulance, full dose of numbers for the staff, who was already well trained and evaluated for resistance. Also, the option of shutting people down via remote control in case of contamination. The ambulance was fully operable remotely. The ideal would be to claim the boyd after.

Does Argent ever (mentally) refer to herself with plural referrals (we/us, etc) because of the nanovores? I'm curious because sometimes their emotions influence her, too.

Not often. She works hard on keeping boundaries, but at times they slip.

What triggered Sentinel's and Ashfall's/Pyroclast's TBR?

I haven't detailed that, so I have no idea yet!

When Ace tells Shroud "you will kill me but that will be the end of you," and that killing them "will be the biggest mistake of (her) life." -

What did Ace see?

Is Shroud's downfall set in stone, as hinted as by Ace?

That is a big spoiler, exactly what Ace saw might be found out in game.

Before Heartbreak, were that any weird incidents - documented or undocumented - that went down in the Heartbreak apartment building/complex?

Yes. Quite a few.

May we have a basic rundown of Charge's fully-kitted suit?

Ahahaha good try. Nope. You'll have to face that in game.

Or if I could just get like, a General Idea that'd be fine too, I can run with that.

Nope! None. Sidestep has to do research for that...

Even though we only really "commit" to a villain path in Retri, the options for the gala in Rebirth already give us a taste of what Step's career could be in the future. I'm curious about your writing process here; did you already know which careers you would write in Retri, or did those come from what was already in Rebirth? As in, which came first when you were planning the story?

Originally I had not planned on having any career variation, adding those paths came when Rebirth became popular, and I felt the courage to expand the scope a bit. It's not intentionally modeled, but I think it comes from the same core of basic villain variants that might work for Sidestep in this story.

Can objects or places be telepathically charged? Like with a strong enough telepathic signal, could the "vibe" be invested into the object or place such that it reproduces or emits the original signal? Like the heartbreak site?

That's a close enough description, yeah. Places can be changed.

From whatever you can tell us without spoilers or character writing yet--do you have much idea of what Tia Elena thought of the relationship between Ortega and their father? Did she tw abuse ever try to get in between them when Ortega's father was being abusive, or was she silently resigned about it? Or did she also have a bit of an... outdated mindset on child-rearing in that regard? Bonus, do you have much idea of what Elena's parenting style was like?

Elena was a deeply ambitious child of an ambitious family, and trained to be an olympic gymnast. If you know anything about the kind of training gymnasts go through at a young age, it will tell you a lot about her. I suppose outdated might be one description, as would be disciplined and driven with no room for failure, and suffering for a good end cause. And, combining those experiences and mindsets with a hyperactive and challenging child was not easy. Not always ended well.

That being said, she didn't know the depth of resentment/abuse between her husband and her child, most likely because part of her didn't want to see it. Also, Ortega was always very good at hiding things, and probably felt like they were protecting their mother that way. It was a complicated relationship, yes there was real love there, but also many ways it strained. If Ortega's father hadn't died, they would be divorced now. Elena has many regrets.

this might have been asked before, sorry in advance but! will step be able to quite/manage their vices?

I dunno, we'll see what happens!

Do thief Steps have a consistent fence or are they constantly switching up who they're fencing their wares to for resell? Or are they actually selling their stolen goods themselves?

Depends on your level of arrogance/anonymity, it can vary.

There's a fairly large age gap between HG and the youngest sib. How did HG feel about the new baby after being The Baby so long themself? What kind of big sibling were they?

Oh HG adored the new kiddo, they were a bit overprotective and spoiled them.

A couple things about Shroud. 1) Could she hypothetically pass the memories of minds she 'eats' on to someone else, or could they otherwise be... taken from her mind and stored elsewhere?, and 2) if so... did this have anything to do with her function at the Farm before she escaped?

1. A telepath could possibly do that. 2) And yes.

What languages can Argent understand through her technopathy?

No human ones.

Could you tell us more about the science behind the boost drug? What does it do, exactly?

Ahaha I have no idea. It's pseudoscience. I know some things about certain functions, but those are spoilers.

Less generally, what do boost drugs elicit for the Catastrofiend? Why does it "snack" on them? Does it need boost drugs or something triggering similar effects in order to survive as it is now?

I would say it is more for pleasure than for need. A bit like scratching a mosquito bite.

Building on that - How would eating a boost drug affect Catastrofiend vs Anathema?

Huh. Like trying to set fire to an already burning bonfire, vs trying to set fire to a stone.

If each of the rangers were asked to give their definition of a hero, what would they say?

Ortega: Someone popular with the people who writes the headlines. Herald: Someone that can and does save people. Steel: A licensed powered individual working to protect the city. Argent: Someone doing what needs to be done for the good of the many.

And what about "villain"? Also can you answer for Hollow Ground and Dr. Mortum?

Hollow Ground: Whoever is in the way of the city council. Mortum: A title worn by people who have stopped giving a fuck.

And for Vera and Skyraider?

Vera: Just another color of the team jersey. Sky-Raider: There's heroes and villains in every war, just depends on what side you stand.

Would there be, perhaps, any way in which Sidestep could steal HG's identity after disposing of them? To keep things under wraps or cause a smoother power transition.

Complicated but interesting.

You've mentioned some things in passing but just to have it all in one place: what does Sentinel think of the Ranger's team members currently? Does he have opinions about how things are done / run?

He tries not to. He sees it as promising and powerful, but essentially a paper tiger. There for show, not to make real change.

When Hollow Ground threads someone, especially someone with stronger resistance, does that make it easier to build more threads in their mind or do the layers add complications?

It depends. A strong mind can be securely threaded if you can find the right angle of attack, because then the mind will help you uphold the delusion.

The text where it's mentioned that Owl punched Sidestep in the past notes that "She never landed another punch on you." Were there other situations in which she tried to?

I don't know specific situations, but there was probably some low-level beef for a while.

How did Hollow Ground feel when the former mayor was assassinated? How do they feel about Alvarez?

It was an annoyance and added to the uncertainty of city politics. Alvarez is alright, but a lot less easy to mold.

Have the current mayor and the Crack ever interacted?

Not openly.

Have Hollow Ground and the Crack ever interacted?

Oh hell no.

Both Carter and Devereux seem to have their hands in some shady business. Why do some steps want Devereux dead but not Carter?

You could see it as Carter being more "base", there's a lot of money involved and easy to manipulate. Devereux is a lot more political and drives plans.

It's been said that Hollow Ground used to hire The Catastrofiend before it really started going crazy, and Psychopathor remembers when it only had two arms. What was The Catastrofiend like in those days? Could/Did it actually talk to people at any length? Was it still seen as pretty much a monster, or just someone really dangerous?

Oh yeah, it could talk to people. Was fully coherent, and some would even call it funny. It was playing a lot with the monster archetype, and was seen as dangerous and slightly unpredictable.

Is the Themmy we meet in those near death visions really Themmy, or the Themmy step remembers them to be?

Spoilers. Also, what are memories?

Is the part of the villain suit's gauntlet/glove that houses the nanovores removable [by Sidestep]? Or is it completely built into the suit and inextricable? Curious if we'd be able to use it outside of and independently of the suit while Rat King is piloting separately.

The void-cage housing is removable from the gauntlet, but not easily. It takes some work.

What's every main cast members favorite drink (alcoholic)?

Ortega likes whiskey, smoke and tar. Chen had a secret fondness for tropical drinks like Mai Tai (rarely these days). Daniel is a wine drinker, especially white and dry. Argent doesn't drink. Dr. Mortum likes rum, preferably sweet, sometimes spiced.

Is HG gonna refuse to acknowledging us as their sibling if we are too lame?

No. Sigh. Family is like that sometimes.

Does Danny have fingerprints? Or the same from before the boosting incident with Josh?

Yeah, they have grown back.

^ Adding to this, how have Daniel's nerve endings fared after the Josh Incident? Or I guess in general, how has his physiology been affected by what was presumably a pretty intense / large amount of burns?

Daniel was luckily smart enough to grab the bed comforter before tackling Joshua through the window. That protected his face and chest, the hands and lower arms took the most damage. But even so, it was a short flight to the pool, so the amount of third degree burns on him was small. Mostly second degree. The best medical specialists fixed his hands, there was a lot of artificial skin grown to transplant, and the nerve damage was minimal. There are still numb spots where things feel different, but the psychological damage was worse. Seeing Josh. Having the water evaporate around them as he dragged him out, and having to push Josh back as he started burning again out of the pool. It took years before Danny could visit a barbecue without being nauseous. He still doesn't like open flames.

Accounting only for the "key events" of heartbreak, and what actually happened to themmy - how much would you say, in percentages, has Step's memories changed from before to after they were sent to the core?

Huh. Hmm. Maybe 30%? But things were funky even before.

What are Danny's parents current feelings about/attitudes towards Daniel and his Herald shenanigans?

A cold, controlled dislike.

How much in percentages does the catastrofiend's original personality still remain?

Not much at this point.

Can the Rat King and Argent's vores work together? 🐭🐭 Not specifically under anyone's control: but as teammates?

Oh that will be interesting.

What does Argent do with overflow nanos? Does she decommission them? Turn them into more hairstrands for later use? Put them in a jar for when she's lost too many of them?

The old ones are recycled into hair, or other inert material. She has so far avoided any swarming behavior.

On that note, could Argent's nanos manipulate the "dead" nanos that form her hair in case of emergency?

No, they are linked in that shape.

What are Argent's siblings up to now?

Living normal lives, working jobs, raising kids.

Additionally, were any of Argent's siblings "sensitive" in any way, the way she was to technopathy? (not specifically technopathy either, just in general--would they have a proclivity for boosting if they were boosted, or sensitivity for powers?)

In general, genetics doesn't do much for boosting, at least according to research. However, since there are families with several boosts, there must be something going on. Many competing theories.

Pontypool talk made me remember my Pontypool conspiracy board era, so: you mentioned once that a recording of the HB incident existed. Where is that recording now? Has any of the main cast seen / heard / read / analysed it?

Chen's armor had recording capabilities, yes. The big question is what happened to it. None of the main cast has seen it, it is possible it was destroyed when the armor was wrecked.

Building on that - who made the recording?

Chen. It was a dangerous enough mission that he wanted a record for analysis.

Talking about recording, are there any recordings or more pictures about the experiments that were inflicted on sidestep by The Farm post HB?

Of course there is.

Is sidestep the sleepwalker mentioned in the heartbreak flashback? If not them, may we know who?

Nope, you may not know.

What does HG do to train?

Just a general workout. Some swimming. Not big on training.

Whose idea was it for Ortega to upgrade their generator to plasma? If it was Ortega, was it motivated by their experience with the Void?

It was a prototype that was offered to Ortega as a possible candidate that might be able to handle it. It came through the Rangers' tech team. It was motivated more by Heartbreak than Void...

If we get Blaze as an ally, the media seems unsure on who actually won the fight and it's overall considered a draw. In this particular scenario, what does he think? Does he believe he could have taken the villain down if it had come to that?

Depends on how the fight went.

Building on this question, what about if he was defeated in a fight/successfully escaped from him? Does he still think he can take on and win against the villain?

Blaze's confidence is not broken, he just made a mistake.

Given how perceptive Herald is, did he ever suspect or pick up on Steel's crush on Ricardo?

Haha oh irresistible force vs immovable object... Probably has an inkling.

Is the folding that step mentions in void lore the same kind of folding that Ijungstrand talked about in his notes?

Close enough!

Are hero grade nanomesh skinsuits densely woven enough to keep nanovores out?

Nope. There are edges and openings and zippers and things where they can get in. Unless it is hermetically sealed, it can just be bypassed and eat from the inside.

Has Sidestep ever "touched" Sentinel's mind? How does he feel like? Could Sidestep control/possess him in a pinch or is he difficult to shake like Steel? Has his experience with Thunderhead helped him develop any telepathic defenses?

Yes. Kinda hard not to. Feels very controlled and calm, Sentinel has a good grip of himself because his power requires that. Sidestep could probably possess him, but controlling the powers would be HARD. And yes, dealing with Thunderhead helped him a lot.

Sidestep kept the current Rangers in mind when they designed their armor, but... How does that armor hold up against Sentinel? What kind of armor variation would hold up better and why?

Armor would be better against Sentinel, would add more weight and durability against shock and debris. Speed would be the worst, any jump would be an invitation to get airborne.

What about Five Pennies? Say, if Five Pennies made a come back in Book 3... would the helmet be enough to counteract the Pennies' effect? Do they have to latch onto skin?

The pennies needed skin for the best effect, but had others in contact with armor or concrete.

Could Hollow Ground's threads in someone's mind protect them from Sidestep's body-hopping or possession, or are they 1. too weak; 2. in an entirely different realm of telepathy and thus not applicable?

If they were intentionally placed for that purpose, oh yes they could.

What's the current maximum number of pigeons that Vera can control at once and how many would she need to control to be considered alpha class?

Oh it is not the number that would make her alpha class... but the current one is about fifty or so.

Where is Thunderhead? Her status is unknown, but is she unknown of her own volition or is she part of the disappeared telepaths?

That is unknown.

Is there any tiny little info you can give us on what cool fights we might get next book? Like, maybe Zephyr? Shroud? The Catfiend???

All three are planned.

What would Porphyry, Locus, Zephyr, and Blaze's villain names be? 🐞 What about the HG trio if they were heroes?

I truly think they would have the same names!

What's the deal with Teresa Alvarez and Nocturne? What's their relationship like, at least on the surface? Does Nocturne want to see Teresa gone, or puppeteered?

Spoilers.

Speaking of Nocturne, what would her life be like if she never met HG or Jake?

Routine. Never leaving her apartment. Working remotely as an IRS investigator.

During regene boosting, given it can happen at very early stages in the life cycle, how do the boosts present? We've seen when in teen/adult they seem to trigger an immediate active flare up of the power (for example like josh and the fire). Does this happen with very early boosting too? Or is the mutation adapted less hrm explosively into the body?

Early boosting happens a lot more benign, the survivability is higher. So it is less explosive, and would trigger softer, with an easier chance to control it.

Are Tina's plans in one way or another motivated by what happened to Psychopathor?

Somewhat, yes.

is she aware of where he is now and what exactly happened to him?

She suspects. No proof yet.

Do you see F!HG and M!HG as similar as F!Mortum and M!Mortum or slightly different like Julia and Ricardo?

They feel a lot more similar to me.

What does the Farm do to bring in the funds they need? What do Re-Genes do to get it?

Works with the government and the military.

Are/were the following people aware of the existence of the farm? Alvarez, The previous mayor, Devereux, Carter.

No, yes, yes, no.

Did Nazar and Luis ever look deeper into HB or other LD events? Or was that a bit too involved for them?

Spoilers.

Where did the name "Numbers" come from? Is it because they're numb-ers, or because telepathy's classifications are in numbers and they block those, or something else?

Would Numbers protect against Shroud's powers?

Numb, as in numbing things. And yes, they would, but less effectively.

We've gotten a look into how Dr. Mortum feels about being trans, but what about being bi? Is it something they've always been at peace with? Did they know they were bi before they knew they were trans?

They knew they were bi long before they knew they were trans. A lot of the gender and presentation feelings got wrapped up in that, being non-conforming in general. It was always easier to deal with, because it was easier to not act on having a relationship than it was getting dressed in the morning.

How large would heartbreak's radius have expanded if they had been left alone once they got to LD? Would they have eventually burned themselves out?

Hopefully, yes. But LD might be gone, perhaps more.

Do you have any specific characters in mind who are part of the Rangers PR team, or are they just a vaguely hateable presence? Will we meet or deal with any of them at any point (I just wanna talk 🗨)?

No details yet, we'll see when one of them pops up.

Was the person who orchestrated the Nanosurge aware of, right at that moment, when they lost control/when Step took control of the nanovores?

Nope.

If Sentinel & Pyroclast both had doubt stats like the other Rangers, what would the current values be?

Sentinels would be high, Pyroclast's at 0.

Inspired by the recent Chen snippet: If Step had gone to the Rangers (including Sentinel + Pyroclast) for help after the second escape, what kind of help/advice would each of them have given Step, if any?

I don't know. That's a big thought. Maybe it will come up in game.

A couple Pyroclast questions because it's been ages since I last asked about my favourite dusty lad:

• **How does he handle Rangers PR? Is his approach more like Argent or Daniel's?**

More like Daniel. He's good at it.

• **How does he feel about being famous?**

Not bad. A bit uncomfortable at times.

• **What is his main role within the SF Rangers? Is he the vanguard, support, etc.**

A combination of scout, second in command/tactician and last resort.

• **Has he given any thought to the end of Resolution 32?**

Yes, he has.

Do you have any details on who were Praetor and Mad Machine?

Nope, just cool names for now.

What is the recruitment process for the Rangers?

Have a successful career, reliable background, a useful power and being able to work in a team.

Does HG have a family scar from losing everyone they loved around them?

No. Or. Well. Yes. It makes them do stupid things at times.

With a found family step, would they get worried about losing them (as they did with their baby sibling) if step is a thief/the farm is on their heels/they become very reckless? Would HG do something about it?

Yes.

Sidestep tells us Joes has good dampeners and security tech in place to avoid boost cheating, since they run some games; how does that work with Ace's precog? How can Sidestep still "feel" the red twelve?

Ace's precog works differently, and is not affected by any of the things in there.

Is the extra sexualization aimed at sapphic women and potentially their partners one of the things that's kept Julia from publicly coming out or is it not a concern for her?

One of them. She's seen what happens to others.

If we were to put each of the Rangers' fanclub "stat" in rough numbers, like Sidestep has in the game, what would you say they'd be?

Hmm from 1-100. Ortega 70, Steel 20, Argent 50, Herald 70.

Mortum sometimes shows himself to be "stronger than [they] appear". Do they train regularly, are they modded for strength, do they wear some kind of suit under their clothes that would enhance their strength?

Other. ;)

can friendly/sibling!hg steps expect a new source of income through their relationship with HG? For steps who aren't recruited, are there different things that HG might offer them to coax them to work together, and would we be able to decide that?

If they ask for it, it is possible.

Mortum mentions fate and lack of choice quite a bit when you have a good relationship with them. How do they feel about fate and responsibility themselves? Are they superstitious, spiritual? Why did they feel trapped into turning villain?

Mortum has very complicated feelings about religion and fate, and has taken steps to cut those ties as thoroughly as possible.

Does Themmy age at all? Are they capable of building/breaking down fat cells for energy storage? Can they build muscle?

Themmy didn't appear to age much, but it's hard to tell. The body could change, so could break down fat, and training would affect it.

Would Five Pennie's (Gerard's... Gerry's?) pennies work on Sidestep's armor? In any armor, really? And do they just force action, or do they mess with your head too?

Spoilers. You might find out.

"You remember the smell, even if your armor is filling in the blanks since your armor would never have let you get that close"—this feels like one of those sentences that have a different weight when you have more information down the line. Memory filling in the blanks... is Sidestep filling in the blanks when:

they feel HB's fingers in their mouth, though they would have had their mask on?

smell burning hair and oil?

see the rusted tubes leaking out of HB's body?

dream of HB's face? Was it a different face altogether?

dream of HB himself? Was HB's real body in the room with them?

Memory is memory. You're pointing out some interesting scenes.

Was step filling in the blanks for "feeling HB's fingers in their mouth" from void, and

"rusted tubes leaking out of HB's body" from what Void was doing to Ortega?

Similar scenes, surely.

Since Step turned out to be alive, have Ortega or Chen had any doubts about Themmy's true fate?

Yes. Impossible not to.

How did Ljungstrand “escape” after his military disciplinary hearing?

Just walked out. He's a powerful telepath.

How are regenes trained in using their boosts? Are there specific trainers for different types of boost?

They are trained like in everything else. The farm is experienced with broad types, and there are specific trainers for various types.

Has Dr Jansen heard from Ljungstrand since refusing his offer to move to a Nevada military base?

Yes. Once.

When/under what circumstances was Ljungstrand boosted?

Spoilers.

Is Porthole at all related to project Methusalem?

Yes.

can all boosts hypothetically become alpha class through traumatic boost response? or are there powers (i'm thinking of whoever's got shrimp vision) that no matter how you heighten them will never reach the necessary ceiling in combat capability?

Yeah, some pathways are just power capped. Though shrimp vision might not be...

In 1978 Ljungstrand's own telepathy qualification was T23567. Has his control range across the classification system grown since then? If you assigned him rough force/subtle values, what would they be?

Around the time he disappeared they would be Force 75 Subtlety 80.

Does Ortega and Chen's memory of Themmy's death match Sidestep's?

Neither of them saw it happen.

Has any further research/experimentation been done into Project Methuselem (or research with similar goals) since the 90s?

Yeah, but on a much reduced scale.

Does Ljungstrand, at present, possess the mental capacity to make sound decisions of his own volition?

Sound.... hehe no.

In the rebirth oooops epilogue, why does the farm suspect the sighting is specifically a cuckoo? One of the cuckoos, in fact. How many cuckoos are there who've escaped their cage?

More than three.

If Herald's knee wasn't damaged in the Gala fight, why was he in rehab/off active duty for 3 months? What other injuries did he sustain during the fight?

Were there reasons other than physical fitness that he was kept on press duty etc during those 3 months?

You've said before that he moonlights, did he do any moonlighting while he was signed off?

There are a few spoilers there, and it will come up in game. Injuries can be useful for many things.

Does Sky-Raider have any mods?

Yeah, mostly connected to power armor use.

How much was Sidestep told about their own powers after being decanted? The Void Lore says they were never told a lot about... hmm, being human, I suppose. So what did the training for telepathy look like? How much did Sidestep actually know about what telepathy was during training, how was it explained to them, if at all?

No explanations other than the bare bones, that wasn't needed. You explain things to a person, you only instruct how to act to a dog.

Can you give us a hint on what Mortum's "private project" entails (the one they tease to the puppet during the post-therapy scene), and what kind of issues they ran into? Is it at all related to the villain or the puppet, or is something for the work they're doing... on the side?

That is big spoilers, you'll find out in this book!

What does Mortum think of Chen? They seem more enthusiastic about him being taken down than Ortega; why?

Chen is military, focused and dangerous. Ortega can be distracted with shiny objects.

Prior to knowing the truth about Sidestep, did Dr. Mortum suspect regenes were sentient?

Oh yes.

How long has Regina been interested in Dr Mortum?

It is a recent thing.

How long ago is this too, relative to the time Mortum began their secret project?

Strangely, around the same time.

When Sidestep's pain gate was functional did it help with severe headaches or any other pain above the neck? Was it beneficial while recovering after the nanosurge?

Yes and yes.

I'm sorry if these are obvious questions are or too heavily tied to spoilers, but what are gates. How do they impact sidesteps abilities, and why is it necessary to close them?

I would say look at gates like doors in a corridor. You are on one end, something bad is on the other. The more doors that are opened, the closer you get to the bad thing. It is a Sidestep defense mechanism.

Who's the old man? It can't be marshal hood, right?

That is a big spoiler, and people theories that it can be a few people. Marshal Hood and Vernon Browne are two of the ones I have heard, but there are more. Sentinel comes up too.

And could the regeneration machine be used to restore fertility to boosts? And if it could, could that contribute to its value/appeal to other boosts or inversely to its repression.

Nope, it would not affect that. The fertility issues is due to degraded/changed DNA.

And I'm sorry to ask but is there a specific post where you can find all of the telepath classes and the general range of boost/mod levels and so on?

Oh boy, not a specific one. I should probably make a summary at one point.

How many and which languages does Mortum speak?

A few, haven't decided. But French, English, Haitian Creole and Spanish are among them.

What was the Rangers plan for heartbreak? Were they going into that building with the intention to capture? Or was the plan to put an end to heartbreak?

Depended on the person, but the latter was definitely on the table.

It's known that several of hg's competitors have suffered localized seismic events, solidifying their rumored Boost being geo/petrokinesis, right? Do we know when those events take place relative to hood's assassination?

Has been both before and after.

How many times since heartbreak has the same experiment - in terms of the end goal they were planning to achieve - been carried out?

They must be up to a dozen or more by now.

Can you tell us more about Porphyry? What is he doing in Seattle? Where does he think Locus is? Will we meet him in the book?

He's working, trying to focus on the present. He's a bit burned on his former friends, but he is worried about Locus. However, he thinks she's staying away because she doesn't want to talk.

How many times have people (in FH canon) misspelled Porphyry's name? Is he like the Benedict Cumberbatch of the FH verse?

A few times, but far less than Psychopathor. The amount of variants I see of his name on the forum is so funny. Psychoraptor is my favorite.

Actually sorry, I'd like to expand a little on my own question if that's okay - what about the fanclub for Blaze, Zephyr, Psychopathor and the Catfiend?

Zephyr 10, Psychopathor 50, Catastrofiend 90.

Given that in the video Shroud's arms weren't covered well enough to hide the tattoos, can we assume she's a particularly carefree cuckoo or is Step an especially paranoid one compared to the rest?

Sidestep is the Spiders George of paranoid carefulness at this point.

What is our telepathic tracker's Ijungstrand code?

Ehehehe not telling.

what is the range of their 'detection'?

Not far, luckily.

[Second lore poll up!](#)

[May 28, 2023](#)

Alright, since the "another view point of a scene from the game from another characters point of view" is winning handily, here is a follow up to see which character to focus on!

Ortega

Dr. Mortum

Herald

Lady Argent

Steel

478 votes total

[Lore poll time!](#)

[May 26, 2023](#)

Since I am now finished with the Void series, I am thinking about what I will write for the lore section next time. The poll will have the major types of lore, but feel free to fill in any suggestions you want in the comments. I want to know what you are interested in! There might be another poll in a week with more choices within the winning choice.

A main character deep dive/history

13%

Detailing more of the world/history/science

4%

Writing another mentioned past Sidestep/Rangers event

22%

Doing another "other person" viewpoint of a scene from the game

61%

[Time for this month's questions!](#)

[May 23, 2023](#)

Time for this month's questions! Anything you fancy about the world, the story, people, my writing process, writing in general... have fun.

Just consider one thing: Would telling you the answer remove some of the fun and uncertainty of the story in the future? If the answer is yes, you'll probably get told it's spoilers.

[1.2.2 Propaganda](#)

[May 19, 2023](#)

(1.2.2 continuing from the first one, Rangers capture, this time with Herald flavor. 8100 words, few minor variables yet)

*label heraldfirst

*page_break A Knock On The Door.

"Go away," you say, because you're in no mood for visitors. It's late, if not in the middle of the night, at least too late for doctors. You've had your evening meal, you're supposed to be asleep now.

You was. Until you woke up, one restraint broken.

The door opens despite your command. Just another sign that you really have no power here. Helpless. Captive. Hating every second.

"Are you okay?" Herald steps inside, cautiously, as if he's... what? Afraid to intrude? Afraid of you? It's surprisingly hard to tell now that you don't have his mind to flavor his expressions.

He looks... older? Maybe? It feels like watching a different man, someone who's aged a decade in the days since you were captured. Or maybe it's the face that he doesn't smile, or that he's lost the barely concealed admiration when he looks at you. Or maybe it was never there, not on his face. Just in his mind. And now you're left with a surface shell as unreadable as Ortega's.

*fake_choice

#"Of course I'm not okay," I snap.

"Of course I'm not okay," you snap, words harsh in comparison to his. "You tell me exactly how I could be okay considering the situation I'm in."

"I was thinking about your leg." Herald doesn't latch on to your need for an argument, instead he walks, yes walks, over to the side of your bed.

"So what? Is that really something you should be concerned about, or were you just sitting there spying on me, looking for an excuse to lecture?"

#"No," I admit. "I don't think I've been okay for a while."

"No," you admit, too tired to make an argument about his intrusion. "I don't think I've been okay for a while."

"Your leg support snapped." Herald doesn't meet your gaze, instead he walks, yes walks, over to the side of your bed.

"Were you keeping watch?" It wouldn't surprise you, it makes sense that the Rangers would have someone on call in case something happened. You hope you've scared them enough for that. "Or were you coming here to lecture me?"

#"Why wouldn't I be?" I smile grimly. "Best possible care."

"Why wouldn't I be?" You aim a grim smile in his direction, but he avoids meeting your eyes. "Best possible care, no expense spared."

"Your leg support snapped." Herald walks, yes walks, over to the side of your bed.

"Were you keeping an eye on me?" It wouldn't surprise you, it makes sense that the Rangers would have someone on call in case something happened. You hope you've scared them enough for that. "Or are you here for a lecture?"

*if endstate = "guiltyheraldtalk"

*goto heraldnewtalk

*else

*goto heraldbigtalk

*label heraldnewtalk

"I'm not here to lecture you." He cautiously leans down to check your leg, finding where the restraint has failed. "You must have been struggling in your sleep, it's slipped." He reconnects the restraints, carefully raising your leg back to its original position.

"No, I suppose you already did that." You grit your teeth at the movement, but it doesn't hurt as much as you feared.

"I wouldn't call it a lecture." He steps back once he's done, unwilling to sit down. "I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have cornered you when you were that out of it."

"I wasn't as out of it as you think." You gesture to your legs. "I'm not human, remember? I operate differently." These days it's mostly a lie, but there's a certain flavor of truth to it. You're too used to being a mess.

"I don't think that's how it works?" But you can see how unsure he looks. "You're still flesh and blood."

"I still meant what I said." You keep looking at him. "It wasn't some drugged ramble."

*if herald_relationship = "disappointed and betrayed"

"You didn't make much sense," he says with a sigh.

"Only because you don't want to think about it."

"Think about what?" A confused frown.

*else

"Are you feeling better now? I saw on the charts that they've tapered down your pain management some?" The hurt is there, though he's trying his best to hide it behind caring.

"I'm as fine as I can be." You swallow down whatever emotions you can. "You should worry more about yourself. You're still ignoring the real issues here."

"Which is what?" A confused frown.

*fake_choice

#"That I was capable of lying to you and hurt you," I explain

"That I was capable of lying to you and hurt you." Of course that would not make sense to someone who sees the best in people. "And I'm not the only one. You trust people too much. You're a pawn in a bigger game that you know of, and you'll remain one until you start to figure out the rules."

"You don't make sense." Herald looks like he's thinking hard about your words but doesn't like where they lead him. "I will admit I didn't see your betrayal coming, that I let my... admiration cloud my judgement, but I don't prescribe to your world view."

"Did you think I made a fool of you for fun?"

*if herald_relationship = "disappointed and betrayed"

"Yes." The answer is quick and without thought. "You've given me no reason to think otherwise. I trusted you once, I won't fall for that so easily again."

*else

"Yes—" he says, then quickly adds "—no." A shaky breath. "I don't know. It's not hard to think that was the reason, I certainly feel like one. But—" he gives you a stern look. "—I won't fall for that again."

"Keep telling yourself that," you say with a shake of your head. So naive.

#"That I made a fool of you for so long," I mock.

"That I made a fool of you for so long." He thinks he can read people, and you showed him he could not. "And I'm not the only one pulling your strings. You're a pawn in a bigger game than you know of, and you have no idea what the stakes are."

"Do you really think you can hurt me anymore? With words?" Herald shakes his head. "I'm a fool, I'll admit it. I didn't see your betrayal coming, I let my... admiration cloud my judgement."

"Judgement?" Your smile turns vicious. "You don't have any. You believe everything people tell you as long as it agrees with your world view. I didn't lie to you, you lied to yourself."

*if herald_relationship = "disappointed and betrayed"

"Shut up." He's glaring at you now, hands balling into fists. "Maybe I want to believe the best in people, that's not a flaw. That's a strength."

*else

"I did," he admits with a deep sigh. "But I think you're doing the same now." A shaky breath. "I don't think it was as much of an act as you make it out to be."

"Keep telling yourself that." I sneer.

##"That the world is a lot murkier than you want to admit."

"That the world is a lot murker than you want to admit." Of course that would not make sense to someone who trusts the system. "Just because you're one of the lucky ones doesn't mean the world is just. All it means is that you've got the luxury of ignoring the hell it is for everyone else."

"I know I'm lucky, but that doesn't mean that what I stand for is wrong." Herald looks like he's thinking hard about your words. "I know the world isn't perfect. I know you think I soar above it all and don't see the shadows, but I see more than you think. But I don't think that the way to change anything is to start by betraying and manipulating people. Nothing good can come of that."

"Do you honestly think anybody would listen to me if I played by the rules?"

*if herald_relationship = "disappointed and betrayed"

"Of course." The answer is quick and without thought. "I know you don't trust people, but that doesn't mean they are untrustworthy. If you had started by talking to us, we would have listened."

*else

"Yes—" he says, then quickly adds "—no." A shaky breath. "I suppose you have a point. I know I'm too quick to believe the best in people, and that doesn't always work out. But—" he gives you a stern look. "—the way to go about this is not turning against people who could have been your allies."

"Keep telling yourself that," you say with a shake of your head. So naive.

##"That I might be [b]right[/b]," I say with a growl.

"That I might be [b]right[/b]," you say with a growl. "You're sitting there on your high horse, no, worse, soaring above everything and everyone and you don't understand. You don't even want to understand."

"Understand what?" Herald has raised his voice as well, matching your frustration.

"That you're living a lie built on other people's bones. That you and the rest of the Rangers shore up a system where people like me are not even allowed to be [b]people[/b]!" You stare him down, and to his credit he doesn't look away. "You're nothing but a glorified prison guard, and this city is a prison. You're just to naive to see the bars."

"Having ideals is not wrong. Yes, maybe I have put my trust in the wrong people on occasion..." he gives you a glare there. "But that is better than never trusting anybody. I know the world isn't perfect. I know you think I soar above it all and don't see the shadows, but I see more than you think. I just don't think that the way to change anything is to start by betraying and manipulating people. Nothing good can come of that."

"Do you honestly think anything will change if you play by the rules?"

*if herald_relationship = "disappointed and betrayed"

"Of course." The answer is quick and without thought. "I know the system has flaws, but that doesn't mean it can't be reformed."

*else

"Yes—" he says, then quickly adds "—no." A shaky breath. "I suppose you have a point. I can see why you'd want to tear it all down considering what's been done to you, but—" he gives you a pained look. "—the way to go about this is not whatever this is that you've been doing."

"Keep telling yourself that," you say with a shake of your head. So naive.

"You weren't always like this." He takes a step closer, pleading to a self you've long since abandoned. "You've saved people, you were my hero—"

"I wasn't," you interrupt sharply. "Someone you saw on television was. You get that, right? That the person you admired in the past wasn't real."

"What you did still happened. You can't tell me that it didn't. You saved people." He looks at you as if he's trying to find your face behind the mask of his hero.

*fake_choice

#"And then they made me part of the propaganda machine."

"And then they made me part of the propaganda machine," you admit with a grimace. "Whatever they showed in the news wasn't the truth. It was there to impress people like you. Young. Naive. Impressionable."

"But Ortega..." Herald drifts off on his own accord, as if he's realizing that Ortega is not the world's most reliable narrator. "I see what you mean."

#"They sold you a fiction, not the truth."

"They sold you a fiction, not the truth" you say with a pained shrug. "It had nothing to do with me. All they took was the suit design and some quips to make me into what they needed to make the Rangers look cooler."

"Was there really nothing of you in there?" Herald looks at you as if hoped you would assure him that there was. But as you meet his gaze, he looks down with a sigh. "I guess I should have realized that long ago."

#"You needed a hero to look up to, so you made one up."

"You needed a hero to look up to," you say with a pointed look at him. "So you made one up. Whatever you took from the news and TV shows wasn't me."

"I didn't..." Herald starts to protest, but you can see the realization growing on his face. "I was a kid. You're right. I shouldn't still make a big thing out of it."

*set propagandahero true

"You have this—" you gesture "—idea of the world. Of how it's supposed to be. Of how the people around you are supposed to act. But that's how the real world works."

"And this is supposed to be that?" he looks down at you, and you can see the desperation written on his face. "Real?"

"It hurts too much not to be, doesn't it?" You certainly do, matching his emotional distress with physical. What is he even doing here? You need to sleep.

"I feel like an idiot." Short, terse words.

"Remember that feeling the next time someone wants to sell you a cause." You lean back against the pillow.

"I don't understand you." The admission is a frustrated one, and you can feel that he wants to. He's just not equipped for the job.

"Then get out and let me sleep. Neither of us are getting anything out of this." You look up at the ceiling. "Maybe do some thinking. You're not gonna get any of your precious answers once they drag me back to where I came from."

"That won't happen." He sounds so naive. So protective despite what you have put him through.

"Keep telling yourself that. Now get out."

You keep expecting him to say something else, but instead he turns and leaves. Heavy footsteps. But the door closes behind him.

Finally.

*goto firstnext

*label heraldbigtalk

"I'm not here for a lecture." He cautiously leans down to check your leg, finding where the restraint has failed. "You must have been struggling in your sleep, it's slipped." He reconnects the restraints, carefully raising your leg back to its original position.

"They have nurses for that," you point out.

"I know." He takes a step back, unable to figure out what he wants to do with his hands now that he's helped you. "I guess I wanted to...I needed to..."

*fake_choice

#"To see if it was true?" I tense up, defensive.

"To see if it was true?" you say, tensing up. Defensive. You expected him to confront you sooner, that he's waited means you're less likely to predict how he'd act. "Did you hope it was a mistake? That I'm not what you feared I was?"

"I'm not that naive. And I'm not here to scream at you." Herald runs both hands through his hair, looking toward the door, then back at you.

##"I am so sorry," I apologize, voice cracking.

"I am so sorry," you interrupt, your voice cracking with emotions you can't stop. You're too hurt, too shaken by forgotten nightmares, but you can read the expression on his face clearly. And what's written there hurts.

"So am I." Herald runs both hands through his hair, looking toward the door, then back at you. "But sorry doesn't really fix things, does it?"

"There's no way things can be fixed." Not you. Not what you've done. Not what was between you. "Just look at me. I am what I am. No changing that."

"You sound so sure." His sigh is as heavy as yours.

*set villainy %- 10

*set hsorry true

##"To gawk at the caged beast?" Anger helps.

"To do what?" you interrupt, going on the offensive. "Gawk at the caged beast? Wasn't fun enough through the cameras? Did you need to smell the desperation firsthand?"

"Is that what you think you are?" Herald runs both hands through his hair, looking toward the door, then back at you.

*set herald_friendship %- 10

"Let's not mince words here," you say, looking at your broken legs.

*if herald_limp

Ironic. Maybe he appreciates that.

"I'm \${villain_name}. Not your old hero."

*if heraldregenereveal

"I know. I've had a few days to think about that." He swallows, looking down at you. "And about what you are..." His eyes trail down to your bare arms.

"A Re-Gene. You can say it out loud." It's understandable that he doesn't.

"I want you to know I'm not furious with you because of that." He clenches his fists, looking down at you where you lie. In judgment? It sure looks like it. "But because of what you've done."

*set heraldregenereveal true

*else

"I know. I've had a few days to think about that." He swallows, looking down at you. In judgment? Sure looks like it. "And I want you to know I'm not furious with you because of that, but because of what you've done."

*fake_choice

##"Come on," I taunt. "Get it all out there."

"Come on," you taunt. "Get it all out there." You look up at Herald, effortlessly heroic in his uniform even at this time of night. Can you make him lose his temper? Would he hit you?. He won't, of course, but it feels better to imagine he might.

"Do you want me to scream at you? Is that it?" Herald raises his voice, a frustrated cry. "I wouldn't believe Ortega when \${he} first told me \${villain_name} was you. In what world is this a good idea?"

*set drive %+ 10

"Not saying it's a good idea," you snap.

*if (((h_friends) or (h_like)) or (h_hot))

"I thought we were friends." Herald doesn't look at your face. Just your legs.

*elseif ((h_coach) or (h_useful))

"I wanted to be like you, you know?" Herald doesn't look at your face. Just your legs.

*else

"You were my childhood hero." Herald doesn't look at your face. Just your legs.

*if trainherald

"You were training me. Helping me become a better hero."

*if herald_weaken

"I was trying to break your confidence," you say with a frustrated huff. "Don't you get that?"

"Why?" His eyes widen in surprise, but there's a look on his face that tells you he's starting to add things up.

*set herald_friendship %- 20

*else

"You were too green," you say impatiently. "I wanted a challenge."

"So you taught me because you wanted me to put up a fight?" He doesn't look like he expected that, but the grimace tells you that he's starting to add things up. "Why?"

*set herald_friendship %- 10

*fake_choice

*if (herald_weaken) #"Because you're my enemy. Don't you get that"

"Because you're my enemy," you say with an incredulous look. "Don't you get that?"

"I can't..." Herald hesitates, and you can almost imagine the words he swallowed. He can't accept that. He can't believe that. You can't read his mind, but his face is wide open. Just like his guard used to be.

"Get used to the fact. I'm here for a reason." You try to square your shoulders, be the dangerous captive villain, and not the pathetic, broken loser you feel like. "I manipulated you. Don't blame me for your ignorance."

"And you're trying to manipulate me now." He looks upset, you've ruffled some feathers.

*if (not(herald_weaken)) #"You're my enemy, I like a challenge."

"You're my enemy," you admit with a thin smile. "I like a challenge."

"That's absurd." Herald hesitates, and you can almost imagine the thoughts tumbling around in his head, unable to come to terms with the fact that you are two very different people. You can't read his mind, but his face is wide open. Just like his guard used to be.

"Do you really think you pose a challenge to me even after training?" You try to square your shoulders, be the dangerous captive villain, and not the pathetic, broken loser you feel like. "I'm here because of bad luck and Charge. Not because of you."

"You're trying to get a rise out of me." He looks upset now, so it seems to be working. "It's not going to work."

*if (herald_weaken) #"Because I wanted you to quit. Before it was too late."

"Because I wanted you to quit," you admit with a sigh. "Before it was too late."

"Too late for what?" Herald's face has gone pale, as if he's starting to realize this isn't a nightmare. This is the real world.

"You're not cut out for this. You're going to get yourself and your friends killed, what I did to you was a mercy." Your smile is grim and dangerous, you can see it reflected in the way he looks at you.

"You're wrong, and I'll prove it." He looks upset now, you've ruffled some feathers. "Just you wait."

*if (not(herald_weaken)) #"It was either that, or watch you get killed."

"It was either that, or watch you get killed," you admit with a sigh. "Or get someone else killed."

"Do you really have that little faith in me?" Herald looks angry, which is not a good look for him. Or for you, trapped in bed as you are.

"I have no faith in what I saw when I fought you. I took you apart, and you know it." Your smile is grim and dangerous, you can see it reflected in the way he looks at you.

"Just because I lost doesn't mean you're right." He looks upset now, you've ruffled some feathers.

#"I'm not going to give you any answers."

"I'm not going to give you any answers," you say with what amounts to a shrug. "You need to learn how to think for yourself."

"I can do that." Herald looks as tired as you feel. "But that doesn't mean I don't want to try to understand."

"Understand what? Me?" You gesture to your broken body. "The world?" You gesture to the room. "Try starting with yourself."

"Just because what I think doesn't agree with what you think doesn't mean that I'm ignorant." He looks upset now, you've ruffled some feathers. "Just that we hold different views."

#"It doesn't matter anymore," I sigh. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter anymore," you say with a deep sigh. "And for what it's worth, I am sorry."

"So am I." Herald looks as tired as you feel. "I feel like I should have seen this coming."

"You're not as good at reading people as you think." You look away, because right now you can read his face all too clearly.

"Maybe I am naive," he admits. "And maybe I keep looking for the good in people." He looks upset now, you've ruffled some feathers. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong."

*set hsorry

*else

"I wasn't," you protest. "Someone you saw on television was. You get that, right? That the person you saw wasn't real."

"But that doesn't mean {che} wasn't important to me." He looks at you as if he's trying to find your face behind the mask of his hero.

*fake_choice

#"They made me part of the propaganda machine."

"They made me part of the propaganda machine," you admit with a grimace. "Whatever they showed in the news was there to impress people like you. Young. Naive. Impressionable."

"But Ortega..." Herald drifts off on his own accord, as if he's realizing that Ortega is not the world's most reliable narrator. "I see what you mean."

*set propagandahero true

#"It had nothing to do with me."

"It had nothing to do with me," you say with a pained shrug. "It was fiction. All they stole was the suit design."

"Was there really nothing of you in there?" Herald looks at you as if hoped you would assure him that there was. But as you meet his gaze, he looks down with a sigh. "I guess I should have realized that long ago."

*set propagandahero true

#"You needed a hero, so you made one up."

"You needed a hero," you say with a pointed look at him. "So you made one up. Whatever you took from the news and TV shows wasn't me."

"I didn't..." Herald starts to protest, but you can see the realization growing on his face. "I was a kid. You're right. I shouldn't still make a big thing out of it."

*set propagandahero true

"You have this—" you gesture —idea of the world. Of how it's supposed to be. Of how the people around you are supposed to act. But that's how the real world works."

"And this is supposed to be that?" he looks down at you, and you can see the desperation written on his face. "Real?"

"It hurts too much not to be, doesn't it?" You certainly do, matching his emotional distress with physical. What is he even doing here? You need to sleep.

"I feel like an idiot." Short, terse words.

##"I'm sorry." I don't know what else to say.

"I'm sorry," you

*if hsorry

repeat,

*else

say,

not sure what else to say.

*set hsorry true

"You and me both." Herald's voice is tired but steady. "But that doesn't really matter, does it?"

"I know I'm not getting a happy ending if that's what you mean." You let out a sigh, scratching one of the scabs on your hand. Nails digging in. Focus on the pain.

*if train_herald

*if herald_weaken

"I'm sorry for making a mess of your training. That wasn't you. I was trying to make you quit."

"You were trying to..." Herald frowns, as if trying to understand the implications.

"Yes, it would have simplified everything." You shake your head. "For you too. You're going to end up dead if you keep pushing yourself."

"That's my choice though."

"Is it?"

*else

"For what it's worth I really did try to train you to the best of my ability."

"You helped. A lot." Herald shakes his head, frustrated. "That's what I don't understand. Why you would do that."

"Maybe I just didn't want you to end up dead." You look away, there are too many answers there that are dangerous. This is the safe one. "If you keep making these kind of mistakes, you'll end up dead one day."

"That's my choice to make."

"Is it?"

*else

"I tried to stay away from you." As much as you could.

"After what you did at the gala?" Herald frowns, it's not a bad guess but you don't like the implications.

"Many reasons," you admit. "Like it or not, you're insignificant to my plans. You should keep it that way. If you start looking into things you shouldn't you might end up dead."

"That's my call."

"Is it?" You give him a tired look.

"I'm a hero." He does his best to sound determined. "And so were you."

"What do you know," you protest. "The only thing you know about me is what you saw on the television. A character curated to get the right message across. You get that, right? That the person you saw wasn't real."

"But that doesn't mean you weren't a hero. And even if they exaggerated some things, you were important to me. What you stood for." He looks at you as if he's trying to find your face behind the mask of his hero.

*fake_choice

##"They made me part of the propaganda machine."

"They made me part of the propaganda machine," you admit with a grimace. "Whatever they showed in the news was there to impress people like you. Young. Naive. Impressionable. I'm sorry, but they are very good at their job. Don't blame yourself for falling for it."

"But Ortega..." Herald drifts off on his own accord, as if he's realizing that Ortega is not the world's most reliable narrator. "I see what you mean."

##"That Sidestep had nothing to do with me."

"That Sidestep had nothing to do with me," you say with a pained shrug. "I'm sorry, but that's the truth. It was fiction. All they stole was the suit design. Didn't even look like me."

"I know, but was there really nothing of you in there?" Herald looks at you as if hoped you would assure him that there was. But as you meet his gaze, he looks down with a sigh. "I guess I should have realized that long ago."

##"You needed a hero, that's what they gave you."

"You needed a hero," you say with a pointed look at him. "And you weren't alone in that. They game you one. Whatever you took from the news and TV shows wasn't me. It was tailor-made to appeal to your demographic."

"I don't think..." Herald starts to protest, but you can see the realization growing on his face. "I suppose you're right. I was a kid. I shouldn't still make a big thing out of it."

"You have this—" you gesture "—idea of the world. Of how it's supposed to be. Of how the people around you are supposed to act. But that's how the real world works. It's not kind, or decent."

"But it should be." He looks down at you, and you can see the desperation written on his face. "And I want to help make it that."

"Do you really think you can make a difference?" You shake your head. "All you will do is make another legend for young kids who will fall for the idea that there's justice in the world."

"I feel like an idiot." An exasperated sigh.

*set propagandahero true

##"This wasn't part of the plan," I try to explain.

"This wasn't part of the plan," you say, looking at Herald's chest. Better than his face. He's in uniform. In some ways, that makes this easier.

"What plan?" Herald shakes his head. "Turning yourself into a villain and beat up the people trying to be your friends?"

"Don't try to make this about you," you snap. "There's more to this than hurt feelings and old friendship."

*if h_coach

"I trusted you." Herald doesn't look at your face. Just your legs. "You were my hero, and you were teaching me how to be a better one."

*elseif h_awkward

"I admired you." Herald doesn't look at your face. Just your legs. "You were my hero."

*else

"I thought we were friends." Herald doesn't look at your face. Just your legs.

*if train_herald

"You were my hero, and you were helping me become a better one."

*fake_choice

*if ((train_herald) and (herald_weaken)) ##"No, I was undermining you all the way."

"No, I was undermining you all the way," you say. "I was trying to break your confidence." The truth is out, so you might as well reveal everything.

*if h_hot

Well, except that you're attracted to him, your libido has nothing to do with this.

"Why?" Daniel doesn't look like he expected that, but there's an expression on his face that tells you he's starting to add things up.

"You're a hero. I'm a villain. It's not exactly rocket science."

"I can't believe this." But he can, there's that flush of shame and embarrassment you're so used to being the cause of. "I feel like such an idiot."

*if (train_herald) #""You were going to get yourself killed."

"You were going to get yourself killed," you say impatiently. "I couldn't let that happen."

"Why?" Herald doesn't look like he expected that, but there's an expression on his face that tells you he's starting to add things up.

"You're a good man. A good hero. But you could be better."

"What are you talking about?" You can see the frustration written clearly on his face. "You're a villain. I should have known. I thought something was wrong, but I couldn't..." an annoyed huff. "I'm such an idiot."

#""I wasn't your hero, just part of the propaganda machine."

"I was never your hero, just a part of the propaganda machine." You can't stop the pained grimace. "It wasn't me. The Sidestep they showed in the news was there to impress people like you. Young. Naive. Impressionable. I'm sorry, but they are very good at their job. Don't blame yourself for falling for it."

"But Ortega..." Herald drifts off on his own accord, as if he's realizing that Ortega is not the world's most reliable narrator. "I see what you mean."

"You have this—" you gesture "—idea of the world. Of how it's supposed to be. Of how the people around you are supposed to act. But that's how the real world works. It's not kind, or decent."

"But it should be." He looks down at you, and you can see the desperation written on his face. "And I want to help make it that."

"You can't do that." You shake your head. "All you will do is make another legend for young kids who will fall for the idea that there's justice in the world. heroes doesn't change the world, they just uphold the status quo."

"I feel like an idiot." An exasperated sigh.

*set propagandahero true

#""Hate me if you like, but I do what I think is right."

"Hate me if you like, but I do what I think is right." Any means necessary. It might be your Farm training shining through, but wouldn't it be poetic justice to use that for your own purposes?

"I don't believe that." Herald frowns, and since you can't read his mind, all you get is the disapproval of his eyebrows. You can handle that.

"I don't care what you believe," you say coldly, because this is the truth. "You don't [b]know[/b] enough of the world to have an informed opinion. I don't cater to dreams." Or dreamers.

"You can't just..." but the more he meets your gaze, the more you can see his face fall as he realizes that in this, you have a stronger conviction that he does. He's not sure he's right. You are.

"Don't blame me for your own inability to see the truth." You stare him down, and he evades your eyes.

"I feel like such an idiot right now."

"That's something you've got to deal with yourself." You know you sound harsh, but it's the middle of the night and you're hurting. You really don't feel like coddling anybody.

*if villainherald_relationship = "afraid"

"You know something? I used to be so afraid of you." Herald has started pacing,

*if herald_limp

the slight limp there if you know how to look for it,

a haunted look on his face. "I had nightmares for months."

"I know," you say coldly. "You're good at reading people. You should be afraid of me."

"I trusted you." He shakes his head. "I admired you. And all the time you were..." A shaky breath, and he stops to stare at you. "Why did you do it? Turn yourself into that...thing?"

*set herald_friendship %- 15

*set herald_relationship "nemesis"

*elseif villainherald_relationship = "nemesis"

"I was so determined to stop \${villain_name}." Herald has started pacing,

*if herald_limp

the slight limp there if you know how to look for it,

shaking his head as if he still can't believe it. "It was my one goal. I couldn't let them continue like that.

*if villain_name = "Sidestep"

Take your name and drag it through the dirt.

That's why I wanted you to train me. Help me be a better hero."

*if train_herald

"I know," you sigh. "That was obvious from the start."

*else

"I know," you sigh. "Why did you think I said no?"

"I never guessed it could be you. I admired you, and then..." A shaky breath, and he stops to stare at you. "Why did you do it? Turn yourself into that...thing?"

*if ((villain_name = "Sidestep") and (not(massacre)))

*set herald_friendship %- 5

*else

*set herald_friendship %- 15

*set herald_relationship "nemesis"

*elseif villainherald_relationship = "humiliated"

"I wanted a rematch so badly." Herald has started pacing,

*if herald_limp

the slight limp there if you know how to look for it,

shoulders hunched in frustration. "You humiliated me on national television. They were running that footage for weeks. That's why I wanted you to train me. Help me be a better hero."

*if train_herald

"I know," you sigh. "That was obvious from the start."

"I never guessed it could be you." He shakes his head. "Were you laughing at me when you trained me? Were you thinking of the next time we'd..." A shaky breath, and he stops to stare at you. "Why did you do it? Turn yourself into that...thing?"

*set herald_friendship %- 10

*else

"I know," you sigh. "Why did you think I said no?"

"I never guessed it could be you." He shakes his head. "Were you laughing at me when I asked you? Were you thinking of the next time you'd..." A shaky breath, and he stops to stare at you. "Why did you do it? Turn yourself into that...thing?"

*else

"I wanted a rematch so badly." Herald has started pacing,

*if herald_limp

the slight limp there if you know how to look for it,

not looking at you. "Not just for my sake. For the team. That's why I wanted you to train me. Help me be a better hero."

*if train_herald

"I know," you sigh. "That was obvious from the start."

*else

"I know," you sigh. "Why did you think I said no?"

"I never guessed it could be you." He shakes his head. "You were one of us. A hero, and then..." A shaky breath, and he stops to stare at you. "Why did you do it? Turn yourself into that...thing?"

*set herald_friendship %- 5

*fake_choice

*if (suit_terrifying) #"I wanted people to fear me," I snarl.

"Because I wanted people to fear me," you snarl, and Herald takes an instinctive step back. "Because I was so tired of being on the run. Being the soft one. The target. I'm the predator now. The monster. The one that gives people nightmares."

"\${name}..."

"\${villain_name}, you mean." You have no vocal distorters, but your voice has dropped down into that register anyway. "That's who I am now. \${name} died a long time ago."

*if (suit_imposing) #"I needed to be taken seriously," I say.

"Because I needed to be taken seriously," you say, straightening your back. It's hard with your legs at this angle, but you know you still have the presence, even in this state. "I was nobody. Nothing. Now I am. Now people listen to me when I speak."

"\${name}..." Herald takes a step closer.

"\${villain_name}, you mean." You have no vocal distorters, but your voice has dropped down into that register anyway. "That's who I am now. \${name} died a long time ago."

*if (suit_mysterious) #"I needed to be a ghost. A mystery."

"Because I needed to be a ghost," you say with a shrug. "A mystery nobody could solve. I was already dead. Why not build on that?" Herald keeps looking at you as if you were spouting gibberish. "I couldn't afford to be found, and obfuscation was always my greatest talent. Made sense to stick to form."

"\${name}..."

"\${villain_name}, you mean." You run your hand over your face. "Helmet or not, that's who I am now. \${name} died a long time ago."

#"It was my only chance to do what I needed to do."

"Because it was my only chance," you say with grim determination. "To do what I needed to do." Herald keeps looking at you as if you were spouting gibberish. "I was officially dead, and since my enemies were with the government, it made sense to switch sides. They'd name me a villain anyway. I was just one step ahead of them."

"\${name}..."

"\${villain_name}, you mean." This is how it has to be. It's almost a relief to have it out in the open. "That's who I am now. \${name} died a long time ago."

#"Why not? Being a hero didn't do me any good."

"Why not?" you ask with a shrug. "Being a hero never did me any good." Herald keeps looking at you as if you were spouting gibberish. "I tried to be the good guy. I was a hero. Saved people. And in return, I spent five years in hell because I had the temerity to pretend I was people."

"\${name}..."

"\${villain_name}, you mean." This is how it has to be. It's a relief to have it out in the open. "That's who I am now. \${name} died at their hands."

#"Because there's something wrong with me, don't you get that?"

"Because there is something deeply wrong with me." You look up at Herald, equal parts pain and frustration. "Do you get that now?"

*if hsorry

You blink hard to keep your eyes steady.

*else

A twisted growl.

"They broke me. Or maybe the Heartbreak incident did. Or maybe I broke myself to get out of there. I don't even know anymore. I don't recognize myself."

"\${name}..." He looks at you with something akin to pity. You hate it.

"\${villain_name}, you mean." You look away. "That's who I am now. They killed \${name} a long time ago."

"Did they?"

Herald's question is naive, and you can't stop the laugh. The villain laugh. This is absurd.

*fake_choice

#"What do you want me to say?"

"What do you want me to say?" You let out a sigh of frustration. What is he going for? You're feeling a trap, but you don't understand it. "I'm a liar that put on a mask and beat you up. I beat Ortega up. I played the Rangers for fools. Doesn't sound like good old \${name}, does it?"

"No, it doesn't." Even Herald has to admit that. "But I have to think that there's a reason behind it. A reason you would—"

"Maybe I was like this all along." Ortega wouldn't fall for it, but Herald might. "You've been listening to secondhand stories from someone who's guilty \${he} got me killed."

"I don't believe that." But there's no certainty in his eyes.

#"I'm the villain here, that's what you need to remember."

"I'm the villain who beat your team and sent you and Ortega to the hospital." You meet his eyes, willing yourself to be hard, lips pulled back in a snarl. "That's what you need to remember."

"You keep saying that." Herald looks like he's not sure what to say, playing the eternal optimist is getting difficult in the face of your wrath. "Why do you keep pushing so hard?"

"Maybe because its the truth." You let out a frustrated groan. "Maybe because I hope you'll finally get tired and get out of here. There's nothing for you here to save."

"I'm not so sure of that." But there's no certainty in his voice.

#"They might as well have. I don't even remember how it used to feel."

"They might as well have," you say, letting out a tired sigh. "I can't even remember how it used to feel. Being a hero."

"You can get back to that again," Herald says, eternal optimism though it's falling flat against the truth that is the two of you. Hopeless. You bet that's what he's thinking. "If you just—"

"No." you stop him before he can finish. "You can't just walk in here and think you can make a difference. That you can save me. What kind of ego is that?"

"It's not ego," he protests. "It's hope." But there's no certainty in his words.

"You really don't get it." Your voice is flat now, tired and hollow. "You keep talking about me, and you haven't even asked me about [i]them[/i]."

"I wasn't—"

"You're afraid," you interrupt. "Because if you start asking why I'm doing this, what I'm fighting for, what I'm fighting against... well, then you might have to accept that the world is a little more complicated than black and white."

*if massacre

"Maybe I don't want to know." He looks down. "How you could justify killing all those people." A quick glance at you. "Did you ever think about that? That maybe I was trying to give you the benefit of the doubt?"

"Coward." You don't look away. "Do you think I need you sitting here making up reasons that would make it [i]palatable [i] to you that I killed people?"

"I guess not. I just didn't want to think you were that...evil." There's a crack to his voice.

"Evil is a human word." You dig into that crack and stares him down. "It doesn't apply to me."

*elseif knownkill

"Maybe I don't want to know." He looks down. "You're a murderer." A quick glance at you. "I don't want to know how you could ever justify that?"

"It was necessary." You don't look away. "You know how that works. The end justifies the means."

"I don't subscribe to that line of thinking." There's a crack to his voice.

"And that's why you'll never be able to change anything." You dig into that crack and stares him down. "You need to be ready to do what needs to be done."

*else

"Maybe you've got a point." He looks down. "You've hurt people." A quick glance at you. "You've hurt me. Maybe I'm afraid to ask how you'd justify that."

"It was necessary." You don't look away. "You know how that works. You're still alive and wiser for it."

"You can't tell me that's the only way." There's a crack to his voice.

"I do. This is why you'll never be able to change anything." You dig into that crack and stares him down. "You need to be ready to do what needs to be done."

"I don't understand you." The admission is a frustrated one, and you can feel that he wants to. He's just not equipped for the job.

"Then get out and let me sleep. Neither of us are getting anything out of this." You throw back your head, looking up at the ceiling. "Maybe do some thinking. You're not gonna get any of your precious answers once they drag me back to where I came from."

"That won't happen." He sounds so naive. So protective despite what you have put him through.

"Keep telling yourself that. Now get out."

You keep expecting him to say something else, but instead he turns and leaves. Heavy footsteps. But the door closes behind him.

Finally.

*goto firstnext

[1.2.2 You don't get it, do you?](#)

[May 16, 2023](#)

(1950 words. Revelations path 1.2.2, same start as the last one, but shifting to Steel instead of Ortega. Few minor variables.)

*label chenfirst

*page_break A Knock On The Door.

"Go away," you say, because you're in no mood for visitors. It's late, if not in the middle of the night, at least too late for doctors. You've had your evening meal, you're supposed to be asleep now.

You was. Until you woke up, one restraint broken.

!\$[swear]. Of course someone would come. But why did it have to be Steel? You recognize that knock, too muted for flesh. It sounds like the hard, rubbery texture of modded knuckles. The door opens a moment later, and the Marshal steps through, closing it behind him.

"You're not in a position to tell anybody what to do right now." Trust Steel to point that out. Rub some salt in the wound.

"Thought you had planned to give me a few days before interrogation," you say with a tight smile. "Can't sleep either?"

"No," he admits. He looks around the room, eyes pausing on the chair next to the wall, but in the end he remains standing. "I should be at home. In bed."

*fake_choice

#"And yet you're here," I say cautiously.

"And yet you're here," you say, frowning faintly. You can't read him, not right now. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure." Steel stands straight, at attention. It's one of the things that always unnerved you about him. His body language at work is too similar to where you came from. Impossible to ignore the soldier inside the man. "But it looked like you were having a nightmare."

#"Hard to sleep on a bad conscience," I tease.

"Hard to sleep on a bad conscience," you tease. The look on his face tells you that your barb hit home.

"It looks like you might feel the same thing," Steel retorts. There's a restless energy to him that he pushes back, standing at attention instead of pacing. The fact that's a natural stance to him tells you everything you need to know about the difference between you. One a soldier, the other a tool.

#"Go back home then," I snap. "I don't want your pity."

"Go back home then," you say, voice going harsh. "I don't want your pity."

"I thought you might like my company." It's as much a question as a statement, and Steel straightens his back as he stands at attention. Hard to take the soldier out of the man, which is one reason you want him out of here. "It looked like you were having a nightmare."

"I've always had nightmares," you say with a shrug. "You think I slept like a baby back when I was a hero?"

"I... didn't know enough about you back then to hazard a guess." He looks down, though his body remains still.

"And you don't know enough about me now to pass any sort of judgement." You wish you didn't have to look up at him, but you can't look away. He still feels like a threat, and you prefer to have them under surveillance.

*if savedcivilians

"I know that you put the lives of civilians before your mission, at least on one occasion." He meets your gaze.

"They were innocents," you say, not looking away. "Or well, at least what counts for it among humans. They were just kitchen staff."

*if massacre

"You haven't given everyone that of consideration." Steel's voice is hard but not aggressive, as if he's more interested in your reply than to condemn you.

"Maybe I know more than you about what kind of people that would be there." You wait for a protest, and when he remains silent, you shrug. "Not that it matters at this point."

*elseif massacre

"I know you've killed a lot of people." Steel's voice is hard but not aggressive, as if he's more interested in your reply than to condemn you.

"So have you," you retort.

*if ((repentkill) or (stopkill))

"And I don't do that anymore. Can you say the same?"

*else

"Probably more than me, and for worse reasons."

"Do you think that matters?" He sounds tired, but you're running on adrenaline.

"It doesn't matter what I think." The truth neither of you can look away from. "I'm not the one sitting in judgement here."

*else

"I know you've thrown away what you fought for in the past." Steel's voice is hard but not aggressive, as if he's more interested in your reply than to condemn you.

*if (((anarchist) or (prepare_them)) or (motivation = "justice"))

"Have I?" You glare at him, not bothering to veil your accusation. "You have no idea what you're talking about. If you did, you'd realize who's the villain here."

"I'm preserving the peace." Curt words. "Order."

"I rest my case," you say with a sneer. "Good luck with that."

*else

"Maybe what I fought for in the past decided to turn around and rip out my throat." Your voice is hoarse, filled with pain. "Not that it matters. Not to the likes of you."

"You're making this complicated." Steel looks down, and this time his stiff stance breaks down into movement. Pacing. Maybe he just doesn't want to look at you.

*fake_choice

#"The world is complicated," I say with a sigh.

"The world is complicated," you say with a sigh. "And it doesn't matter if you try to make it simple with your rules and your lines. It's never gonna be black or white. Not for everyone. Not for people like me."

"You're right."

"You can't just—" you start to protest, before you realize what Steel said. "I'm right?"

"In this, at least." He has walked over to one of the side walls, staring at it as if he'd rather face that clean blankness of space than your complicated mess of a life. "The world is complicated. You are complicated."

#"I am? You're the one that's standing here having doubts."

"I am?" You can't help the incredulous look on your face. "You're the one that's standing here having doubts. Don't put that on my shoulders."

"You're right."

"I mean, you—" you start to protest, before you realize what Steel said. "I'm right?"

"In this, at least." He has walked over to one of the side walls, staring at it as if he'd rather face that clean blankness of space than your complicated mess of a life. "I'm the one who is overthinking this."

#"It's really not," I say firmly. "And you know it."

"It's really not that complicated," you say firmly. "And you know it. Either I'm just another villain and it shouldn't matter what happens to me, or I'm not."

"You're right."

"See, that's—" you start to protest, before you realize what Steel said. "I'm right?"

"Yes. You're not just another villain." He has walked over to one of the side walls, staring at it as if he'd rather face that clean blankness of space than your complicated mess of a life. "And I can't treat you like one."

"But in the end that doesn't change anything, does it?" You look over at his back, but it reveals even less than his face would have. The dense storm of dampeners makes his mind as unreadable as Ortega's.

"It shouldn't," he admits.

*if steeldoubts < 40

"I can't let the fact that you used to work with us color what you do now. What you're doing is wrong."

*else

"Regardless of what points you've made, the way you are making them is wrong."

*fake_choice

#"Hypocrite," I snap. "You do that all the time."

"Hypocrite," you snap. "You do that all the time. Look at Argent. Look at Ortega. You know what they've been up to, and it's not all by the book."

*if ((blinded) or (argent_marks))

You touch the bandage covering your eye. "I bet she's not even getting a reprimand."

"That's different," Steel retorts, but you can hear the hesitation in his voice as he turns around to face you.

"Is it?" You gesture with your bruised hands. "Because they're Rangers? Because I'm not even human?"

*if ortega_relationship = "Re-Gene copy"

A bitter laugh. "Ortega doesn't even think I'm me."

"They're not—"

"Killers?" you interrupt. "Breaking the law? Hurting people?" Your laugh is bitter. "If you disregard me being a Re-Gene, the only difference between them and me is government sanction. You know that."

"I do." Steel looks down, shoulders slumping. "But that is a big difference."

#"I know," you admit. "But it's the only way."

"I know," you admit. "I know the things I do are wrong, and trust me, if I had options I would take them. But I don't have that. This is the only way."

"That can't be true, we—"

"We? You don't get it, do you? I couldn't crawl back to the Rangers for help because I couldn't be sure I wouldn't end up exactly where I am now. Trapped and waiting to be sent back to the people I escaped from." You barely pause to draw a breath. "You might talk all you want about morals and law and order but in the end this is about protecting a system that will have me dead or dehumanized. Or both."

"I didn't say I agreed with all parts of it." Steel looks down, shoulders slumping.

#"Then tell me what to do instead," I snap. "What options do I have?"

"Then tell me what to do instead," you snap. "What options do I have? An escaped Re-Gene? What would you have done if I came to you right after and asked for help?"

"I wouldn't have turned you in, I—"

"You wouldn't have helped me either!" You raise your voice. "Because that might have inconvenienced you and your career! What would you have told me? Hide and keep my head down for the rest of my life? Ignore what was done to me to stay safe?"

"I wish I could say you're wrong." Steel looks down, shoulders slumping. "That sounds like something I might have suggested."

"So then you know how useless this conversation is." You slump back in bed. "All you're doing is keeping us both awake."

"I suppose so." He slowly walks over to your bed, doing his best to refasten your cast to the support wires. "Maybe I felt that I owed you one last time to set the record straight before things become official."

"Did you honestly think I'd go down that easy?" You speak through gritted teeth, that hurt.

"I suppose I didn't." The smile is hidden, and could just have easily have been your imagination. "But in the end I am doing this for my conscience, not yours."

"Keep telling yourself that." You sink back in bed. "Now let me get some sleep."

"Do that. I think we both need to rest up." Steel pauses at the door, turning around as if he's about to impart some sage advice. In the end he settles for a cryptic "Good luck." before he closes the door.

Leaving you to your nightmares.

*set cstag true

*goto firstnext

[1.2.2 Stuck in the middle with you](#)

[May 15, 2023](#)

1.2.2

(Revelations sketch 5300 words. Broken legs, Ranger's capture, no rescue coming. Rough draft. Few minor variables)

You shouldn't have tried to get out of bed again, but in your defense you were dreaming. Were you chased? Your heart's refusal to slow down gives an indication of that, but you can't remember anything but sliding backwards down the hole. Hole? It's already fading. Good. You've got enough baggage in the waking world.

You look up at the dim panels of light in the ceiling. They won't let you sleep in darkness, which right now is a small mercy. You don't think you would have stayed sane then.

With a pained grimace, you twist yourself back into position, choking down a cry. One of the restraints keeping your leg elevated has broken, or perhaps slipped off. Impossible to see from your position. Your therapeutic cast makes your leg a dead fish on the crisp sheets, and you're grateful for the pain. It makes it belong to you in a way it wouldn't if they'd put you on an epidural.

It's still yours.

*if ((blinded) or (argent_marks))

*if blinded

Unlike your eye. The ache there is dull and you wish you could pretend that the compress covering it was the only thing that kept you from seeing. The remains have been removed now, everything cleaned up. You don't like the lack of peripheral vision this gives you, but your neck aches too much to keep twisting your head. Maybe that's where the nightmares come from, the sense that something could sit there next to the bed, in your blind spot.

*else

Unlike your face. You know it's just damaged nerves, delicately snipped by silver scalpel claws. Lady Argent slit the side of your face open, and while you know it will heal well, right now it makes you feel like you're wearing a mask. No. The stitches don't even itch under the compress, the skin feels numb and plastic. The pain is surface level enough to be wiped away by the painkillers, you suppose.

And yet something there crawls on your nerves like ants. Like there's someone there, at the corner of your eye. A prickle of sensation like a threat, and then it is gone as if it never was there.

Maybe it wasn't.

You wouldn't know. Not with the dampeners.

Sometimes you imagine breathing. A warmth on your skin. And then you need to turn, too fast, with a fear only the cameras register but there's nothing there.

Nothing.

*fake_choice

#Lady Argent will pay for this.

Lady Argent will pay for this. You don't know how yet, but you've added her to your long line of grudges. Once you're healed. Once you're out.

She'll pay.

#I know I should blame Argent, but I'm over it.

You know you should blame Lady Argent for taking your eye, but you've already left the event behind. You lost, that's all. She won and decided to rub it in.

You'll live.

#I deserved what Argent did to me.

You can't pretend you didn't deserve what Lady Argent did to you. What you did to her might be from necessity, but you can't say you're proud of it. You hurt her. She hurt you.

Some would call that fair.

Bodies are strange. You don't think humans realize that, how much of their self is tied to their physical form. As if it's one and the same. You know better. Separate pieces held together by will, like your broken bones are contained by their casts. You remember the newly decanted, the newly implanted, rigid with AI-chipped memories don't belonging to their bodies. Soft faces racing with expressions but no emotional maturity to understand.

You. Did.

You shouldn't be thinking about this. About the Farm. But maybe it's inevitable, to dig your fingers into that particular wound.

You feel...

*fake_choice

#Afraid.

You're afraid, and here in the loneliness of your room, your prison, you're not afraid to admit it.

Of course you're terrified.

They'll come for you eventually, and you don't think the Rangers will stop them. You don't think they can. Even if they wanted to.

Can you?

You make an attempt to push yourself up towards a sitting position, but the pain is gravel on raw nerves and you choke back a frustrated sob.

You should be used to pain, but your body betrays you all the same.

#Empty.

You know you should be terrified, but instead you feel unmoored. Empty. It is as if all adrenaline has been wrung from your body, leaving you wrecked in a pool of icy water. Not floating. Not sinking.

Just.

Just.

You force yourself to take a deep breath, deep enough that your ribs hurt. That, at least, is real. Must have broken them in the fall. No. Not fall. Crash. The least you can do for yourself is to stay in the present.

Gritting your teeth, you push yourself back, trying to get into a more upright position. It hurts enough to cut through the chill, is real in ways that makes you bite back a curse as you abandon your attempt.

You should be used to pain by now, but your body still reacts.

#Angry.

You know you should be terrified, but you're too furious to cringe in the face of your past ghosts. So let them come. Let them try to take you back. Didn't work out for them the last time.

Miscalculated. Badly. Thought you. Thought you.

Heh.

You might have messed up enough to land you here, your body might be broken but you are not helpless. Not again. Never again.

Show them.

You bare your teeth in a snarl and push yourself backwards in bed. Not exactly sitting up, but close enough. Breathe through the pain. Accept it. It's yours like nothing else is.

You should be used to it by now.

You never knew how good you had it 'growing up', coddled by the pain-gate turning agony to discomfort. You doubt the Farm truly knows what power it gives to their Re-Genes. The pain-gate allowed you to exercise will over your body's involuntary functions, to let you destroy yourself in measured intervals rather

than collapse in protective shock. Did it make things worse on occasion? Yes, of course. Pain is there to protect your body from breaking further, but broken bodies can be fixed. Death is permanent.

*if gate >= 4

Right?

Did the pain-gate break with you against the hard asphalt below that room full of nightmares that was the Heartbreak Incident? Perhaps. Was it taken out or sabotaged while the Farm was stitching your broken body together afterwards? Equally likely. All you're certain of is that after the fall, you had to go through every agonizing breath afterwards. Local anesthesia can only go so far and the blissful darkness of sleep was denied you. Were they afraid to put you under?

*if gate >= 4

They were. And rightly so.

You've blanked out most of those first months, there was nothing there worth remembering, even in your nightmares. A second birth, more traumatic and painful than your first decanting. The farm. Your creators.

Did they put you back together wrong, all those years ago?

*fake_choice

#They put me together wrong, this is their fault.

*if motivation = "fate"

They did something to you, of that you are sure. Put you together wrong. Set you on this path.

It's only right they get to reap the whirlwind of \${villain_name}'s wrath.

*else

Did they put you back together wrong? Is this the Farm's fault?

Probably. \${!villain_name} is their creation, like it or not.

#No, they set me free, finally.

*if motivation = "fate"

They did something to you, alright. They set you free. Set you on this path. Birth is always painful, but you hold no gratitude for your cruel midwives.

It's only right they get to reap the whirlwind of \${villain_name}'s wrath.

*else

The farm didn't do anything but set you free. Whatever bonds you had with your past were cut on that operating table, and what remained shriveled during the captivity afterwards.

The farm might have messed \${name} \${surname} up, but they set \${villain_name} free.

*selectable_if (motivation != "fate") #Maybe. I don't want to think about it.

Maybe the Farm messed you up, but didn't they do that back when they decanted your mewling teenage form all those years ago? You try not to think about it.

What's the use? \${!villain_name} is here to stay.

#The farm has nothing to do with this. This is all me.

*if motivation = "fate"

The Farm has nothing to do with this, this is fate. You were always meant to walk this path, you can feel the weight of inevitability with every step.

\${!villain_name} was always your destiny.

*else

The Farm has nothing to do with this. They're a painful memory, an obstacle in your path. Nothing more. You've crafted \${villain_name} from past mistakes.

Let nobody say you're not responsible for where you go from here.

"\${swear}." It feels good to say the word out loud. A sign that you are real. That this is not a dream. You've slept too much already. Lost track of time.

You don't like that.

Time is an easy linchpin to hang your life on. There's not even a clock in here.

*if tech_savvy

You think they have removed things from the room. Did they do that because they feared what you could do with it? Even the monitoring systems are at the far end of the wall, out of reach of your clever fingers.

Cold you pull them here if you tugged at the cords? Probably not without triggering an alarm.

*else

Are they trying to soften you up? Make you lose track of everything outside these walls? It would make sense, if they want you to crack, this is a good way to start.

Too bad for them you're used to worse.

You think it's been a couple of days, going by the food. Not more, the wounds are still too fresh. You can judge time surprisingly well by how cuts and scrapes heal. Not by bruises, they are too variable. You've had staff here to treat you, a doctor with kind eyes and a troubled smile. She didn't say her name, and you couldn't dig it out from behind her brainpan. The dampeners must be running hot, their static is a constant roar at the back of your mind. Only the fact that everything hurts enables you to forget it.

She asked you how you felt.

*fake_choice

#I laughed. Not kindly.

She asked you how you felt, with that kind little smile. You laughed in return, harsh enough that she pulled back. As if you had proven something to her.

It was interesting that she repeated the question, this time specifying parts of your body. Medical interest. Checking for circulation. Those you answered, you have no wish to have your legs go gangrenous.

#I kept my silence, not meeting her gaze.

She asked you how you felt, concern written all over her face. You didn't answer at first, because what use would that be? Nothing you said would change your position, only give them more ammunition against you.

You did answer when she asked about your legs, though. She needed to know what you could feel. Circulation. Pinched nerves. You were short but truthful, because you want to heal.

#I answered truthfully, this is not her fault.

She asked you how you felt, as if you were just another patient. As if you were human. You have to give her that, you didn't get any feeling that she treated you differently because of what you were. Re-Gene or criminal. You suppose to her you were just a patient.

Her concern was your legs, she wanted to know about circulation, pain management, pinched nerves. You were glad she seemed to be on the ball.

#I was glad for the company, even joked around.

You were glad to have company, staring at the walls made you feel worse than any bruises or broken bones could. Besides, she treated you decently, just another person, not a Re-Gene or a criminal. She even laughed at your jokes.

Bad as they were.

She focused mostly on your legs, she wanted to know about circulation, pain management, pinched nerves. You were glad she seemed to be on the ball

You need to get back on your feet as soon as possible. The new casts you were fitted in after cleaning is supposed to help with that. Gentle vibrations to assist bone healing, temperature controlled cycling for comfort and circulation. You suppose she's used to working on the Rangers, at least you appreciate that she's using the same skills on their enemies.

*if blazedead

You wonder if this is Ortega's doing, you think Steel would rather have left you to rot.

*elseif ortega_relationship = "Re-Gene copy"

You wonder if this is Steel's doing, you doubt Ortega would have wanted this kind of money spent on a Re-Gene.

*elseif monster

You wonder if this is Steel's doing, you doubt Ortega would have cared after what \${he} called you. Nobody spends this kind of money on a monster.

*else

You wonder if this Ortega pulling strings. It feels like it. Too soft to let you rot, even after this.

*if ((ortega_relationship != "Re-Gene copy") and (not(monster)))

*goto ortegafirst

*elseif ((not(blazedead)) and (savedcivilians))

*goto chenfirst

*elseif heraldrelationship != "nemesis"

*goto heraldfirst

*else

*goto ortegafirst

*label ortegafirst

*page_break A Knock On The Door.

"Go away," you say, because you're in no mood for visitors. It's late, if not in the middle of the night, at least too late for doctors. You've had your evening meal, you're supposed to be asleep now.

You was. Until you woke up, one restraint broken.

\${swear}. Of course someone would come. But why did it have to be Ortega? You recognize that knock, especially the way it repeats. The little jaunty rhythm.

Would \${he} go away if you told \${him} to? You know better than that, so you remain silent. Pretending to sleep, though your eyes are open. You hear the click of locks, the handle turning. Interesting. Electronic, not key. Good to know.

"Can't sleep?" Ortega asks, looking more tense than sheepish as \${he} closes the door behind \${him}.

*fake_choice

#"Just a nightmare," I admit with a shrug.

"Just a nightmare," you admit with a shrug. It hurts, which is why your eyes sting when you look up at \${him}. "What are you doing here?"

"I saw..." Ortega gestures to the wall, which at least lets you know where the cameras are. "You looked like you were having a bad time."

"You don't say." You can't stop the wheezing laugh, but the funny part wasn't that \${he} said it as a joke. It's that \${he} didn't. "And what are you planning to do about that?"

"I..." Ortega flounders, trapped on neutral ground, halfway between door and bed. "I just wanted to check in."

"To see that I'm okay?" You look down at yourself, gesturing to your legs. "I'm obviously not. I'm a mess, distracting myself with bad dreams and painkillers, waiting to be pick up for execution."

#"Here to sing me a lullaby?" I joke, same as always.

"Here to sing me a lullaby?" It's as if Ortega's tension makes you relax. What do you have to lose at this point? \${he}'s the one that's got to live with \${his} conscience and the knowledge what \${he}'s doing to you by keeping you here.

"No," \${he} replies, unusually short for Ortega. Did you hit a sore spot? Did \${he} expect something different from you? \${he} should know better.

"Worried that I had a nightmare?" You tilt your head despite the soreness and pain. The dampeners don't affect your read on \${him}, if anything it clarifies. Reminds you that there's nothing but what that face gives you. The twitches. The way \${he} won't meet your eyes but looks over \${his} shoulder. At the camera? That \${he} was spying on you with?

"Makes sense that you would, considering..." Ortega gestures to your surroundings, trapped on neutral ground, halfway between door and bed.

"Considering that I was in a terrible accident?" Your voice is light as cyanide pills. "Considering that I can't move without my bones grinding together?" A small exaggeration. "Considering that I'm laying here waiting for my extraction? For my execution?" There it is, the truth laid bare.

##"So what?" I say, confrontational to the end.

"So what?" you say, chin up, voice hard, staring Ortega down as if you could do something about \${his} intrusion. It works, \${he} stops halfway to the bed, unwilling to close the distance between you.

"So what maybe I care?" It's ridiculous that a grown \${ortega_gender}, the former Marshal of the Rangers, can look so much like a teenager caught in a lie. You know it's an act, but it's a good one. That look over \${his} shoulder. Was that aimed at the hidden camera? Interesting, now you know where it is.

"If you did, you wouldn't keep me trapped here. All you care about is your own precious feelings of guilt." You don't look away, not this time. Eye contact can be a weapon, and it's one you wield rarely enough to be effective.

"Why should I feel guilty?" The shrug is confrontational, but you know you won that round. "You're the villain here."

"Touched a nerve, didn't I?" You smile, trying to look like you're the one in control here;

*if suit_imposing

a broken conqueror on \${chis} throne, broken but not beaten.

*elseif suit_terrifying

a monster outside \${chis} shell, but no less terrifying.

*elseif suit_mysterious

face as blank as your helmet was, revealing nothing but more questions.

*else

two old friends talking, nothing more, nothing less.

"Don't tell me you're having second thoughts about letting me be cared off back to where I came from?" Hell. Or close enough.

"That's not going to happen." Ortega takes a step forward, approaching your bed at last. \${he} doesn't sit down, maybe \${he} likes the height advantage.

"Not this again." You roll your eyes. "You've kept me hidden so far, I'll give you that. But it's not going to last. Someone will talk."

"Maybe you should be the first to do that." \${he} walks over to the side, dragging a chair close before sitting down on it backwards, like \${he} was a delinquent and not a Ranger. Slightly distant, not close enough for either of you to touch. Is that suppose to make you feel at ease?

"Not sure what you want me to say." How often can you repeat yourself? "Nothing's going to change the truth." You pause, but \${he} doesn't interrupt, so you continue...

*fake_choice

##"I can't let them get away with this. Not again."

"I can't let them get away with this," you say, sounding as tired as you feel. "Not again."

"You keep talking in riddles." Ortega runs \${his} fingers through \${his} hair. "Don't you get tired of being cryptic?"

"I'm not tired of being alive." You're too aware of the camera to do anything but add a soft chuckle. "You need better interrogation equipment than a pair of puppy-dog eyes if you want to get anything out of me."

"This isn't an interrogation," \${he} admits, probably too avoid letting you score a win.

"So what is it then?"

"You were my friend..." Ortega looks away, leaning awkwardly on the chair. \${he}'s turned away from the hidden camera, perhaps \${he} doesn't want it to record the way \${he} looks now. A personal kind of agony. "I guess I do."

*selectable_if (thief) ##"So I'm a thief and worse, get over it."

"Sure, I'm a thief.

*if knownkill

Sure, people have ended up dead.

Sure, I beat you up. Get over it, you've done the same and worse." You give \${him} a stern glance.

"Get over it?" Ortega looks like you dumped a glass of water over \${him}.

*if knownkill

"You didn't use to kill people."

"But you did," you remind \${him}. "When it was necessary."

"Was this?" There's a crack in \${his} voice.

"Did you think I did it for fun?"

"I..." Ortega looks away, leaning awkwardly on the chair. \${he}'s turned away from the hidden camera, perhaps \${he} doesn't want it to record the way \${he} looks now. A personal kind of agony. "I don't know."

*selectable_if (hunter) # "You of all people should understand the lure of a good fight."

"You of all people should understand the lure of a good fight." You meet Ortega's eyes, quick, and you are not the one who evades.

*if prepare_them

"Maybe I do," \${he} admits softly.

*if knownkill

"But you're killing people."

*else

"But does that matter?"

*else

"Like hell that matters if you're fighting the wrong people." \${he} looks upset.

*if knownkill

"Killing them."

"Oh grow up," you say, voice hard and filled with the pain of your broken body. "You're lucky enough to got goverment sanction and a media team. That's all."

"You know there's more to it than that." Ortega matches your energy word for word.

"Is it?" You feel the wave of anger build underneath you. Good. You'll need it. "Is it really? Mr. Military project? They built us both to be killers, the only different is that nobody stamped goverment property on your ass!"

"What..." Ortega looks shamed by your anger, leaning awkwardly on the chair. \${he}'s turned away from the hidden camera, perhaps \${he} doesn't want it to record the way \${he} looks now. A personal kind of agony. "What makes you sure they didn't?"

*selectable_if (anarchist) # "You were never interested in politics before."

"You were never interested in politics before" You sound more tired than angry, not a look you want to go for. "What makes you think I should bother explaining things now."

"Maybe because I'm asking?" Ortega smiles, just the faintest echo of a past you've both tried your best to bury. "Maybe because I want to get it? Get you?"

"You don't." You ignore the smile. "You just want to hear something so you can write me off for good. Something to justify to yourself that you're keeping me in here."

"That's not..." Ortega looks away, leaning awkwardly on the chair. \${he}'s turned away from the hidden camera, perhaps \${he} doesn't want it to record the way \${he} looks now. A personal kind of agony. "That's not why I'm here."

*selectable_if (boss) # "Are you jealous I built my own team and didn't include you?"

"Are you jealous I built my own team?" The question is only half mocking, because you can see from the look on Ortega's face that you might not be far off.
"Are you jealous I didn't include you?"

"Of course not," `$(he)` snaps. "I'm a Ranger. You're a villain. A killer."

"So are you." You give `$(him)` a stern glance. "You think killing people is alright just 'cause you're a Ranger?"

"That's not what we're talking about here."

"You started!" You lower your voice again, forcing stillness down your throat. "You get it if you dare to think about it. Why I'm surrounding myself with people who are actually on `[b]my[/b]` side."

"I..." Ortega looks away, leaning awkwardly on the chair. `$(he)`'s turned away from the hidden camera, perhaps `$(he)` doesn't want it to record the way `$(he)` looks now. A personal kind of agony. "I guess I do."

`#`"I'm sorry, I suppose. But saying that doesn't change anything."

"I'm sorry, I suppose." You let out a sigh and looks at Ortega. Neither of you look happy about the circumstances. "But saying that doesn't change anything."

"Maybe meaning it would." `$(his)` smile is tired but familiar. "You're not pulling my leg, are you?"

"No," you admit. "I could have handled this better."

"So could I." `$(he)` sucks on those words for a minute, dragging out the silence. "I wish I understood."

"I'm glad you don't." Glad Ortega haven't been dragged through what you have. You doubt `$(he)`'d survive.

"That's an asshole thing to say." The offense look half pretense, a familiar dance between you.

"I put you in the hospital first," you retort, trying to break whatever camaraderie that was building. You can't afford hope.

"You did, didn't you." Ortega looks away, leaning awkwardly on the chair. `$(he)`'s turned away from the hidden camera, perhaps `$(he)` doesn't want it to record the way `$(he)` looks now. A personal kind of agony. "Me and Herald."

`#`"You're my enemy now." I glare at `$(him)`. "We're through."

"You're my enemy now," you say with a harsh glare. "We're through." What `$(he)`'s aiming for coming back here, you have no idea. The fact that you're stuck here is proof enough of what you are.

Enemies.

"So I am supposed to do what?" Ortega sounds upset, which isn't surprising. Never could take rejection. "Ignore the fact that you're here?"

"Why not? You did your part, you caught me. Leave the rest to Steel and get out of my room." Your eyes meet, and for a moment you think `$(he)` will do something stupid. Like trying to reason with you.

"You really have changed." Not a question. Not this time. `$(he)` looks away, awkward, like he wasn't prepared for this.

"What did you think? That there was some magical explanation for all this that would make it okay?" It feels so good to say it out loud, finally. To end this charade. "Why did you think I didn't come looking for you when I returned?" You catch Ortega's eyes, holding your gaze steady like a blade at `$(his)` throat. "I didn't want to."

"Ah." `$(he)` looks down, and there's a short laugh of something that might be relief, but sounds terribly adjacent to panic. "Guess there's no use for me here."

"None." Steel would be a relief in comparison. No illusions of a shared past making things uneasy.

"I'll be going then." There's still a hesitation as `$(he)` heads for the door, as if `$(he)` can't quite believe this. You shutting `$(him)` out.

`$(he)` should have thought of that before sending you here. You keep your eyes on `$(him)` but doesn't say anything.

Finally, the door closes with a slam, leaving you alone once more.

Hopefully you can go back to sleep.

`*set ortegabreak true`

`*goto firstnext`

"This is stupid." You can't call it anything else, a repeat dance with nobody to lead. A fight without a winner because neither of you will lie down and admit defeat.

"It is," \${he} admits, fidgeting with \${his} sleeves. Long, for once. Hiding the bruises. You watch \${his} fingers doing their familiar restless dance, and it takes you a moment to realize that \${he}'s pulled out a small handwritten card and is showing you it in \${his} hands, out of sight of the camera. "I just wanted to check in on you."

[You will get help.]

"I can handle a few nightmares," you say, keeping your face tired but impassive. "There's nothing you can do."

"I know," \${he} admits, clever finger disappearing the card up \${his} sleeve as if it never was there. "But you know me, I'm a sucker for trying." A new card, equally surreptitiously presented.

[Tomorrow night. Take all the painkillers you can.]

"If you really want to do something for me," you say, catching on. "Tell them to up my painkillers. Maybe I can get a good night's sleep then."

"Don't overdose," \${he} cautions as the card disappears. Looks like that wasn't the plan then.

"Just tell them to fit me with an epidural at bedtime." You catch the hidden wink before \${he} adjusts his position to a more relaxed one, so the camera once more catches \${his} sad face. "It's not like I need my legs for anything at the moment."

"I'll do." Ortega says, awkwardly getting to \${his} feet. As an afterthought, he bends low to reattach your leg to the support wires. "I think Chen is getting ready for a more through interrogation in a few days. You might want to come up with a better story to him. He's not as patient as I am."

*fake_choice

##"Bold of you to think they won't have picked me up by then."

"Bold of you to think they haven't picked me up by then." You say the words with a grim expression, if Ortega truly is serious about helping you out of here, you might as well try to distract from \${him}. Make this about you.

"This place is secure," Ortega repeats. "You know that. We won't let them take you."

"Famous last words." You let out a sigh, allowing yourself to relax once your leg is raised once more. "Now get out of here and let me get some sleep."

##"Steel can go fuck himself, same as you."

"Steel can go fuck himself, same as you." Harsh words, but it's easy to fall into that mask. "I have even less for him than for you."

"He's the Marshal." Ortega sighs and straightens his back, looking down at your legs. Both raised once more. "He can't just ignore the fact that you're here. You know that."

"Would be better for everyone, wouldn't it?" You bare your teeth in a snarl. "Just drop me in a hole and throw away the key."

"Get some sleep, \${name}." Ortega doesn't even have to pretend to sound tired.

##"Everybody's more patient than you," I lie.

"Everybody's more patient than you," you lie. Sure, Ortega can't sit down for long stretches of time, and is liable to jump into trouble head first, but \${he}'s also frighteningly focused when \${he} wants to be. You learned that lesson by now.

"Yeah, yeah," \${he} says with that lazy grin you can't believe you fell for. How long had \${he} been suspecting you and just played along? "Don't fall out of bed again."

"If I do, don't come playing nurse. Send someone who can actually do the job." You sink back against the pillow, clinging to irritation so your relief won't show. "Now get out and let me sleep."

"Sure," \${he} says, keeping it short and annoyed.

The door closes with a slam, leaving you alone once more.

It is the hardest thing you've done to close your eyes and try to go back to sleep. To ignore hope. To ignore friendship.

To go to sleep.

*goto firstnext

[May 13, 2023](#)

Ortega's still breathing. It's a stupid compulsion needing to look to make sure, but you were always like that. Couldn't trust the world hadn't changed since the last time you checked, maybe that's why you started seeing the edges back at the... No. Don't think about that. Think about Ortega instead, the sweat-stained skin, the slow rise and fall of that bruised chest, deeply asleep. Not unconscious, not limp enough for that. There's a stillness to an unconscious human, something almost approaching Re-Gene in nature.

Shit. Your thoughts went there anyway.

You lean forward, chasing away the flies, and you can see Ortega's skin move under their feet. Twitching. Dreaming? Hopefully not. You should take a nap as well, conserve your energy, but instead you keep clinging to the taste of neon green on your tongue, worrying it like a loose tooth.

What was that? What did you see?

The ground is no longer steady beneath you, the world threatening to spill apart in new angles, new knowledge prepared to break you. Like a wave. You remember being back on the farm, feeling minds crash down upon you like waves, unguarded, not equipped to understand. Nobody had told you that humans were so immense, so complex. Nobody expected you to understand what you saw, what you felt and maybe you didn't.

You don't need to understand a wave to ride it.

Drift ashore covered in seaweed, a bloated jellyfish speaking like a man with the memory of whales. Landlocked. A scientist that missed the ocean and there were Words again, Thoughts and Feelings. Big Ones. And then they built the house that was you and it was a fortress of steel over the ocean, long legs drilled into the bedrock. Above the waves. Orderly. Controlled.

You Obeyed. You Did Not Smile.

The water tastes like plastic, but you savor it anyway. Dehydration is a killer. If your body temperature rises too fast that will kill you before your wounds do. No pain-gate can handle that. Autonomous. You hate that Ortega is so fragile. You don't want to be alone with your thoughts and the silence. Maybe you're unfair there. Not fragile. If you didn't know it wasn't done you would think Ortega has a pain-gate too. The way there's no cringing, no hesitation. Just necessity.

What was it again?

A half-remembered story of climbing up a cliff. No harness. Death below. Aching hands. Can't flinch or you die. Embrace the pain. The only thing blood means is that the grip gets slicker, but the dust takes care of that. You remember asking why. Why not? You suppose you see the logic in that now.

You're the same.

The flies return, and you move your hand to chase them away, pleased to feel it functioning, less pleased at the feel it makes as it passes through the air. The ground shifts again, and you press your hand against your mouth, swallowing down the feeling of freefall. Focus. Sit. Listen. Here. Now. You.

You almost lost yourself the first time they took you out on a mission. Blunted handlers, unreadable minds. Approaching the city slowly, observing as your eyes grew wider. Discipline. Breathe. You had been taught shields, but not been taught what you were shielding against.

The beauty.

Your weakness saved you, smelling the edges of glory but blind to the full truth. After your escape, you felt it again, riding the bus into downtown Los Diablos, bathed in humanity. Falling freely into the warm ocean, whispers surrounding you. You learned to listen to them, in time you learned how to tell them apart.

To influence them.

You need to REMEMBER that now, like you did after the nanosurge when you took that tidal wave of pain and fear and anger and told it to STOP, and it did, and you held IT even though your mind was breaking into bloody glass and you remember blood. Nose. Ears! Not supposed to happen. You nursed your headache for months, you can't go through that Again, you can't let yourself think, you can't let yourself SEE.

Stupid heart beating too fast. Breathe.

You place your hand on Ortega's back and tries to match your breaths together. One breath. One heart. Shouldn't it be more of a difference between you? Real and Fake. You breathe. In. Out. Slow. Void fed you their blood. Her blood? It felt like a woman. As much as it felt like a human. Boosted. It's supposed to boost people. But you're not people, you're a Re-Gene, vat-grown with boost drugs seeping through your umbilical, seeing which pod will survive the change. You're not human, you never were, of course it wouldn't work right with you. Of course you would survive.

The wave breaking above you.

You've felt it before, so you knew what to do. Don't fight. Don't breathe. Fall and ride and be pulled and, when you can, surface. Breathe. See. Don't judge. Don't understand.

You rub your eyes hard enough to hurt, hard enough to paint fireworks in the darkness, green lines of logic in the chaos. You did understand, that's the problem. You did understand, but you can't see it anymore, just whiffs in the air, a scent long forgotten. Ortega's shiver under your hand demanding vengeance. You can't read that mind.

But you can make sure it won't have to suffer these dreams again.

So.

You're on your feet before you know it, filled with an aggressive energy you thought were lost to you moments ago. The Void WILL come, you know that. You've tasted obsession, and it doesn't let go of it's prey. The Void will come and you need to be ready. Armed. You didn't find a gun when you searched the buildings, but you need something sharp enough to cut a skinsuit. It didn't feel like armor. You don't remember armor. A helmet, yes, larger, fitted with...

A diver descending the depths....

"Hey, Sides?" Ortega's voice catches you frozen against a window, a twisted silhouette feeling less than human.

"I hate that nickname." You complete your scrutiny of the surroundings. Nothing. Yet.

"You told me no names on the job." A groan as Ortega gets up on all fours, cords still attached.

"Learning in the worst possible way. Just like you." You move over to detach Ortega, the batteries drained. "How do you feel?"

"Like shit." But on their feet, flexing with a wince. "I can move. You said there was a generator?"

"I did, if the gasoline's still good." You had sniffed the tank, but it had been hard to tell.

"It can go bad?" An incredulous look, and you toss Ortega the water bottle. Good catch. You feel better about your chances.

"Of course it can." Trust a Ranger not to know about things like that. Everything new. Everything paid for.

"I think we should start it up." Low words, meeting your gaze.

"Me too." On the same page, like always. "We're gonna be found, might as well lead them to where we want them. And we'll have a better shot with you at capacity."

"Doubt we'll get there on a generator, but any zap would be good."

"Setting yourself up to be bait?" You finish your search of the room, finding no better weapon than the utility knife you found earlier.

"The Void's looking for me."

"And I can make sure they don't spot me."

"Can you?" Ortega puts a hand on your shoulder, turning you around to face them. "You said that didn't work last time."

"I didn't know how the Void worked last time." You try to turn away, but the hand keeps you there, and for some reason you don't want it to let go.

"And you do now?" Trust Ortega to get well enough to worry. "We'll only have one chance at this."

"And what are our options?" It's not wise to lean close. It's not wise to place your hand over theirs. "Walk into the wilderness hoping Sentinel picks us up first once dawn comes? Set d'fire to the building to draw attention to us?"

"That's not a bad plan." Soft words against your ear, not a hug, but the whisper of one. "He must be looking."

"You want what I want, though." You knew it when the generator was mentioned. Knew you were on the same page.

"To take down Void." Pulling away. Ortega or you? The cold air doesn't reveal your secrets. "We won't get a better chance."

"Angry. Overconfident." You could taste the arrogance.

"You should be dead. I should be a ruin." Ortega grins.

"You should be desperate for a reload." Your smile is an echo. "A light in a dark place, barely hidden behind blocked windows. A running generator."

"We don't know who will come." Ortega looks unsure, for the first time. Some of those pendejos I'm not sure I could take. Not like this."

"Won't dare to wait too long. Would risk losing us to death or rescue. Probably who might have been left at the place we escaped."

"And we took a toll there already." A grim set to Ortega's jaw. "Void is the biggest danger then."

"I might have a plan for that." You do. And you don't like it.

Neither does Ortega when you tell it to them.

...

Hours later. Pre-dawn. The generator chugs away in the shed, the single lightbulb casting a pale, yellowish light over Ortega, sprawled against one wall. It could be a Renaissance painting, if you hadn't forgotten the names. You were taught them for a cover story, it's a wonder the feeling of light on humanity stayed at all. Some Madonna, or broken God, resplendent in their humanity. Ortega's eyes are closed, but you can feel them waiting.

Can the Void?

You doubt it, predators don't bother with smaller ones, what does a wolf care about a cat? Or a rat? You feel like one, squeezed into the corner of the shed, behind the generator. Your breathing is covered by the sound it makes, your electrical aura covered by what Ortega puts out. Heat signature wouldn't be too different, this one is running hot. As for your mind...

You're not even here.

Re-Gene stillness, calmly waiting, nothing moving, no thoughts. Awareness. Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

The ground twists, but you don't move. The air shivers, but you ignore that violation as you do the door. Kicked in. Brutal. Not Void, a zealot unmoved by Ortega's display, stepping through the room like a battlefield, but someone's watching...

There!

You feel it in the defiled spaces of the room as Void follows, eyes on her target, safe in voidglow, the field barely deployed. Is she worried it might hurt Ortega in their state? So bruised, so hurt, struggling to their feet at the zealot approaches, no fear at the spark of electricity.

Sorry Ortega, looks like this one won't care you've got your juice back.

You move, slowly and without intent. To the side, not a threat, don't look. Look at Ortega slammed back against the wall, dust raining from the roof, the shed groaning under the impact. Look at them. Look at them struggle. Look at them fight. Charge. Hero. Nearly broken. Afraid.

Afraid? Good show.

The utility knife is already extended, not too far, just enough to... there, your eyes don't look, but you can see, no intent, just calm observation of the heavy helmet, the thin skinsuit, lightly armored, but the joints...

Ortega screams in pain.

You don't look, but the Void does, takes a step forward, arm raised, breath quickening, curse Ortega for knowing that leaving the jacket off was the right call, you step closer, feeling the world turn but you're a tightrope walker and you slice!

Deep.

Through the field. Through the thinnest lining in the shoulder joint. At the arm pit. Never comfortable if it is thick and hard there. Not in armor like this. Not for someone who is not used to getting hurt.

It's not supposed to happen.

You feel the Voidfield deploy, pain washing over you like acid, but you're not screaming, you're licking the blade. A sharp stab as your tongue is cut, but by then the green has you.

"Gotcha."

The world has slowed, but not for you, and not for her. You're falling freely, but you're not afraid to land. You're churning like a cork in the waves, but you're still afloat. Your brain reaches for pictures to make sense of a world that does not, but in the end you do what saves your sanity and don't.

No.

Don't understand. You have a grip on Void, in the three ways and five, your fingers in her arm and you smash her helmet as you fall sideways. It breaks like frozen paper, bottleglass visor cracking to your weighted fist, but her eyes are wide and she screams at you and you force yourself not to hear. You did not understand language, once. You did not understand concepts. You still said no, and you do it again.

No.

Pain blooms, but your pain-gate doesn't care what way your nerves are flayed, it throttles sensation to an acceptable level. She thinks you're human, and she's so wrong. You laugh. She hits you again and you keep laughing. *It's a drop of blood, you waste of space, what do you think you can do with that against her?*

So you bite. Hard.

Blood in your mouth. Deep underwater green of folding reality and does she wear the helmet because she is Afraid? Because she is Afraid of what she might see?

Deep, deep, deep, you fold and she screams and you're clinging to her, mouth and arms, and you can feel the pressure. Hard. Unyielding. You should *pop* like a grape in the jaws of death, but you refuse understanding on a level equal to armor. Slam the gates, shut *shut shut*, watertight seals, partition understanding before the truth breaks over your head.

She screams.

You accept the reality of a scream (*sound is heard*). The fact of blood in your mouth (*you have no mouth*). The feeling of a mind against (*not yours*). Push down (*wrong word for wrong direction*). Close folds (*understanding collapses here so you don't*).

No.

You exist at a level of reality where you have no business existing.

And so you leave her there.

Broken.

Compressed by understanding.

Humanity always looked for the light of knowledge even if it would burn them.

You're not human. You couldn't care less.

Unfolding.

Cutting away, and that **HURTS** in ways your pain-gates struggle with. Becoming lesser. Flattened like a folded paper. Dull. Nothing.

You're not human: you know this.

Worthless: a reflection of glory.

Fact: acceptance.

"words.familiar.understanding.forced.yourname."

"words.mumbled.fragment."

"yourname"

"disjointed.word."

"YOURNAME!"

"What?" You cough the word into the world, and stares up at a face, strangely angular against the retreating nothingness.

"We need to get out!" An arm is trying to drag you to your feet, and you realize that there is a fire burning. The back wall. Near the generator lies the zealot, the big shape twisted in death, the handle of a screwdriver jutting out of one eyeball.

"You. Killed." Death. Should you know death?

"He had a screw loose." The joke is. Is. A joke. You know jokes. You know this. You know... Ortega.

"Idiot," you say and reality fits together once more. Fact. Ortega is an idiot. Your idiot.

"We need to go." But the look on their face fits it better now, the angles making a strong nose, a sharply angled cheekbone. "You're stuck, I need you to help me."

"Stuck." Your arm is cold, and you realize it is stuck. In the ground. For a moment the world *turns* bad again, and you *pull* it out.

Then you throw up.

"Ugh, gross." Ortega tugs you to your feet, and you stumble together through the broken door. Outside, the sky has lightened into blue, and the smoke is rising into it.

"Don't let go of me." You feel an urge to rise with it, to *fade* to nothing in the worlds between.

"I won't." Ortega holds you tightly, and you ride the waves, focusing on their heart. You feel drunk, the senseless motion of everything, the urge to *turn* yourself inside out. "What happened to Void?"

"What did you see?" You don't want to.

"I don't know." Maybe Ortega doesn't want to either. "The Void field. I couldn't. And then it snapped, and the guy who was choking me out screamed, so I stabbed him in the eye. Then you were there, half stuck in the floor."

"I think Void is... dead." You say the word and it's not a lie, but you don't think it's true. Neither is gone. Or unmade. Flat terms for a worse fate.

"No body, though."

"Not here." You swallow, forgetting. "Elsewhere."

"Oh. Well, good riddance. Hope they won't return for a rematch, you look half dead," Ortega tries another joke.

"I feel it." But that is also a lie. You feel alive. Giddy and unsteady. Drunk on oxygen at the top of the world. "And they're gone." Understood. You are better at forgetting.

"Think Sentinel will see this signal?" Ortega looks up at the smoke. "I'm alright with being rescued. This once."

"Again you mean." You focus on the banter, and the feeling of skin against yours. It's not easy to let the feeling of understanding go. Is that what made people so addicted to Void's blood? The glimpse of something *more*?

Maybe. Not safe to think about.

And, if you're being honest with yourself, you don't need *more*.

This feeling. Hurt and bruised but together. Laughing. Human. It's enough. More than you ever thought you'd get.

You let everything else drift away like smoke on the wind.

[April questions are answered!](#)

[May 6, 2023](#)

What are the chances of getting a villain reveal during a fight with one or more of the Rangers in Revelations?

I can't give you a percent, but I do know that is one planned option. Both accidental and planned. There are a few points in the story when it will be very fitting to take the helmet off and be "Hah, it was me all along!"

If Ortega found out that the villain was sidestep while fighting them, how would they react? Would it change the way he/she wants to handle the fight?

Of course it would change the way Ortega would handle that fight! However, I can't tell you how, that kind of tension will be revealed in game. Also, it will vary depending on how "bad" the villain is, and how close Ortega is to their old friend.

Really how would each of the love interests react in that situation is the better question.

It would change very little for Steel, the fight comes first, the heart comes later. It would change things some for Argent, but in a limited range. Not very much. Herald would be the one who would react the strongest, potentially even stronger than Ortega. But once again, the exact reaction would depend on closeness, and how "bad" the villain is.

So, what is (or rather, if there is any at all) the ability/ies that has the highest potential of going apocalyptical, maybe even on a global scale? Whether the user is causing the catastrophe intentionally or not.

Speaking of the free western territories, the power most people are cautious about are geokinetics/petrokinetics (earth/stone manipulation) because at higher levels, they have the potential to trigger earthquakes and that's still a trauma for people put there. Has the faultlines stabilized? Or are there still massive aftershocks to come? People are scared. It's not a global scale, but certainly a regional.

Fire boosts in fire prone areas are also feared, but again, that's a regional threat.

I think so far, the only known type of boosts that have had the ability to affect things globally in a truly bad way are boosts that affects/creates/controls disease and infection. No powerful ones are known, but considering that a relatively minor one almost paralyzed London with the a virulent strain of cold called "sneezing syndrome" which was originally created to get away from pursuing police. The main symptom was repeated sneezes, sometimes so strong that ribs could be broken, and people were incapable of doing anything else as the spasms lasted. It rapidly infected the majority of London population, spreading quickly through subways and buses. It is known to have caused at least five deaths in unrelated accidents, and only the fact that it petered out fast saved the rest of the country (and the world) from becoming infected. The boost was named "the flu guy" in the newspapers, and has been in custody in a secure lab facility since then. Much like Typhoid Mary, he's too dangerous to be released.

Is there anyone out there who can 1. Nullify/silent/be immune to/counter-spell anyone else's abilities? or 2. Duplicate someone else's abilities? 3. Create/control nuclear reactions, be it fusion or fission?

1. Not widely, no. 2) Yes, to some extent. 3) None that survived long.

Will we get to meet some corporate heroes? I'm so interested in what they do! Are they basically walking brand ambassadors or something? Or are there corpo heroes who are secretly some sort of wetwork agents who murder or silent anyone who's threatening the corporates interest?

Corporate heroes can indeed be both, some are more like mascots, never seeing any active duty and mostly doing photo ops and shaking hands with children. Some are private security personnel, more of an unofficial police working corporate interests. And of course there are the wetwork agents, though they are not acknowledged openly. Assassins don't wear branded suits.

Have there been any other boosts whose power has gone from completely unremarkable to off-the-charts like Sidestep?

Yes, it is not uncommon for powers to mature over time into something stronger. Most strong boosts are on a curve, with a weak boost growing into something stronger over several years. One reason for this is that the boosts who start out strong, are more likely to die fast and be overwhelmed by their powers as they don't have the experience to handle them.

However, what has happened to Sidestep is something known as Traumatic Boost Response, or TBR for short. This is similar to things like "hysterical strength" in the human body, where stress and adrenaline can make normal people perform almost supernatural acts, or live through things that should have killed them. In boosts, this can cause the boosted power to not only make an almost exponential leap in strength, but also sideways, into new variants. Some scientists have also theorized that the original advent of boost power is actually a trauma response from the human body as the boost drug slowly kills it.

Exactly which boosts that have undergone TBR is hard to say since they are often known to the public only after their boost increase. I will however say that both Anathema, the Catastrofiend, Sentinel and Ashfall/Pyroclast have undergone TBR.

Are there any Alpha ReGenes? Are they desirable or are they too potentially uncontrollable and dangerous to be worth the risk?

Disregarding Sidestep, none are known at present. You can't plan for an Alpha power level boost, and the controlled circumstances of Re-Gene use is not conducive to the kind of disasters that might give rise to those power levels.

Why does Ortega immediately assume a killer Sidestep is a fake if they crash, but if they reveal themselves after Puppetcrash Ortega is always supportive even if they're certain Sidestep is the villain and they're a killer?

Because of the circumstances and Ortega's view of Sidestep. If a killer Sidestep is revealed in the crash as a Re-Gene, Ortega's first instinct is that this can't be true. This can't be their friend. It has less to do with being a Re-Gene, and more with knowing what the villain has done. Once Ortega has had time to think, their views might change, but this is the initial shock.

On the other hand, if Sidestep reveals that they are a Re-Gene to Ortega, they are still not unmasked as the villain. Ortega can't be certain that Sidestep is the horrible killer villain. In fact, once Ortega has time to think about things there, their suspicions might indeed go down, as they realize that their suspicions and thoughts was very off base. If they were wrong about Sidestep being HG's relative, maybe they are wrong about them being the villain too?

In therapy during the panic attack Sidestep has two "Climbing the stairs..." options but with different reactions. What do they mean?

Basically, the second one of them is more focused on suicidal thoughts, while the first one is more focused on sharing the pain with the world.

What would Nocturne instinct say about Regina?

Dangerous. Reveal nothing. Be uninteresting and pleasant.

What kind of plans does Nocturne has?

Bigger ones than Hollow Ground... not gonna tell you what though.

What would Regina think about Hg and what would HG think about Regina?

It would be a discussion of cat and also cat, they would both see the other as very useful, and be overconfident about being able to use them.

What kind of handler Regina was?

Regina wasn't a handler, she was a scientist.

Before HB incident did Sidestep have nightmares?

Yeah, most people do. They got worse after it.

Did Sidestep have a name in re-gene language? Will they ever get a chance to tell it?

Hmmm Sidestep did, but I am not sure we'll get into that until book four. We'll see what happens.

Can Sidestep tell HG about their farm days?

Not sure yet. I will see how things feel when I write them. There needs to be trust for that.

Did Sidestep have any other re-genes they were close to at the farm? If so, were they aware of Sidestep re-capture? Did they have any feelings about it?

I haven't detailed that yet, we will get into that in book four. Like many things, it will vary depending on choice.

Is there any scenes/moments you look forward to writing in book 3?

YES. Not gonna give any details, but there is Chekov's gun floating around, Ortega's got an upcoming birthday party, and a voluntary villain reveal is gonna be sweet.

Depending how close Sidestep is with HG how would they feel not being able to red-thread Sidestep?

Hmmm. I think that would add a certain edge to their interactions, even if HG likes them. However, if HG decides they are trustworthy, it won't matter.

In therapy angry Sidestep "started a gesture but you don't bother censoring yourself". Did Sidestep fall back to re-gene language in that scene?

Yep. There are a few other instances of that in the book, just small moments and gestures.

What kind of fighting style does farm teach? Do other re-genes teach each other too?

It is basically a version of what is taught in army special forces, focused on getting the job done more than anything else. If you want a name, I'd point to Krav Maga and similar ones. Re-Genes teach each other too.

Do the mob boss crew have any hobbies?

I need to think about that, we'll see what comes up in game!

If Mob boss has base on the workplace what does Marcia think about Mob boss crew?

Ahaha oh boy, Pelayo is a handsome gentleman she'd flirt with if she were twenty years younger, Ward makes her a bit nervous, ZaZa is such a funny young man, she likes him. Nehal gets asked about school a lot, and she tends to baby her somewhat.

Will Sidestep revealed their Identity as Villain automatically in next book If they don't reveal themselves to Ortega in Book 2 ?

No, you will be able to remain unrevealed for the entire game, even in book four.

Can we run into Lady Argent or other Ranger If Sidestep stuck as Puppet ?

Yes, I can guarantee it.

How deep association between Mayor and HG?

Not as deep as the last one, but so far there has not been any conflict.

Have ever Sidestep and impostor met before (I mean that while Sidestep still was Hero)?

That depends on who the impostor is, there can be three major variants depending on stats, and in once case it is definitely yes.

I'm sorry if this has been asked before but how exactly did Anathema use their acid powers if they were not immune to it?

The current theory is that they might have triggered one of the trauma boost responses I was talking to above due to interactions with Heartbreak, and that made their acid powerful enough to kill them. Or it could have been that their acid was that strong all along, but Anathema subconsciously limited the use to a

point where it didn't hurt them.

So, could sidestep have successfully pretended to be a "replacement" for the sidestep from the heartbreak incident? I ask because Ortega refuses to believe that step is real and not a Re-gene and I just wondered if the others could have been manipulated into believe that step wasn't in control of their own machine body or something like that

We'll see how the story goes, this is one of the things I am not sure about yet.

A fun idea I thought about about, would it be possible at anypoint for Sidestep to get Mortum to redesign the villain suits aesthetics, specifically, to base it of off Sidestep's old suit?

We will have some suit modding in book three (some Sidesteps also REALLY need the repairs) and I can see a revealed Sidestep maybe going that route, maybe even with a name change.

About the Skyraider and Vera romances: Are there any gender locks on them like for Steel? And would you consider either of them to be genderqueer in anyway?

No genderlocks for either of them. I am not sure about the preferences on the bi/pan scale yet, or if I would see them as some flavor of genderqueer. I need to write them more first, but I think I can safely say that if anybody is going into that territory it would be me Sky-Raider.

Now that we'll have 3 villain ROs how do they stack up to each other in the ruthlessness department? Who's the most considerate and who's the most callous. (Also can we go to a Villain party with any of them? I heard those were a thing)

I am not sure about the villain party, we already have Ortega's birthday, but we'll see. It would be fun, but also time constraints. Maybe a smaller scene.

The ruthlessness level from max to min is: Mortum - Sky-Raider - Vera.

When telling Ortega about the Farm stuff, there are some details that don't come up. Basically, does Ortega actually know how long Sidestep was held captive for? Does she know it was around 5 of those 7 years or is she wildly off the mark?

Ortega doesn't know how long, or any details. We will be able to get more into that in this book.

What does your research/world building look like? How much/little time do you typically spend researching places/concepts/theories, etc?

I am a compulsive researcher, so I spend way too much doing that. Funnily enough, these days I do it mainly for the Patreon, since many of the things for the game is already worked out. But here I get to dive into things that will never be gone up. However, I don't do very much comprehensive worldbuilding, where everything is worked out in detail and put in nice binder. It is very much an "as needed" activity, because otherwise I will never stop.

Hello! I hope everything goes smoothly in your transition process and that you have the opportunity to write as much as you'd like! If you get the philanthropist achievement, do the rangers know about that and are going to absolutely ruin our street cred? Slightly related, but will Mia's personal ideas about Sidestep (rabble-rouser, secretly hero, etc) play a larger role in the future, or is that just how she interacts with them?

If any Rangers have contacts with Mia, or have contacts in the organizations that might have got the money, they might be able to work things out. But it's gonna take a bit of work, and is not a given. And as of right now, Mia's views are just her own, but she can have an influence on people and the media as time goes on.

When it comes to headcannoning or verifying what happened at the farm, will other choices similar to what post dates alluded to exist? Perhaps not in the same capacity but along the same lines.

Oh yes, there will be many choices, and nothing bad need to have happened at all. Or bad things might have. It will be up to the personal Sidestep, there is no canon here.

Hello, hope you're doing well! I was wondering if there will be a chance to tell Herald about the farm alone in Revelations, I noticed the only way to tell him in Retribution is if you do a re-gene reveal at Danny's house for Ortega.

Yes, the small Farm talks so far have only been previews. There will be options to get into it deeper in this book, even if you have touched the subject before.

Will Steel/Sidestep/Sky-Raider poly be possible?

No idea until I write them, I would not say it is impossible.

What kind of patients are the ROs? We all know Ortega can't sit still and will ditch diagnostics/check-ups, but what about everyone else?

Chen is an okay patient, he's a bit restless as well, but has had to get used to it. He's not going to risk his health too much. Daniel is a good patient up to the point where he starts to ditch follow up appointments because he feels okay, and is also bad keeping up with rehab. Argent is a model patient.

Out of curiosity, what was Danny and Chen doing during the casino arc?

I don't know. It hasn't come up, so I won't detail it as I might need it in the story later.

Ortega being an epileptic makes them resistant to telepathy. I'm wondering if, after you accidentally make Chen have a seizure when you are dethreading him, does Chen develop some resistance towards telepathy? Or does it leave him more vulnerable to future attacks/intrusions?

A very interesting question. The seizure has certainly had an effect, but I won't tell you what.

Does the fact that Regina and re-gene both sound the same intentional or just a coincidence???

Pure coincidence.

what value would chen's heartbreak scar be, in rebirth and retribution?

Hmmm... I would say around 60 in Rebirth, and 50 in retribution.

is it well documented or at least well known that psychics can occur naturally?

Yes, it is a fact most scientists agree on.

what is mortum's thoughts and opinions on the heartbreak experiment, and the heartbreak incident? do they know it was a boost incident and not an attack?

We might get into that in the story, so spoilers. Mortum knows things, at the very least that it's a coverup.

is sentinel currently threaded by hollow ground? how extensively was sentinel threaded in the past and/or present?

Oh this is Spoilers. You don't get to know ;).

what does the rat king and spoon think of each other?

Fun! Friend!

who is argent's physical therapist?

I haven't detailed her yet, she hasn't appeared in the game in another role.

does daniel and sentinel still talk, since sentinel mentored him?

Yes, on occasion.

what's skyraider and vera's thoughts on each of the rangers? i'm especially curious to know if skyraider is aware that steel is chen!

Still figuring that out! Sky-Raider knows that Chen is Steel, for a long time. Vera's nemesis is Herald. Other than that I am not sure.

what was ben and chen's relationship like in the army?

They were in the same squad/special forces team so they were close. Colleagues. Trusted each other with their lives. Friends? Friends are dangerous in the army, better to keep people at arm's length because people die in war. They had both experienced that.

in what ways did being stuck in mortum's gun affect the catastrofiend? did anything change with it mentally, or abilitywise?

Oh it changed it a lot for the worse, both mentally and physically. Whether it can recover fully is unclear.

from the rumors about the catastrofiend in the urban legends of los diablos, how does it actually "disappear into thin air?" is it just extra sneaky or is there something more to it? an ability?

Spoilers.

does the catastrofiend have a "passenger" in its mind too?

Nope. Hmmm. Not really.

what kind of different planes/dimensions exist?? (the void cages/paths, the plane sidestep moves through when switching bodies, etc)

A lot of extra dimensions exists, the interesting thing is what people can interact with/influence. We eill get into that in game, Mortum is interested in this.

did ortega know that anathema grew up with the Green Sky?

Yes, but not for a long time. They learned it during the Void incident.

what's the actual name of the heartbreak experiment? what does the farm call it, or its name in official records?

Spoilers. Big spoilers.

does mortum know anyone/have contacts in the special directive or the farm?

No.

does mortum know the farm exists?

Hmmm, not the exact extent, but that something is.

During the flashback dream you get if no one breaks you out of Ranger HQ on the guilty path, Regina consistently misgenders a trans Sidestep (the shit cherry on top of a terrible cake). In this case does she think Sidestep's transition was just done as a disguise? Will she be surprised to find out that Sidestep has kept up with their transition since the second escape?

With Regina it is less a question of what she believes, and more what effects the words she uses will have on Sidestep. In this case, the most hurtful ones.

Will Sidestep get the chance to tell their therapist they are a telepath/ get medicated?

I have not decided yet. A lot of these things depends on trust, and it's hard to judge Sidestep's trust levels until I am at that point in the story. They have surprised me in the past (Argent auction reveal).

Since Ashfall often lost his clothes on missions, did he ever meet up with Sidestep after to borrow some of their many many layers? Or did he just have stashes dotted about the city just in case?

Ahaha oh that is just too cute, I can imagine that has happened. But yes, Ashfall as a vigilante tended to have a backpack with civilian easy to pull on clothes that they dumped close to the stakeout zone, or at the start of combat.

When did the Rangers move bases compared to HB/ Sentinel retiring? The thought of him losing a genderqueer Step and Themmie and then immediately moving to a base without gender neutral changing rooms hurts my heart 😭

They moved into the new base around 2017, so it would have been a few years still in the old base.

I'm not sure if this has been asked before: does any of the ROs snore? Is Sidestep bothered by it? If not, how do they deal with it?

Snoring will be headcanon! But most people snore now and then.

Do you prefer writing in English or your own language? What are some differences you like or differences you find annoying?

Oh boy. Hmmm. I think the answer is that it depends. At this point I am a lot more used to writing in english, and as I live with my american partner, that's the language I talk and think in daily life. However, I could never write poetry in english. There's a rhythm and innovation with making new words in swedish that I truly miss when I write, and I have on more than one occasion simply bent english the way I want it to sound more than what would be grammatically correct. There are some things I really dislike about english (the capital letters everywhere messes up sentence flow for me so I ignore them in casual writing), but it is a very mutable language. I think I would have issues writing dialogue in swedish now, unless I go very working class. The more neutral/middle class dialogue swedish from movies and such sounds so unnatural to me.

Since some boosts exist without the use of boost drugs, are there some who have decided to use them to gain more powers and lived?

Good question. I am honestly not sure, but it feels like a risky spin of the roulette wheel for me.

What is the maximum amount a person has ever been boosted/taken the drugs and survived? Is such a person like that well known/have been documented?

Oh that is the Catastrofiend. At this point it eats boost drugs for snacks, and it's doubtful it has any further effects on them.

Of all the characters who have been looking into the bigger things happen right behind the scenes (Vernon, Ortega, Steel, ect) who has the closest idea of what's really going on or the most complete picture/puzzle pieces?

I would say each of them have a slightly different view of what the bigger picture is, but I would say it's a tie between Vernon and Steel. Ortega is not looking in that direction yet.

There are groups like the Green Sky, who believe boosting is the future of human evolution; but the boost drug is known to cause fertility issues. How they reconcile this fact with their ideology?

There are two differing views there, and it is indeed a thing up for a lot of debate in those circles. One side says that the boost drugs/boosts we have now are not pure enough yet, and once that threshold is reached, children can be conceived and will inherit the powers. This side often works on trying to further the boost drug research, and get to that point. There's a lot of waiting for the first child, and many attempts of trying to bolster fertility has been used.

The other side sees it as a butterfly/larvae thing. Humans will still be necessary for breeding, and the chosen ones children will be boosted and ascend as butterflies while the majority of humanity is stuck in larval stage. These people see boosts as an individual achievement, and see no reason to worry about

children. After all, children haven't achieved anything, the boost drugs are a path of trials to be taken by people old enough to know what they are doing. This is more in line with what the Green Sky believes, but people holding both views can be found in any cult/organization that subscribes to this idea.

Given Ortega seems to have a pretty poor view on how therapy has gone for them in the past why are they so insistent on Sidestep going? Do they actually think it will help Step; or is it a desperation thing or Ortega having ulterior motives?

Ortega is very aware that what doesn't work for them, can still help other people. It is truly a hope that it might help Sidestep that's the driving force here.

You've told us what presentability stats HG has, if Step has matching presentability and chooses to go the the meet in what they usually wear, what is the HG trios thoughts on Step dressing like HG on top of Step already looking like HG?

I think that would just be icing on the cake that is resemblance.

If we chose to break all contact with Ortega as the puppet or did not have any kind of relationship as the puppet with them is Ortega still interested in that line of investigation if Sidestep is already revealed as the villain?

Not really. Perhaps if they think the puppet is involved with Sidestep, and might lead Ortega to their base, or provide information.

And if Sidestep is revealed as the villain would any of the Rangers use/slip up and use their real name instead of the villain persona name?

Some people are more prone to slip up/use it than others. In order from most likely to least: Ortega - Daniel - Chen - Argent

Would their view/relationship with the villain effect this; like if sympathetic would they use their name to try and get through to them or if they hated the villain would they not care about keeping the secret?

The first one, yes, but I feel that all of them would still be interested in keeping the secret. At least so far.

Do any of the characters figure out that Sidestep's tool set includes nanovores and if so what is their reaction to it?

Nope. Not as of book two. Some will figure it out fast in book three (especially if the Rangers have the villain armor), but the reactions will vary.

Do the rangers know ASL?

I think Daniel probably tried to learn it as a kid, but he's not very good since he doesn't get a lot of practice.

Does Daniel drink those energy drinks?

Yeah, I think that is one vice he has.

Will we get scenes/choices revolving around Steps farm days? Regene/Handler interactions and their communication systems fascinate me.

Definitely in book four, I am not sure what might pop up in book three flashbacks yet. It depends on what can be used to cast a new light on the current point in the story.

How amused/How would the RO's react if they noticed Sidestep willing away fans, waitresses, etc. because they don't want interruptions on their time/conversation?

I think all of them would be amused, and a bit grateful. Ortega would tease, and Chen would disapprove but be grateful.

If Sidestep could read Ortegas mind how often would they catch them thinking things like Daniel does? Embarrassingly enamored thoughts or even things more spicy?

Ahahahaha Ortega's mind is a ride. Not as spicy as one would think though, Ortega is a lot more sappy than spicy.

Do the rangers know where the MC lives and if so, when and what were their reactions.

Nobody does officially. If anybody has found out through underhanded means, that is spoilers. Sharing that information can be happening in book three.

In one of many endings, everybody(except Steel) believes the MC to be a regene. After using the machine, will we be able to trick everybody that the regene was just that, Another regene?

Using the machine can lead to many shenanigans. Exactly which ones I have not decided yet, it will depend on how complicated I can handle the story getting.

Will there be a point where the MC will eventually be able to control both their and puppets body?

Spoilers.

Pretending to be "powerless" is by far my favorite choice I've seen. Will the MC go all the way with the lie? If not, will we be able to "awaken" our powers?

You can decide to do both, at least I am planning that. Since certain people already are convinced it is more of a mental block than physical change.

When starting a story, do u know the ending or make it up as you go along?

It depends. In some stories, the ending comes first, and I build back from that. But, more often, I get a flash of a scene somewhere early in the story, and then writes to see what happens. I am a discovery writer, I write to experience the story myself. I don't detail plan, that takes away from the fun of writing for me. For this story, I know the climax chapter of book four. But getting there is a labyrinth. And by the time I get there, things might have changed so much it won't even be included.

Thanks for taking your time off your busy schedule and answering our questions. Love your writing style, love how realistic their reactions are to the MCs choices(you are so evil and i love it). Love how the story story's progressing but can we have some more "emotional damage" sprinkled in? Its just soo good how you do it. Wishing you the best and whatever you put out will no doubt be a banger.

Oh there will be emotional damage aplently for some in book three. But again, it depends a lot on your choices.

Could sidestep use their abilities to make foes see illusions,like they go right but who ever their fighting see's them go left?

Oh yes, that is classic Sidestep fighting! But I would say it is less of an illusion, and more a confusion of directions in the opponents' brain. Since the brain is what translates visual information, it is easy to nudge it to translate wrong.

Does Daniel like birds, given his history of naming himself after them? How does he feel about birdwatching?

Daniel likes birds, but that came after his powers of flight. It was never really a part of his life beforehand, but when you interact with them on their level, it's really interesting to see what they are up to. Birds doesn't always like him, though. He's treated a bit like a big bird of prey, or an owl. Birds can scream at him to drive him off.

If the MC fainted when Herald kidnapped them off the street, does Herald tell the rest of the rangers what happened? If MC is later revealed as the villain, will the fainting be taken into consideration when discussing ways to take them down?

Oh no, Herald will take that secret to his grave. He feels so bad and guilty about it.

If MC tells Ortega about numbers, will numbers be used by the Rangers against a known telepath villain?

Spoilers.

Will it be possible to kidnap Spoon?

No.

What's Regina's view on Regene Liberation? Also, what's Regina's views on the Rangers in general? Is she a fan of any of them? Does she hate one of them more than the others?

Regina's views are her own, and they concern usability more than anything else. Emotions doesn't factor into it.

If the MC got subtle manipulations stat up to 100 or the high 90s, would they be able to do what Hollow Ground does with their threads? Or would it be even more powerful than that?

It would be more powerful, but also require more effort. Sidestep has some talents in that direction, as the sword of Damocles thing they did with Argent shows. But things decay a LOT faster than HG's, and work in a different way. It would be more like precision Shroud, removing certain inconvenient memories altogether.

Is Steels mind so hard to read/influence only because MC thinks it is?

I mean, partly? Confidence and conviction are important for a telepath, if you think something will be hard, it's already become harder just because of that. But Steel has a trained mind that is hard to mess around with.

In the Hoots scene, if the MC has an alcohol vice, Ortega brings up how someone was concerned MC was drinking too much. Sidestep assumed it was Steel, but was it really? I had my suspicions it was Herald.

Oh yeah, it was Herald, 100%. Steel might agree, but wouldn't have brought it up to Ortega.

If Steel has high clue and MC killed blaze, the receptionist says she didn't hear good things from Steel about MC and that she thought they were there to apologize. What did Steel say?

Nothing specific, and nothing that could be tied to the act. Mostly warning the receptionist to notify him immediately when the MC arrives next, but in a tone of voice that was clearly angry.

Is becoming a warlord/conqueror of Los Diablos and the greater part of the Free Western Territories in the cards for the future of some steps?

Oh yes.

If the puppet crashes, there's a choice to place evidence that suggests the puppet was keeping an eye on the MC & tracking their movements for nefarious reasons. Does this also suggest to Ortega that puppet only got closer to them to get to the MC? And if it does, does it cast in a new light the questions he got asked about the MC by puppet if they went to the gala together?

Yes, that is indeed very true. We have not seen the fallout of that yet.

If we kidnap the MC as puppet and are romancing Ortega as both puppet & MC, is it possible to play the crazy lover card as the puppet? Like, the puppet saying that they wanted MC out of the way so they could be with Ortega? That would be hilarious.

I have no idea! We'll see!

Who would win in a fight between Shroud and the Catastrofiend?

The Catastrofiend, Shroud can't eat that.

Who was decanted first, Shroud or Sidestep?

Sidestep.

Could Shroud have won against Anathema back in the day?

No.

If still not revealed as a villain by next game, will Herald get a clue variable like the rest of the rangers?

More like an on/off flag, he's not going to wait until he's sure before bringing something up.

I remember what I wanted to ask!! Will we be able to visit our (and anathemas) grave at some point?

That is planned, yes.

You have said multiple times that having high telepathy stats may not be the best thing. Since Step can use the puppet's abilities, does this mean a certain someone that's piloting Step's body could potentially become an alpha telepath?

Oh you will have to wait and see there...

Can or has Ortega given themselves a seizure from their own lightning? If it looks like actual lightning when they use it.

I think that might have happened on at least one occasion. That's why normally their suit comes with eye protection. You haven't fought Ortega in their full hero suit yet. Sidestep was very good at avoiding that.

Where was Ortega when Argent got possessed in Rebirth? Since only Steel and Herald showed up to stop her.

Probably out on their own business. They are very busy.

Will we get to interact with the main cast more as the puppet if Step gets Puppetstuck in the next game? Not in the puppet crash version, I mean the broke Step out of the hospital successfully without getting caught version.

If you are puppetstuck you've got to do something with your time, right? The answer is yes.

And then, my final question that I probably already know the answer to but I just gotta ask. Were the autopsy photos Chen found for sure Sidestep or was it Hollow Ground's sibling?

Sidestep.

Are there any known boosts with a 'future sight' power?

(a repeat from an earlier ask) There are two notable ones that are known. The oldest one was Harriet Gould, a boosted precog living in Britain in the late seventies. She became famous when it was revealed that she had helped preventing several murders and terrorist attacks by calling in with tips to the local law enforcement departments. Once she had become public she had a brief and infamous tour in America which ended with her having a mental breakdown on stage during her Los Angeles appearance. She had to be hospitalized and was flown back to Britain a month later, catatonic and unresponsive. The Big One happened six months later. She died the next day, and is credited with having predicted the disaster though nobody understood her garbled warnings at the time. Her precognition seems to have been focused on disasters, deaths and accidents.

There other one was Aaron Williams, and he was employed by the US military There is still debate whether he was a true precog, his talents depended on the information he had access to. Given enough background information he could accurately predict events, and even individuals' actions. Even with very little information his predictions were surprisingly solid, and he was considered a major asset by the Pentagon. He had an honorary rank as Colonel, and a

spotless record until he failed to predict the Cavalier turning traitor and attacking the Pentagon. He died in the attack, but the record of his past predictions and analysis is still used to dictate policy today.

Did Ortega really send the LDPD to harass Vernon after the funeral fiasco, as Mia suspects?

Nope. Mia doesn't have high opinions of Ortega.

Every time I get one of the hospital breakout scenes, I can't help but imagine the chaos if every eligible candidate for it showed up at once. Obviously that can't actually happen in game, but how do you think the Rangers would react if they walked in on a teammate staging the same breakout? Or Dr. Mortum and Sky-Raider, if he walked in on the same thing?

I truly don't know, but it might be the spiderman meme.

It's really interesting to me that Chen seems to almost involuntarily blurt out "Hollow Ground is a myth" whenever the subject is raised, even *while discussing* his suspicions that he's been mind controlled to believe that. Do the threads that make him believe HG is a myth also compel him to correct others on the subject, or is the belief simply so strong that he can't stand to let the "myth" go unchallenged when it comes up?

It is more like "Hollow Ground is a myth, and others are foolish to believe it." So it becomes natural to correct people.

I'm not sure if this has been asked before, but if Sidestep wasn't revealed as a villain at the end of Retribution, will they automatically be in a future book? Or is it possible to play through the series without ever getting revealed as a villain?

You can play the whole series and keep both your villain secrets, and your regene secrets.

has chen ever worked with villains before?

Yes.

Going off from an answer in a previous QnA: theoretically, would it be possible to defeat/kill Argent by causing so much damage too many of her nanos die off and her body can no longer be sustained? Would that "death by a thousand cuts" kind of strategy be viable, or is the nanos ability to "regenerate" themselves too fast for that to work?

There is a reason Argent is afraid of fighting fire users...

In endings where Sidestep isn't able to don their villain suit, would the time they have to spend away from the headlines possibly lower their reputation/fanclub? :(

Depending on how you deal with it, maybe.

Do residents of Los Diablos pay any taxes, local or federal, or is the West really entirely tax-free? What about the Rangers, since they're employed by the federal government?

Oh it is entirely tax free! However, there are a lot of "fees" that the cynical person would say is actually a tax. I think the biggest difference is that taxes are collected into one big pot, and then the government takes from that to pay for various things. In Los Diablos you have things like "road service fee" if you have a car, and "fire insurance" if you own a house. So you pay for the exact things you use, rather than let the government decide. It is a lot less efficient, but some people are happy they don't have to pay for schools if they don't have children for example. The Rangers are paid by the federal government, and pays taxes to them. It counts as if they are stationed in Los Diablos, but their job lies elsewhere. This also lead to them getting paid for apartments, living expenses and a lot of other things.

How did Sidestep make a living back in the day? Did they steal or have a side job of some sort, or did they have a way of earning money as a vigilante?

It will vary in the Sidestep, and they might have gone through several of these things. Some might have started with shoplifting, then had odd jobs. Some might steal from the criminals they stop, or get rewards put up by local business to stop certain things.

So when *is* Ortega going to take the puppet on that kitten-rescuing date, anyway? Or did that happen off-screen at some point? (I'm mostly joking—but only mostly.)

I think that happened off stage, but we'll see.

What is HG's opinion on Mayor Alvarez?

So far, useful and not in the way.

What do Vera and Sky-Raider perceive as their best/worst quality?

Vera: Responsible/Bad judgment. Sky-Raider: Friendly/Cracks under pressure.

How would Nocturne react or feel if Mayor Alvarez was killed or reputation destroyed by Sidestep?

It would depend on who's next in line.

Curious, but is there possibility for some kind of rivalry or tension to arise between anarchist Sidestep and Nocturne, depending on the plans both of them have?

Oh yes.

How would Jake have felt about arriving to Los Diablos during the tumultuous times of Nanosurge, Void, and Heartbreak?

Country boy in a big city feeling, like.... is America okay? The answer is clearly no, but still...

Has Vera ever met Jake or Nocturne or does she solely deal with HG? Does she meet with HG in person or does she use her pigeons as messenger birds?

She has met them all. She most often uses her pigeons, HG is not big on personal meetings.

How heavily is Vera red-threaded?

Not as much as you'd think.

Bit silly question, but has HG ever tried to red-thread one of Vera's pigeons?

See, here is the thing. Bird brains work on an entirely different wavelength than humans. It is completely different, and one reason Sidestep is side-eyeing seagulls so badly. HG can't thread birds.

How capable fighters are Vera and Sky-Raider? Are they fighters, tacticians or preferring to avoid fighting part?

Sky-Raider is an ex-soldier, so he's good at fighting in his armor. He doesn't like to, though. He's had enough of that if he can help it, and would rather make a run for it. Vera is more of a tactician, but also prefers not to fight if she doesn't have to do it to defend something she wants to protect. Vera might have fun "play fighting" where the stakes are not too high, but she's not Argent or Ortega.

What was your process when it came to developing the Fallen Hero's plot?

Basically the core plot is the emotional one. A former hero who sacrificed a lot for other people/the world who has now turned villain. Why? How? Then the physical/political one was wrapped around it, but it's still an afterthought compared to the central tenet of digging into Sidestep and figure out what's at the core.

How did you decide/figure out what characters you wanted to use and explore in the story? Did all of the characters form clearly or were there any characters that needed to develop/figure out further before deciding to write them into the story?

Originally, the book was set in a different world, still about a telepath, but with a different trauma. Sidestep was there at the core, as was the puppet, Lady Argent, Dr. Mortum, Anathema and Herald. There were other characters (Rick and Porphyry) vaguely filling the Ortega and Steel roles. I weren't happy with those two. So, when I remade it into interactive fiction I stole Ortega and Steel from another unfinished book, as well as Sentinel, Hood, Los Diablos and the west coast after the big disaster idea. I rolled forward the timeline twenty years, and everything started slotting together.

The characters were pretty clear from the moment I started writing them (Rick and Porphyry were not, which is why they were dropped), but I still discover layers as I write. A lot of my character work comes as I write, the characters reacts a certain way, and I start wondering why that was, and suddenly a new bit of background slots in. Making a story is a lot about discovering characters to me, who are they? Why are they like 'that'?. That's why a lot of the time I can only answer things like "we'll see when I write them" because I can't be sure exactly how they will react until I am in the moment. Fun fact, Rick has been party repurposed as Zephyr, and Porphyry is also in the Guardians.

What was your process to figuring out what the characters in the story want?

I write scenes without a goal in mind and see how they react. I think with my fingertips, the story will reveal them to me. Or I take a drive, a swim or a walk and they will start monologuing. Especially driving is perfect for solving sticky issues.

What duties does the Marshal of the Rangers have?

Basically a cross between representatives of the US government to the city government, a rapid response task force to take down major threats (especially ones that can affect US interests), and goodwill ambassadors to the people.

Did HG plan for Sentinel to become the Marshal of the Rangers?

Yes. HG thought that was the likely outcome.

What did HG and Nocturne think when they found out Ortega retired as the Marshal of the Rangers? What were their reactions when they returned as a member of the Rangers?

Relief, and not surprise sadly.

What about the Long Beach Heroes/Skybright made Lady Argent a fan of them?

Argent surfed as a kid, it is a lot more of an extreme sport in Los Diablos than Los Angeles. So of course surfer heroes would be something she admired. Skybright is a beautiful, powerful woman who takes no shit. She looked up to that.

I've been listening to Magnus Archives and can't help but to be curious and wondered if have listened the podcast: Which Entity's avatar each of the Rangers, Dr. Mortum, HG, Nocturne, and/or Jake would be?

Think I have talked about this in the discord once but I don't remember what I said, so here we go again!

Ortega/The Hunt, Steel/The Buried, Argent/The Corruption, Herald/The Vast, Dr. Mortum/The Eye, Nocturne/The Web, HG/The Stranger, Jake/The Lonely.

If Argent were to swish her hair back with her hand or like rub her arm, would it make noise? Like a knife sliding on a sharpener?

No, it is a smoother, softer sound. A bit like swishing silk, or optical fibers.

Was the Special Directive waiting for Heartbreak at the site and just so happened to get Sidestep instead?

Yep.

Which power would be better prepared against someone that had super speed, telepathy or precognition?

Invulnerability is always fun.

ALSO, I'm putting on my tinfoil hat this time. I think I remember you saying that the Farm doesn't know about the gates so does that mean that the Heartbreak experiment was done by a different organization/group of people completely separate from the Farm??? And Regina was a part of it??

Ehehehehe surely an interesting thought there.

Can you still turn a ranger or at the very least get them to stay out of your way if you have a poor relationship with them but still got their doubt stat very high looks at Argent

Yes, some Rangers might not like you, but understand your goals.

Who is more Ruthless between Ben and Vera and by how much as in what is the worst thing they have done

Ben (Sky-Raider) is the most ruthless one. He has been in the military and done a lot of bad shit he regrets.

Does Mortum's gun operate using Void blood? Is that the real reason Mortum couldn't just replace it and not because they "didn't know how" to?

It is a fair theory.

Is Step's blood still dangerous?

No.

Given that Locus and Porphyry caused so much trouble for HG in the past, were Zephyr and Blaze threaded/influenced to lead to the LBH fallout/blaming Locus for it?

Hehehe now that sounds exactly like something HG would do, wouldn't it?

What does Sentinel's wife think about Sentinel coming back to LD?

Oh she's not happy about that one bit.

How do the dampeners work? We know HG and Shroud and their touch based abilities don't seem to be affected by it. But Sidestep's bodyhopping isn't exactly touch based. So why can Sidestep just merrily control bodies? Is it just because of their sheer strength? Or does it have anything to do with the after effects of the Void blood? In that the bodyhopping actually has absolutely nothing to do with telepathy, but Sidestep just thinks it does?

I would say that the latter is correct enough. The bodyhopping operates on a different "wavelength" I suppose you could call it.

in a parallel question to the ruthless/hg-rep question, is it possible for high empathy or nokill steps to maintain a high hg-rep

I have no idea! But it would depend on what they do.

Do all the people dosed with void blood get green eyes? Or did Sidestep's green eyes come from something other; and in that case, what was it?

Yes, that is the initial reaction.

What would HG think of a Step they adopt as a sibling who abandons villainy/returns to heroism?

Family can be annoying at times.

Was Regina's promotion to director in 2014 in anyway hastened/enabled by the start of (or results from) a 'prize project'?

Or, well, by the failures of other projects...

Was anybody else going for the position?

Of course.

Did she make any major changes to staffing or projects after her promotion?

Some, but she was patient and took her time.

You mentioned that some Re-Genes who were truly influential have their names remembered. Have there been any legends or myths for Re-Genes? 🙄 Is Sidestep's one set in stone?

What other re-genes think of Sidestep is a spoiler (and might vary).

Did Sentinel grow up in LD? If not, when did he arrive? How did the Big One impact him and his heroism going forward?

Sentinel was born in Colfax, east of Sacramento before the Big One. He arrived in Los Diablos back when Hood did back in 1992. It was meant to be a short stop, but they ended up staying. Sentinel wouldn't have been a hero if it wasn't for the Big One, he was an active kid and good at sports, but losing everything tends to get you to re-prioritize your life. Everything Sentinel was and is was formed by the Big One. He feels increasingly alienated from what Los Diablos has become, and it's one of the reasons he decided to move away.

Is Chen's heartbreak scar tied to his sense of duty?

Partly, yeah. Duty and self-sacrifice.

Did Hollow Ground try to thread Vernon when they met?

That might be smart if HG thought Vernon was on to something.

How effective would heartbreak have been against step at their current alpha level of telepathy?

Oh boy. Would depend on Sidestep stats, but Sidestep would definitely have defenses and a good chance at returning the favor.

When we close a gate that has prior been opened, is this gate more susceptible being opened again than a gate that has not been opened before?

Nope, not keeping track of that.

Can we turn an unthreaded Jake against Hollow Ground?

Possibly.

do regene names tend to be human names (like john, lucy, etc) or something more ambitious/descriptive? I'm not sure how to explain that, but along the lines of a (cooler) thou-shalt-not-commit-adultery pulsifer or like a blood of eden name from the locked tomb series? I was curious since you said regene could incorporate fellows names, is that always posthumous or can that be a symbol of dedication as well? is it possible that back on the farm, someone has incorporated our sidesteps name?

It would not follow normal human names most of the time, and would be more descriptive. It is also mutable, and things can be added to it. The older a re-gene gets, the longer their name can be. Names can be incorporated for close bonding, and is not always posthumous. They are often shorted to one part of their name as it is signed.

In addition to this, what do you imagine some Re-Gene names might look like?

Spider namesake-breadwinner-Thornsister (shortened to Spider). Truckfoot-thrice scarred (shortened to Truck). Grass Sun the Cleansed (shortened to Grass).

Herald was impressed... How did Argent feel, upon finding out that Sidestep ended the Nanosurge? What about her friends?


Both angry and grateful. It's a complicated feeling for her.

More of an authory question: What are you saddest had to be cut from Retribution/Rebirth (not counting things pushed from Retri into Revelations)? What cut are you happiest with?

I am sad I had to cut the Ortega breaks up with Sidestep and picks the Puppet instead, but it simply changed too many reactions going forth. I couldn't do it justice. And I have cut many small things that didn't give the effect I wanted it to, can't remember any on the top of my head. But I am grateful for playtesters for pointing them out!

Sidestep's memories of Steel pre-rebirth are very harsh and skewed... is that just the result of resentment, distance and trauma, or did the farm actively fuck with Sidestep's memories of the Rangers?

Mostly the former, but they did actively manipulate some memories.

Is argent magnetic? 

No.

It's been mentioned that a lot of the Rangers project on to/read into Sidestep with their own issues. What was/is Sentinel's opinion or perception of Sidestep?

Someone who is not a teamplayer who desperately wants to be one to belong.

What did Ashfall project onto Sidestep? Is it different from what Pyroclast project onto Sidestep (memory of them) now?

A fellow vigilante out to prove themselves. These days it is more focused on the fact that Sidestep died, and he didn't.

How fine a filter would be required to keep Pyroclast's ash form from freely flowing through, or rather: could effectively slow him down?

Would a high-spec filter's efficiency in catching particles, thus clogging faster, make it easier for him to get through? Or would it require more finesse to work through the clog?

Basically whatever would filter out volcanic ash. The particles are not super fine. The filter would clog fast, which is effective if you want to ruin an armor or machine, but an annoyance if you want to sneak into a building. These days Pyroclast would simply increase their temperature and burn through the filter if they wanted to get through.

Has ashfall ever had to leave a significant or very noticeable portion of himself behind while in ash form due to circumstances going out of control? If yes, how did it affect him?

Not anything more substantial than would be about a percent or two of bodymass. It affected him badly, a bit like coming down with a heavy flu and weakness.

Is Locus more of a tactician or a fighter? How skilled is she in hand to hand combat?

Locus is a tactician, she's not a very good fighter. She doesn't need to be.

!mobbossSidestep mentions using an internal communicator to talk to their team that Argent can't hear. Given Argent's abilities, can she hear it being used?

Oh Argent can hear it alright. But she has no interest in sharing what she can truly pick up.

Is pediatric modding a thing? What is the youngest age someone can be reliably modded from?

It has been known to happen to save people's lives, as a stopgap measure. But more often a temporary mod is placed to keep someone alive and well until a proper replacement organ/limb can be grown. Since children grow and change, any form of modding is a very temporary measure and tends to be avoided if at all possible.

Are there hero nepo babies? Do rich parents buy their kids mods? Has there ever been a case of a parent boosting their kid?

Hero nepo babies exists when it comes to mods. It is one of the more common origin of mods. In fact, for heavily modded young people it would very often be either military, company or rich parents who fronted the money. And yes, Ortega can be seen as a nepo baby in some people's eyes. Boosting is too unreliable to be used like that.

Is there a blind or deaf hero / villain in your LD lore brain? If yes, can you tell us more about their powerset and how they use it? Do any people from the cast we know have hearing or vision impairments--are some modded for it?

Things gets complicated when it comes to that. In the FH world, there exists more options to regain functions than it does in ours. However, these don't work for everyone. For example, it is reasonably simple to either fit grown organic eyes, or modded ones (cheaper) if you can't see. However, the first takes money which not everybody has, and the second runs the risk of rejection and other mod-related issues. This is one of the reasons why Owl doesn't have modded legs, for example. So blindness is not eliminated, not by a long shot. However, if you can't tolerate/afford mods, then you can't be a modded hero, so that is a lot less common since only surviving boosts would remain blind. The same goes for deafness, though the price of those mods is a lot less.

Like in real life, things that are dealt with are not noticed. A hearing aid implant is small and unobtrusive, a bit like glasses are in our world. Blind or heavily visually impaired people who don't go the operation or mod route, still have access to advanced aids. For example, a common tool for the visually impaired is what's called a "radar glove" on the street. It is either a large bracelet or a full glove (the latter is more precise) fitted with a local sonar emitter. The reflected

waves are turned into a pressure pattern on the wearers skin, and by moving the hand, the wearer can feel walls and their surroundings. The pressure changes from moving objects, so they can determine if things come towards them, or is traveling in another direction. The same goes for the material that is reflected, a human feels different than someone clad in armor, grass is different than asphalt. Someone used to this can navigate the city quite freely, especially since touch screens are not as common here. It is also often fitted with a reading function, which scans and translates signs and text to sound, which can be heard in a simple earplug accessory.

I don't have any blind or deaf heroes/villains in my head right now, especially for boosts it can very easily be... I don't know how to describe it. You know the whole "the hero is blind, but compensated fully for it by their radar sense/telepathy/super smell whatever"? I don't know how to feel about that, I would like to think about things a little more.

Do the regenes have a name for their Regene language?

No. It's just language.

How does "physical" danger work during mindmelding / when Sidestep enters another mindscape? We encounter Argent's sharks in Rebirth, and her "mind" nanovores in Retribution, and Sidestep flees; could they be truly hurt by them, or would they just be thrown out? Would that hurt be mental and lasting? Could it translate physically? Steel's telepathic kiss is felt, so... say, for example, if Sidestep had visited or mindmelded with Anathema, and the telepathic iteration of Anathema had used their powers during that visit, would that "projection" of acid "touch" Sidestep in any way? (or any other cases of someone "attacking" Sidestep, with their powers or just with physical strength).

Mind melding can cause actual, physical damage. But not of the type given inside the mind. Let's say you get your head cut off inside someone's mind during combat. Your own head wouldn't fall off, but you might get a heart attack, or a stroke from the shock if you're lucky. Pain is felt, but pain is as much mental as it is physical. Other bodily reactions like nausea, stomach problems, rash or headaches are common.

How aware is the police force of hollow grounds organisation? Could they be used against HG-s organisation if sidestep decides to go against them (via anonymous tips, or motivated via bribes, blackmail etc.)? Or have higher ups in the police force already been threaded?

Oh the police is truly pacified by HG. To use them as a tool would mean abolish them completely and rebuild from the ground up.

Would HG's sibling have survived being dosed with void blood?

Hard to say. Maybe? It also depends on the circumstances.

Is the graffiti that Chen saw in the void compound similar in design to the graffitied eyes surrounding the Heartbreak epicenter?

No, it was a lot more professional.

Tagging along with Anjie's question: Is the graffiti in the Void compound done by the same person as the Heartbreak epicenter? And is the graffiti done around the city of Sidestep's villainsona done by the same person as the Void compound graffiti and/or the Heartbreak epicenter?

Nope, this is many different people.

If the Farm developed the Rat King, have they tried/are they trying something similar with human brains?

That might be seen as the natural endgame here, animal testing always comes first.

Did the pain gate help staunch things like nausea and fatigue, Have some steps had to figure out alternative solutions to that kind of thing? Or was it never a factor?

Not nausea, that work differently. It helped with fatigue though. Might be a reason for that coffee addiction now.

Do you have a ballpark for how much cash each financial status has in their bank account? (ie poor, comfortable, wealthy, etc)

Ortega: Comfortable, Herald: Wealthy, Argent: Wealthy, Steel: Comfortable.

Argent can buy merch of Sidestep and wear/use it... what about the others? ☹️ And for what reason? What sort of merch would they get if they would, even if it's just to tease Sidestep?

Back in the day, Ortega used Sidestep merch to teas with, but seriously, this is not the time for that and Ortega hasn't dared to do that since they returned. Chen stays away from that. Daniel might buy it more as a collection thing, he doesn't wear the clothes, but might like a cool statue.

Are all Re-Genes 'uploaded' with the same language set?

The same basic one of English and Spanish. Additional ones are added later depending on deployment area and need.

Is body hopping / possession a known power? I.e. has someone before Sidestep gotten those powers from Boosting?

Not anybody known to the public, at least.

Assuming Psychopathor does not know Step was behind it, who does he think sent the SD after him/why does he think they showed up?

He would most likely blame someone in the wolfpack for leaking, talking too much. He's not surprised the SD shows up, he has things cooking that might warrant it.

Where was sidestep treated for their injuries after being picked up at the HB site? We're they taken directly back to the farm or was it like with the regenes in the psychopathor fight who were treated locally by local surgeons with a farm contract?

The ambulance was equipped with life support, the rest is spoilers.

Individually, what does the crew + Bo/Rosie think of a romance between their boss and a Ranger? What about the Marshal?

Ahahah that is something you will find out in the book, but it would vary from "go for it!" to "you're nuts".

Shroud's powers take longer to "digest" Boosts. Does this apply to all Enhanced or would someone who is only Modded last as long as a normal?

Mods lasts as long as normal people. It's boosts that lasts longer.

hi! this might be too specific but, i have a mccrash guilty puppetstuck mc,,,,next time i meet lady argent is she going to try to scar me like she does in guilty ending and can i stop her

That is something you have to sweat over and see in game! But I won't let any major things like that happen to your real body without letting you have some input.

second question is if its possible to help with the regenerator while we're puppetstuck/even if we decide we don't want to use it? because I doubt she's that patient about it...

That will most likely be possible.

Did you ever consider having a multi ranger guilty breakout? Like multiple Rangers either planning to or coincidentally working to break out a revealed villain Sidestep? Or would that have added to many new end cases?

None of them would have talked to anybody else about it, so the interesting thing was just who got there first. Others might have planned to do it, but come too late (sorry Ortega).

What do heroes in general who knows about re-genes think about them.

If they are aware of them, they see them as military weapons. They have swallowed the lie.

What kind of horror do you enjoy writing the most

Twisting reality, paranoia, gore.

Can we get any more upgrades to the armor in the next two books

I am seriously considering it.

What ideas got cut for being too ambitious

Lots of armor options and equipment stuff.

When writing the game, do you think of it as chapters in a book, scenes in a movie, or something like that? Do you get ideas for specific scenes and then find a way to link them together, or is it a chronological thing?

I think of it as a book. I often gets strong ideas for specific scenes and then sit forever and agonize about what the hell should link them to the narrative.

Given that the regenerator seems to undergo full cellular rejuvenation, it is possible that it repairs the damage done by the Hero Drug? Would using it diminish or even remove powers granted by Boosting?

Nope, that is a permanent change.

Is the old man known to some or all of HG's family members, or only to HG?

HG is the only surviving one.

If sidestep destroyed their own mannequin back in the rebirth debut, how did the rangers react to it?

At the time, it was seen as just one among many, but in retrospect some might start to think about it.

Is HG's relationship with the old man mutually beneficial or one-sided?

I would call it somewhat mutual.

Have Regina and Mortum ever worked together, or crossed paths, for example during their academic careers?

I don't think so.

Can, say... epileptic minds be affected by telepathic nightmare leakage when sleeping?

Nope. Ortega has to settle for their own nightmares.

What would Argent do if she found out who was behind the Nanosurge. Would she "disappear" them like she did to Oryx

I think the answer to that is yes.

How does Psychopathor know so much about the SD / the Farm's organisation? Has he worked with them before?

Hmmmm. Not exactly, but they've had adjacent conflict.

Sidestep can say of Los Diablos "This is where I can find everything I need". Did we find everything we needed in Rebirth, or is there something(s) else?

Spoilers.

Another question from a friend. Will it be possible for Step to keep seeing a therapist out of their own initiative or anything like that? Not solely at Ortega's insistence

I think so. Some Sidesteps might truly start to want to heal.

If the Rat King and Sidestep are close and got separated from each other, can either of them telepathically 'call out' so the other can try and find them?

Yes.

If we ever decide to embrace our Regene identity in the later books and go public, can we paint our tattoos on the armor?

That is a sweet idea!

In Rebirth, if I'm not mistaken, it doesn't seem like a long time elapses between your call to the farm (Regina?) and the moment the SD descends on Psychopathor's ass. How does that work; are there farm offshoots/ factioned battle operatives ready to attack in LD, or did they come all the way from Nevada?

They did not come all the way from Nevada, there are often caches of operatives stationed close to places of interest for the farm. Sidestep had most likely checked out if there was any presence here before deciding to do the call.

If you are ghosting / mad at Ortega (or vice versa) but are close to Daniel or Steel, and since they're both meddly little meddlers, do you think either of them would try to mend your friendship with Ortega in any way, or is that not something that would come up in game?

They are meddly little meddlers. But they can also respect your decision.

Did the bomb collapse the roof helipad in Carter's home, or did something else cause it?

The bomb.

In Rebirth, it gets tracked (albeit temporarily) when you decide not to use the bomb to blow up the museum and use the nanovores instead. What actually happened to that bomb, considering it never got mentioned again?

Probably found and defused.

Was the void classified as an omega class boost? or were they still in the upper echelons of alpha class?

The Void would still have been seel as alpha, though whether that was the right call or not is unsure.

In the guilty villain reveal, Sidestep mentions that they've tried hiding from the farm in the past and they've been found every time. How many times did they escape between their first and final escape, and how far did they get each of them?

I don't think those first attempts were truly serious, it was more like taking an opportunity and trying to get lost, but being found within the day.

If the Mob Boss crew's criminal past was wiped clean, and they got the chance to start over as normal civilians (with no threat of law enforcement or enemies hanging over their heads), what would they do?

Oh boy. I'm not sure either of them would stay on the straight and narrow, it's easy money as long as you don't screw up.

Is the person/people who ordered for Chen's shooting the same person/people who bombed Ortega's apartment?

No.

anathema's acid powers during the heartbreak. did anathema know before the heartbreak that they were the only one (one of few) who could kill themselves? was this ability always there or was it a result of interaction with the heartbreak?

Anathema did not know this, it was most likely the interaction with Heartbreak that did it as I speculated earlier.

Did anyone look for the sleepwalker mentioned in the heartbreak experiment? If so, did they find anything?

Oh yes, they were found. Just disrupted the experiment.

Can Argent talk to claw machines into helping her get prizes? 🎰 Or even the machines at a casino into helping her win?

Try describing to a claw what a pink bunny looks like, and how it's different from a green frog. It wouldn't be easy. A slot machine would be easy though.

Notwithstanding the probably bullshit descriptions of Sidestep's dream; was apartment 412 empty, or was there any decor in it? If there was, what was there?

It was mostly empty, as if the people there had moved, or just moved in.

Is the tree picture sidestep sees in Finch's office the same tree seen in the Heartbreak vision?

Sure is similar.

Considering what we know now of Ortega's Sidestep scar, did they start having hallucinations about Sidestep shortly after HB? Or were the hallucinations something that manifested gradually over time?

Shortly after, and then ongoing, but with slowly fading frequency.

Why did the Catastrofiend take the boost drugs? Was regeneration its first power?

Spoilers.

Does Chen know who was responsible for the Nanosurge?

No. He has some suspicions, but nothing but vague ideas.

is being able to break through dampeners possible for most alpha level telepaths or is that a exclusively sidestep thing? If that's another sidestep special, is it possible that will be noted in the future?

It might be possible for other alpha telepaths too, but the means might vary.

Since it's in the plans of the government, what would "boost registration" entail exactly if it was implemented in the FEZ?

That is classified.

Is the old man free to roam around LD, or held in an area under HG's jurisdiction?

Free to go where he wants to.

Do the goals of the current mayor align with the goals of the old (assassinated) mayor?

Nope.

Could you give us information about what kind of projects Carter was overseeing? Could it have any connection to anti-attack / city protection measures?

It certainly could.

Steel is in Carter's manor to protect Carter, admittedly, but he's kind of dragging his feet. Did he get conflicting directives regarding that mission? Could it be that his bosses told him that "losing" Carter wasn't that much a problem?

Steel had conflicting feelings there, that is very much the case.

Where about in LD did argent live when she was growing up?

In the northern parts, one of those mostly self-regulated communities on the outskirts of town with their own water supply, electricity and security force.

We know boosts are sterile, but are there any specific predispositions that hint at a higher likelihood of natural boosts? Or are “natural” boosts a relatively new phenomena?

Natural boosts have always occurred. So far nobody has tracked down who or why.

Also: given that it was safe enough for Argent to be surfing during the Nanosurge, how are the ocean’s salinity/toxicity levels at this time?

Salinity is fine, the toxicity is okay as long as the bottom silt layer is not disturbed. It can be iffy after strong storms, which is why the best waves should be surfed before it hits, not after when the water is bad again. It is safest to shower immediately after exiting the water, and to not spend too much time in there. Definitely not swallow. There are flags for water quality, and for the presence of water predators like the laser dolphins.

Last qna you said when the gates open they open linearly. Given mentions of 9 gates, could it be theorised they might open in the order of the telepathic control classification: 1 gate being “emotional control”, 2 then opening up “rational control” and so on?

Nope, that is just a coincidence.

If that were the case, does opening these gates give some influence over these functions in step to someone/something else behind the gates?

Nope, just superficial similarities of numbers.

Building on that - when the gates open linearly, do the gates closest to step open first, or do the gates closest to the "imposter" open first?

Closest to step opens first.

Will it be possible to body hop into porthole?

Oh hell, that would be weird and possibly bad.

What Heartbreak scar did Chen get? Anathema?

No, related to himself, his failure and sense of duty.

Was the weird warping effect that heartbreak had similar to the effect that void had?

Similar enough, yeah.

If Step (telepathically) freaks out during Chen's date + picture reveal, what exactly does Chen see/feel/experience in that moment? Considering his suspicion increases.

Spoilers.

Are there any government heroes that Regina would love to meet in person? Whether alive or dead

Cavalier.

Have there been any successful Animal-Re-Gene hybrids?

No.

Does the farm have any plans for Tina?

No.

Will we be able to talk about politics in therapy?

Maybe. That's not the subject though.

Does HG feel something when Step possesses Jake? If so, how does the sensation come across?

Nope.

Rebirth Heartbreak dream, lab part (see attached screenshot). Was it actually the Heartbreak's memories or memories of someone they (she in my case) had eaten them before?

Heheh memories are weird, aren't they? You're not getting a clear answer here.

Has Ortega noted that Chen's denial of HG's existence is weird? What is their theory on that? (Is he corrupted/bribed?)

Ortega thinks Chen is contrary because that's how he is.

Can we unthread the old man?

Maybe eventually.

Does Heartbreak know the Sleepwalker?

Not in the way you would normally call knowing.

Does Cavalier know the truth behind Re-Genes? Or does he see them as what the Farm wants the world to see them as: AI/super soldiers?

Cavalier knew a lot of things. Most of them very close to the truth.

Is the farm any closer to succeeding in their goals regarding the heartbreak experiment?

Baby steps.

Where is the tracker's (the one that tracks the telepaths in LD) base of operation?

Not going to tell you that!

[1.2.3 Whose fault is it anyway?](#)

[Apr 29, 2023](#)

1.2.3 Ortega late night rescue, no minor variables added yet but a lot of banter. 4150 words of it.

Why does this feel familiar? Stuck in a wheelchair, coming down from painkillers and struggling to keep hold of the thoughts around you? Look away, look away, look away or turn to stone. You don't care which, there's too many memories running adjacent to this experience. As the wheels roll you try to find a position that doesn't hurt. Find a way to breathe, even though you're nauseous with agony. You didn't tell Ortega you might need another dose, that would be admitting to weakness you're not sure you're comfortable with showing.

Right now you regret it.

You should be used to pain by now, but your body still reacts. You never knew how good you had it 'growing up', coddled by the pain-gate turning agony to discomfort. You doubt the Farm truly knows what power it gives to their Re-Genes. The pain-gate allowed you to exercise will over your body's involuntary functions, to let you destroy yourself in measured intervals rather than collapse in protective shock. Did it make things worse on occasion? Yes, of course. Pain is there to protect your body from breaking further, but broken bodies can be fixed. Death is permanent.

*if gate >= 4

Right?

Did the pain-gate break with you against the hard asphalt below that room full of nightmares that was the Heartbreak Incident? Perhaps. Was it taken out or sabotaged while the Farm was stitching your broken body together afterwards? Equally likely. All you're certain of is that after the fall, you had to go through every agonizing breath afterwards. Local anesthesia can only go so far and the blissful darkness of sleep was denied you. Were they afraid to put you under?

*if gate >= 4

They were. And rightly so.

You've blanked out most of those first months, there was nothing there worth remembering, even in your nightmares. A second birth, more traumatic and painful than your first decanting. The farm. Your creators.

Did they put you back together wrong, all those years ago?

*fake_choice

#They put me together wrong, this is their fault.

*if motivation = "fate"

They did something to you, of that you are sure. Put you together wrong. Set you on this path.

It's only right they get to reap the whirlwind of \${villain_name}'s wrath.

*else

Did they put you back together wrong? Is this the Farm's fault?

Probably. \${!villain_name} is their creation, like it or not.

#No, they set me free, finally.

*if motivation = "fate"

They did something to you, alright. They set you free. Set you on this path. Birth is always painful, but you hold no gratitude for your cruel midwives.

It's only right they get to reap the whirlwind of \${villain_name}'s wrath.

*else

The farm didn't do anything but set you free. Whatever bonds you had with your past were cut on that operating table, and what remained shriveled during the captivity afterwards.

The farm might have messed \${name} \${surname} up, but they set \${villain_name} free.

*selectable_if (motivation != "fate") #Maybe. I don't want to think about it.

Maybe the Farm messed you up, but didn't they do that back when they decanted your mewling teenage form all those years ago? You try not to think about it.

What's the use? \${!villain_name} is here to stay.

#The farm has nothing to do with this. This is all me.

*if motivation = "fate"

The Farm has nothing to do with this, this is fate. You were always meant to walk this path, you can feel the weight of inevitability with every step.

\${!villain_name} was always your destiny.

*else

The Farm has nothing to do with this. They're a painful memory, an obstacle in your path. Nothing more. You've crafted \${villain_name} from past mistakes.

Let nobody say you're not responsible where you go from here.

"How are you doing down there?" Ortega's voice is light, but you know \${him} well enough to spot the cracks. "Holding it together?"

"I'm literally stapled together, idiot." You can't help the snarl, your escape from the Ranger's Headquarters wasn't hard for someone with inside knowledge of the systems, but now you're outside and the street makes you feel naked and irritated. The Gucci hoodie covers your arms, and the rest of you is wrapped in blankets, but you still feel exposed. "Please tell me you've got a car."

"Did you think I'd strap you to the back of my bike?" Ortega pauses, waiting for you to give \${him} the all clear before crossing the road.

"No, but I don't think you'd be above handing me a rope and tow me behind it." You force your exhausted mind to scan the road. It's late, the traffic is sparse down here. You wait in the shadows for one to pass, then gestures to Ortega. "Go. Now."

"Hang on," Ortega says, not detailing how you're supposed to manage that feat.

You do your best to help balance as Ortega sprints with you across the road, into the shadows on the other side. The curb makes you grunt in pain, but you keep down a scream. Good for you.

"Sorry," Ortega hisses, pausing as soon as you are hidden by the dark buildings. "Didn't think about that."

"Please tell me you thought of the cameras at least." Your breath is shallow as you try to stop your eyes from tearing up. "The backup power came on fast."

"Of course. The one on the back door was disabled before I went to your room."

"I know you looped the ones focus on me, but the rest?" You know the corridors are filled with cameras. While the privacy act is keeping them off the street, there's no protections inside private buildings.

"They're not watched all the time so I left them running." A soft chuckle. "Jerome is on the nightshift, and I told him to focus on your room to the exclusion of everything else. If no alarms go off, there's no reason to look. There's a lot of them."

"So they recorded you going in." Sounds uncharacteristically sloppy.

"They recorded a big guy with his hood up. I needed to give them a suspect so they wouldn't think it was an inside job."

"But—"

"With the armored coat and hood I had on I looked bulkier than myself, and I know how to fake a mod-walk. They'd probably pin it on someone armored, or at least heavily modded. I dropped the gear in a compressed bag and hid it in a locker once I'd entered the looped area. Nobody should find it until I've got a chance to pick it up."

"So you thought of everything," you grumble. "The corridor cameras went out with the power so they wouldn't have seen us together. But what about the wide-range ones? The power was back by then."

"Been down since last week due to a privacy complaint. They caught too much of the street, and a concerned citizen reported us."

"A concerned citizen?" You can't see Ortega's face, and \${his} mind is as unreadable as ever. You only have \${his} voice to go on. "You couldn't have planned for this back then."

"What makes you think it was me?" A soft laugh as \${he} carefully rolls you down the alley.

"Because you sound too smug not to have done it."

"Well, there are many reasons I don't want too many cameras around the HQ. Not all of them are about you."

*fake_choice

##"Fine. It's your ass on the line."

"Fine," you say with a tired sigh. "It's your ass on the line."

##"You need too stop taking stupid risks like this."

"You need to stop taking stupid risks like this," you say with a tired sigh. "Your luck won't last forever."

##"Oh well, old \${ortega_gender}, keep your secrets."

"Oh well, old \${ortega_gender}, keep your secrets." Not like \${he}'s going to share them. Not now.

"Hey, you could at least have asked what I was up to?" A disappointed complaint.

"It's no longer my business," you say with a tired sigh. "You do you."

"And this time you won't be around to bail me out, is that what you're saying?" Ortega chuckles.

"Yes. You need to understand that. Everyone knows I'm \${villain_name}, you can't just pretend that didn't happen."

That shuts \${him} up, and you roll the rest of the way in silence. It's not far, thankfully, because this wheelchair is not made for use outdoors. Down the alley a nice van is parked, with the logo of a local plumbing company on the side.

*if mustache

"Really?" You can't stifle a laugh, which hurts like hell.

"Thought you'd appreciate it." \${he} strokes \${his} mustache with a wink before pulling open the doors for you.

*else

"Your carriage awaits." \${he} sketches a bow as \${he} pulls the doors open for you.

"Does that mean I'm the princess in this scenario?" You look up at the dark interior, with neatly stacked equipment in shelves along the walls. "Don't tell me you're about to lift me up there, you're almost as messed up as me."

"I could," \${he} protests as \${he} climbs into the van. "But they have a ramp to get the heavy stuff out." There's a small amount of grunting and swears, and a small aluminum ramp slides out and hooks into the floor. "There."

"Did you steal this?" You thought it might have been fake signs on the sides, but this looks like the real deal.

"No." Ortega walks out and grabs the handles of your Wheelchair. It's made to be rolled, not to be used on your own, so you're grateful for the help. "Borrowed it from a guy who does this for a living. And don't worry, he knows better than to ask any questions."

"Really?" You brace yourself as Ortega pushes, the ramp is steep but you make it up alright. "You certainly got friends everywhere."

"Well, you know me." `!``{he}` wipes `{his}` hands, and then rolls you over to the back end. There are straps there, and looking at the locking mechanism on the floor you suppose it might have been to strap in some kind of heavy thing. You're not sure what it can be, judging from the interior of the van, plumbers have some heavy duty tools.

"You need to drive carefully," you caution as `{he}` secures the wheelchair to the wall. "This thing doesn't come with seatbelts, and I don't think I'd survive another crash."

"I will." A serious look passes over Ortega's face as `{he}` hunches down before you. There's a thin sheen of sweat on `{his}` forehead, and you remember that `{he}` was part of the same crash as you were. How many painkillers are running through `{his}` system? "Where do you want me to drive you?"

"I'm not going to lead you to my base." You give `{him}` a deadpan look.

"Do you really think I would turn you in? After this?"

`*fake_choice`

`#`"Yes, the moment I did something you disapproved of."

"Yes." Your voice is hard. "The moment I did something that didn't fit your particular morals. I am not taking that risk."

"I wouldn't," Ortega protests, but you can see that `{he}` knows it's hopeless. "But it's your call."

`#`"It's not about that, I don't want you involved."

"It's not about that," you say with a groan. Trust Ortega to make this about `{him}`self. "I don't want you involved."

"That much is clear," `{he}` retorts, looking slightly hurt. "But I guess it's your call to make."

`#`"I am not dragging you down with me. This is my mess."

"I'm not dragging you down with me," you say sharply. "This is my mess. Not yours."

"You don't need to protect me," Ortega protests. "I can take care of myself." You long eyes, and it takes a full thirty second before `{he}` relents and look away. "But it's your call, I guess."

"Damn right it is." You fumble in your pocket for the burner phone. "Be honest with me, is this bugged?" You can't trust the words, but maybe the reaction.

"No," `{he}` say, looking tired enough for it to be the truth. "You know I have a hard time not messing those up. Especially ina state like this."

"That matters little when you're in diagnostic mode," you say, because there's no way he wouldn't be kept in that low-power mode for at least a week after a crash like this.

"True," `{he}` admits. "But I'm not. You think I'd break you out limping around with barely enough power to move? Dragging around a siphon cord?"

`*if ortega_power_info`

"What the hell did they put in you?" You're not worried, your voice is raised for other reasons. "I know you've been upgraded, but why would you need a siphon cord?" A generator of some sort is the only answer, not only batteries.

"That's not the point," Ortega evades. "I just—"

"I know you like to risk your life, but this is stupid, even for you. How much pressure are you putting on your nervous system? How drugged up are you, really?"

"Don't preach to me, `{nickname}`. You're as bad as I am, and the longer we stand here arguing, the worse it will be for both of us."

"Fine." You let out a frustrated huff. "I'll take your word on the phone, now get me out of here."

"Alright." Ortega's smile says that `{he}` thinks `{he}`'s won this discussion, but you don't have time for an argument.

`!``{he}` gently closes the door behind `{him}`, leaving you in the semi-darkness of the interior lights. You wait until the engine starts rumbling, then pick up the phone.

*gosub henchcall

Unlike normally, Ortega drives the van carefully, with no sudden stops or turns. It gives you time to look around the back, wondering what...

"You okay back there?" Ortega's raspy voice makes you jerk around, which makes your ribs hurt and you course out loudly. "Guess not," \${he} chuckles. "Where do you want to go?"

"What the..." It takes you a moment to locate the speakers, and another to activate the small screen next to it. Interesting equipment for a plumber's van, but you suppose that's the kind of friends Ortega has. It allows you a view out the front of the van, highly illegal. Interesting.

You push the button to speak, leaning closer to it.

*fake_choice

#"Thank you for nearly giving me a heart attack, asshole."

"Thank you for nearly giving me a heart attack, asshole." You can still feel the adrenaline, and you pulled something in your ribs. Again.

"Sorry. I forgot." Ortega doesn't sound repentant at all. "But the question stands. Where do you want me to go?"

#"Looks like you've borrowed the Mario spy van."

"Looks like you've borrowed the Mario spy van." Definitely not a regular van, probably some vigilante's stake-out van.

"Not going to pick you up in a regular one," Ortega says, and you can hear the annoyance in \${his} voice. "If you're telling the truth, there's a chance we might have unfriendly company."

"So you decided to be prepared." You don't know whether to be amused or relieved. "Is it bulletproof?"

"Of course." \${he} chuckles. "Now where do you want me to go?"

#"Any sign of being followed?"

"Any sign of being followed?" You can't be too careful.

"Not so far," Ortega pauses, most likely checking the mirrors. "I think we're as clean as we're going to get. Where do you want me to take you?"

"Head towards old Jefferson Park," you say, trying to find a comfortable position. "I'll tell you where to go once we get close."

"Got it." The van speeds up slightly as you hit a larger road, but Ortega is true to \${his} word and drives as gently as \${he} was transporting a cracked egg. Or nitroglycerin. Technically you could be considered both.

Thankfully \${he} doesn't try to keep up the conversation, at least nothing beyond exchanging instructions as you drive closer to your target. \${he} ease the van into the alley you choose, driving as deep as \${he} can to get out of sight from the road. Then the car stops, and the doors open.

\${swear}. From the look on \${his} face, a discussion is to be had.

*fake_choice

#"No, we're not talking about this." I cross my arms.

"No," you say sternly before Ortega can open \${his} mouth. "We are not talking about this."

"What makes you think I wanted to?" \${he} doesn't look at you, instead \${he} starts undoing the restraints around your wheelchair.

"The look on your face." You cross your arms, and try not to wince as you do it. "Hurry up, I want you out of here before my ride arrives."

#"What?" I give \${him} a long look.

"What?" You give Ortega a long look.

"Nothing," \${he} lies, and begins to free your wheelchair from its restraints.

"If you want to say something you don't have long. I want you out of here before my ride arrives."

#"You have exactly five minutes to get to the point."

"You have exactly five minutes to get to the point," you say, crossing your arms with a wince.

"Neither of us is wearing a watch," Ortega points out and starts to free your wheelchair from the restraints.

"You know what I mean. We won't have long, and I want you out of here before my ride arrives."

"I think I should stay." Ortega's voice is low, but there's no mistaking the tension in the words. "Just until whoever it is has picked you up."

"You really want to see who I am working with so bad?"

"No, I want to make sure you're safe, is that so hard to understand?"

*if cro

"Says the one who nearly killed us both in that crash." You raise your voice. "Don't think you've done enough?"

"I made a mistake, alright?" There's a look of desperation on Ortega's face you're not used to. "I've mad a lot of them. I want to try to make up for some."

"Then do that by listening to me," you plead. "For once."

*elseif cra

"You're a walking magnet for trouble." You raise your voice. "Don't think I'm safer without you hanging around? We nearly died in that crash."

"It wasn't my fault." There's a look of desperation on Ortega's face you're not used to. "I just want to make sure nothing bad happens."

"Then do that by listening to me and staying away," you plead. "For once."

*else

"Why?" You raise your voice. "I nearly killed you in that crash. I've put you in the hospital twice by now."

"You're not even in the top five of my regular opponents there." The joke tastes of desperation, and Ortega is not smiling. "I need to make sure you're safe."

"You can't," you plead. "Please for once in your life, listen to me and stay away."

"I can't." \${he} looks down, walking over to the edge of the van and sitting down. "I've lost you once already, I won't have that happening again."

*fake_choice

#"It's not your choice." I swallow hard and blink my eyes.

"It's not your choice." You swallow the clump in your throat and blink, trying to stop your eyes from betraying you. "You need to realize that."

"Fuck." Ortega spits the word, but not in your direction. Hard and sharp and with nothing of \${his} usual rambling amusement. "Is that what we've come to."

"Yes." You feel so tired. So does \${he} from the look of it.

#"Are you trying to make up for not saving me back then?"

"Are you trying to make up for not saving me back then?" The thought is intolerable, partly because wasn't that your dream for so long? Ortega riding on a white horse, saving you from the hell you've landed in? A dream. How dare \${he} try to make it a reality. "Don't bother."

"You can't just say that," Ortega protests. "That's not your choice."

"It is." You feel so tired. So does \${he} from the look of it. "At least if you want to be better than them."

#"You're not losing me," I say softly. "You're letting me go."

"You're not losing me," you say softly. "You're letting me go."

"Maybe I don't want to." But Ortega doesn't turn around, and the protest is as soft as your words. Almost sad. "You get that, right?"

"It doesn't matter." You feel so tired. So does \${he} from the look of it. "It is what it is."

"So this is it then." \${he} slips off the edge and starts to assemble the ramp.

"What else could it be?" You smile grimly into the pain. There's enough in your body to distract from anything else. "You know who I am now. What I am. What I have been doing."

"I don't have amnesia, I remember." \${he} walks up and grabs the handles of your wheelchair, guiding you down into the alley. "And I still broke you out."

"Thank you for that." The words slip out before you can stop them, causing Ortega to chuckle bitterly.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe things have changed." $\$!{\text{he}}$ pulls the ramp back up, and closes the door. "Or maybe we both need some time to think about this."

"I have been thinking about this for the last five years," you whisper. "You were never part of that equation, and I wish you would stay away long enough to do my job."

"You don't mean that." Ortega looks at you, a shadow in the dark alley.

*fake_choice

#"I do." I stare $\${\text{him}}$ down.

"I do," you say, locking eyes with Ortega. It's rare enough to have the effect you want to, and $\${\text{he}}$ looks away first. "Don't drag this out. I'll be safe until my ride arrives."

"I'm going to hold you to that." Ortega's shoulders have slumped, and you know you've won the argument. "But this isn't over."

"It is. Just go." You gesture towards the van. "And don't try to follow, I might not be able to read your mind, but my friends got ways to make sure we're alone."

#"Whatever you and I feel don't factor into it." I sigh.

"Whatever you and I feel don't factor into it," you say with a sigh. "I'll be safe until my ride arrives, you don't have to stick around."

"I'll hold you to that." Ortega's shoulders have slumped, and you know you've won the argument. "Please, stay safe."

"I will. And don't stick around to spy," you gesture at the van. "I might not be able to read your mind, but my friends got ways to make sure we're alone."

#"Just go," I plead.

"Jus go," you plead. "Don't make this harder than it is."

"But that's my thing," Ortega smiles softly, but the slump of $\${\text{his}}$ shoulders tells you that $\${\text{he}}$ knows $\${\text{he}}$'s losing the fight. "I complicate things."

"Please. Not this time." You clench your jaw and points at the van. "I'll be fine. Just leave and don't stick around to spy. I might not be able to read your mind, but my friends got ways to make sure we're alone."

"We'll pick this up later." $\$!{\text{he}}$ opens the door to the driver's compartment.

"No we won't," you say, making the words as decisive as you can. "Now go."

And to your surprise, $\${\text{he}}$ actually does. The door shuts, and the engine starts, and the van starts rolling down the alley. You refuse to look away until it's rounded the corner and is gone.

Silence.

Now all you have to do is wait.

*goto fusedpickup

[1.2.6 Carefully laid plans II](#)

[Apr 28, 2023](#)

(3700 words or so, the continuation of the last one, now with Sidestep pickup. Not all variables, friendly boss and variable leadership.)

"Stop and open the doors. No need to get me out yet, if we do this smart we can roll me from one van to the other."

"Are you sure you want me to stay?" You can feel his concern as a visceral thing, a sour taste at the back of his tongue. "I'm the Marshal, your people might not appreciate that."

*fake_choice

#"You broke me out, don't pretend you're not one of us now."

"You broke me out, don't pretend you're not one of us now." You can't see Chen's face where he's leaning against the open doors, but you can sense the tension.

"That's not how this goes," he says, though softer than you'd thought he'd deny that particular accusation. "I helped you out for many reasons, that doesn't mean I've switched sides."

"So once we part, we're what?" Just because he didn't raise his voice doesn't mean you won't. Nobody around to hear. "Back to being enemies?"

"Are we?" This time Chen looks back at you, face mostly in shadow.

*if thief

"Are we enemies? The Rangers don't catch thieves..."

*elseif anarchist

"Are we enemies? I get the feeling you've got bigger goals than being a criminal."

*elseif boss

"Are we enemies? There are a lot of criminal networks in Los Diablos, and the Rangers doesn't bother with most of them."

*elseif prepare_them

"Are we enemies? I don't get the feeling that's why you're fighting everybody..."

*else

"I'm not sure you have enemies as much as people you really want to beat up."

"That's not what I'm talking about." You're not about to have a philosophical discussion about your current career. "You work for the government. I'm stolen government property. That makes us enemies on an existential level. You need to understand that."

"Then we are not enemies." Chen says the words fast enough to have them ready. He must have been thinking about it for a while. "I don't agree with what's been done to you, and others like you."

"Say the word," you snap.

"Re-Genes. You're not property, you're people."

"Your bosses doesn't think so."

"Then they can go fuck themselves." A frustrated sigh. "I don't know how I will deal with this, but nothing's going to be the way it used to be. I can promise you that. Anything else I need to think about."

#"Do you really think anybody will recognize you?"

"Do you really think anybody will recognize you?" You can't see Chen's face where he's leaning against the open doors, but he's dressed like your average veteran down on his luck, and with the cap down his face won't be too visible.

"Maybe not in the dog park or out on town, but..." he looks back over his shoulder, his face in shadow. "I assume whoever's coming to pick you up is a professional. They'd be bad at their job if they couldn't recognize the Marshal."

"That's a fair point." You could make them not recognize him, but you don't say that part out loud. You suspect he'd disapprove. "But it won't matter. They've got a job to do."

"If you say so. I'd rather avoid getting shot at if I can help it."

"That's not going to happen," you assure.

*if boss

You don't think ZaZa is on the pickup team, and that's the one loose cannon you'd be worried about.

"You want this, doesn't you?" Chen turns around fully, so he can try to read your bruised face. "You want me associated with you. You want me to see the faces of your people. You want me invested."

"I do." You can't stop the smile. "You wouldn't have broken me out if you weren't already halfway in."

"I wouldn't say that," he says with a deep sigh. "I need to think about this."

#"Does it bother you to get this involved?"

"Does it bother you to get this involved?" You can't see Chen's face where he's leaning against the open doors, but you can feel the tension of his shoulders.

"I'm not going to lie, of course it does." He shifts, but doesn't turn around to face you. "I'm the Marshal."

"So why are you doing it? You could drive out of here right now, you know I'm safe."

"Because I can't stop thinking about the fact that you want this." Chen turns around fully, so he can try to read your bruised face. "You want me associated with you. You want me to see the faces of your people. You want me invested."

"I do." You can't stop the smile. "You wouldn't have broken me out if you weren't already halfway in."

"I wouldn't say that," he says with a deep sigh. "I need to think about this before I make more rash decisions."

"You'll have time to think." You rub your sore arm as you feel a vehicle approaching, familiar thoughts behind the wheel. "I need time to heal before my next move."

"I hear a car," Chen cautions, stepping back in the shadow of the open door.

"It's my ride," you say with a thin smile. "Hang back and let me do the talking."

Chen nods and pulls the cap down over his eyes, partly to shield against the headlights, partly to hide his identity.

*if boss

*goto chenboss

*elseif rosie

*goto chenrosie

*else

*goto chenbo

*label chenbo

You pull out the phone, calling Bo as you feel his approaching thoughts. They're always slippery when he's driving, hard to mistake for someone else.

"There's an alley to your left, right across the closed drycleaners. We're parked there, just back the van in enough that it's hidden from the street, then get out so we can talk."

[i]"You're not alone, boss?"[/i] Bo's voice is cautious, you can sense his suspicion. Is this a trap? Are you a hostage? Why the reason for this convoluted pickup?

"I'm hurt," you admit, brushing away his suspicions like cobwebs. He's a cautious man, that's what kept him alive and out of jail so far. "Badly. I've had help getting there, don't worry about him. I trust him." You hear Chen groan quietly at the last bit.

[i]"Shit. I'll be right there."[/i] The dark van rolls past the opening, then skillfully reverses in. Smooth, no hesitation. He does hesitate before stepping out though, and you can feel a quickly suppressed urge to draw a weapon.

"It's fine," you call out. "Just a bit indisposed." You gesture to your legs.

"Shit," Bo repeats with emphasis. "Wasn't sure if you were involved in that crash downtown." Interesting. You didn't tell him any details, looks like he's good at adding things up. "You're sure you're okay with showing me your face, boss?"

"We're at the point where I need to reveal some secrets," you admit with a sigh. Luckily nobody questions why he believes you so readily. Trust is an easy thing to pull forward, especially when it is about something he already wants. Be a part of something. Be trusted.

"Well, thanks for trusting me." His eyes go to Chen, who is still lounging against the side of the van. "Looks like I wasn't first on the list."

"No," you admit. "\${puppet_name} knows."

"That ain't \${puppet_name}." Bo frowns. "Where have I..."

"Don't worry," Chen says, taking a step forward into the dim light of the interior of the van. "I'm just here for the delivery."

"Fuck." Bo takes a step backward, and you feel his mind go into a slippery slide of panic, and oh, shit, you put an abrupt stop to it because there was a hidden rifle at the end of it and you had no idea Bo could be this trigger happy. "You do know that's the Marshal, right?"

*fake_choice

##"I do. We know each other from before. He won't arrest us."

"I do," you admit, because Bo's mind is close to boiling over, and you need to shut down the worst before something happens. "We know each other from before. He won't arrest us."

"I wont," Chen says, hands open. "Just driving the car."

"That's my line," Bo says, as close to a growl as you've ever heard. "But fine. Let's get this over with."

##"And he broke me out from the Rangers' headquarters."

"And he broke me out from the Rangers' headquarters," you say, doing your best to lean on Bo's mind to keep him calm. It's hard, like pressing a lid on a boiling pot. Sooner or later the pressure will be too much. "He's on our side in this."

"I doubt that," Bo says, as close to a growl as you've ever heard.

"I wont arrest you," Chen says, hands open. "Is that good enough?"

"I suppose it will have to be." Bo runs a hand over his head, looking like he'd rather walk out of here. "Let's get this over with fast."

##"Doesn't matter what he is, he's leaving as soon as we're done."

"Doesn't matter what he is, he's leaving as soon as we're done." you say, doing your best to lean on Bo's mind to keep him calm. It's hard, like pressing a lid on a boiling pot. Sooner or later the pressure will be too much. "That's all you need to know."

"No, boss, that won't be good enough," Bo says, as close to a growl as you've ever heard. "I need to know. Are you working with the Rangers?"

"I'm not," you say, impressed despite yourself that Bo is strong enough to break through your trusting calm and question you. "He's breaking the law as much as we are here."

"I'm not doing this as Marshal," Chen says, hands open. "Is that good enough?"

"I suppose it will have to be." Bo runs a hand over his head, looking like he'd rather walk out of here. "Let's get this over with fast."

"Do I know you?" Chen looks honestly troubled, as if Bo's reaction has triggered something in him.

"No, you don't." Bo has his back turned, opening the doors to his van. "But I know who you work for. Not exactly inspiring trust, even if the boss says so."

"If you back the van closer I can roll over more easily," you say, trying to change the subject. This is new, Bo is usually laid back and calm, this is a new side of him. You're hurting too much to dig deeper, but it looks like Bo is carrying more grudges than you thought.

"Sure, boss." He climbs back into the van, movements rough and angry.

"Get in here," you say to Chen, who climbs back into the van with you.

The van starts back up and reverses into position. Chen carefully helps you across the gap, rolling you over to the far end. The van rumbles forward a meter or two again, and he holds you steady as it stops once more. Enough space to close the doors.

"You'd better go," you say, still feeling Bo's barely contained simmer. "Before something happens."

"Stay safe." Chen gives you a long look before jumping down. "We'll be in touch later."

"Bold to assume you can find me." You try for a bold grin, but it's more of a pained grimace.

"I know you can find me," he says, returning the smile before he climbs back in the van and continues down the alley until he reaches the street.

It takes until the van is gone until Bo gets out and climbs in the back with you. "Sorry about that, boss," he mumbles as he improvises a way to wedge your wheelchair in place so it won't roll around.

"Nothing to be sorry about," you mumble, part of you glad that this has distracted from the fact that you're not half as impressive in person, out of your armor. "You don't like the Marshal. That's natural."

"More like who he works for." Bo stands up, tugging a bit on your wheelchair. "But we can talk about that later. Where do you want to drop me off?"

"My base. Keep a line open on your phone, and I'll guide you in."

"Huh. Looks like I learn a lot of secrets today," he mumbles as he climbs out. "Do they come with a pay increase?"

"And here I thought you were ready to dump be because of my choice of escape?"

"Can't say I approve, but I'm not quitting." He looks back as he's about to close the doors. "So keep thinking about that raise."

"Sure you say," picking up your phone. He's going to have to earn every penny in the coming weeks.

The van starts rolling, and you grit your teeth. On the road.

*page_break Finally

*goto fusedrive

*label chenrosie

You pull out the phone, calling Rosie as you feel her approaching thoughts. Focused, looking for the right address.

"There's an alley to your left, right across the closed drycleaners. We're parked there, just back the van in enough that it's hidden from the street, then get out so we can talk."

[i]"Hope the alley ain't too narrow."[/i] Rosie feels concerned, she's not that used to driving a van as big as this. [i]"Let me know when to stop so I won't hit you."[/i]

"There's another van on the way, so I'm safe. Just take it carefully."

[i]"Okay."[/i] She hangs up, slowly backing the van inside the alley. There's a scraping sound as she hits one wall, swearing loudly as she pulls away. You can feel her frustration when she finally stops.

"I'll stay in the background," Chen says, taking a step back as the doors open.

"Is that you, boss?" Rosie peers into the dimly lit van, confusion coloring her thoughts.

"A bit worse for wear," you admit as you brush away cobwebs of suspicion and doubt. Of course this is you, just without your armor. "As you can see."

"Yeah," she looks you over, shaking her head. "Damn, who the hell messed you up?"

"A car."

"Seriously?" She barely resists tapping one of your casts as she leans into the truck.

"Not my proudest moment. And I wasn't wearing my armor."

"See," she straightens her back, "I wouldn't go outside without if I was that soft. No offense boss, but you could have died."

"I am aware of that," you say, not sure whether to be offended or amused by her worry. "But I didn't. And you get the bonus of seeing my face finally."

"Yeah," she says with a grin. "Somewhere behind the bruises. Speaking of..." her eyes narrow in Chen's direction. "Who's the bruiser?"

"My ride here." You look back at Chen who takes an awkward step forward. "You knew I had other contacts than you."

"Yeah, but—" her thoughts light up as she recognizes Chen, and in the same moment she acts.

You always forget how fast Rosie is, one moment her eyes go wide, the next she's going for Chen's throat. Your exhausted mind is too slow to stop her, the violence came from nowhere, and just as you tangle your mental fingers in her thoughts the world turns upside down for her as Chen deposits her on the ground in a flawless throw.

"Stand down," he hisses.

"Fuck you, Marshal," she hisses back, tearing away her arm as she rolls back to get some distance.

"Stop it," you snap, and both of them freezes. "It's not a trap, he got me out of the Rangers' headquarters and got me here."

"Are you sure, boss?" Her eyes are narrow and her stance is ready. "Because I can take him."

"There's no need to. We're on the same side here." You look over at Chen, who is flexing his hand. One of the cybernetic fingers is stuck in an odd angle, and you can hear a tortured whine from the rest. "Right?"

"I'm not here to arrest anybody." He holds up his ruined hand. "And I'm not a threat."

"So..." Rosie's eyes narrow. "You're friends with the Marshal?"

*fake_choice

##"Of a sort. We go way back and he decided to help me out."

"Of a sort," you admit, unsure how to phrase this in a way she'll understand. "We go way back and he decided to help me out."

"Are you sure it's wise to let her know?" Chen looks between you two.

"She can add things up," you say with a sigh. "I used to be a hero. Back in the day."

##"Some people are not as squeaky clean as they come off."

"Some people are not as squeaky clean as they come off," you tease with a smirk. "He helped me escape."

"Don't remind me," Chen sighs.

"Oh... you two know each other then?" She looks between you, interest piqued.

"I used to be a hero," you admit. "Back in the day."

##"Yes. Though we might not agree on everything."

"Yes," you admit with a pained sigh. "Though we might not agree on everything."

"That's not an exaggeration." Chen gives you a long look.

"But..." Rosie looks between you. "Do you two know each other?"

"Yes," you say with a shrug. "I used to be a hero back in the day."

"Huh. That explains a lot." Rosie looks satisfied with the explanation. "You were one of the Rangers hangarounds?"

"Associate," you say sternly, giving Chen a glare as he stifles a laugh. "And we can talk about that later."

"Oh we are gonna," she says with a wide grin. "I want all the gossip."

"Good luck with that." Chen looks amused at the thought of you willingly sharing information. You can feel his relief that whoever you're working with now seems refreshingly normal for being in this business.

"We are here for a reason," you say, raising your voice. "And that is to get me out of here. Understood?"

"Sure, boss. You want us to carry you across?" Rosie gestures to the other van.

"If you think you can work together enough for that." You rethink having Rosie back the van up, she's not the best driver. She is however strong.

"If big boy's hand over there is alright?" Rosie winks at Chen, who sighs.

"It's functional. I don't need all the fingers for this." He walks up to your side, placing himself so his good hand can take the weight, while his broken one balances your legs.

"Alright then, let's do this!" Rosie takes the other side, a bit more awkwardly since she's shorter and has a worse angle. She's stronger though, so the process is surprisingly quick. They put you down gently, rolling you inside so you won't slide off.

"I'll better secure you. Wait a moment." Chen jumps down and walks over to the other van to get his things.

*if (((steelattraction) or (steel_flirting)) or (steelkiss))

"Are you looking at his ass?" Rosie whispers as Chen clambers into the van.

"No," you lie, doing your best not to show anything. "I'm about to pass out."

"Sure you are," she says with a sage nod.

"Shut up," you hiss back as Chen returns.

It's an awkward moment as Chen helps secure your wheelchair under Rosie's watchful eyes. Luckily, he's a quick worker and before you know it he's put of the van again.

"I'll head off now," he says. "Let's agree to forget this ever happened."

"Who's going to believe me?" Rosie jumps down after him. "If you keep your mouth shut, I'll do the same."

"Deal." There's a small nod in your direction, then he turns and starts up his van. There's low growl, and then he heads deeper down the alley to get back to the main road. A turn, and he's out of sight.

"Phew," Rosie sighs, rather theatrically. "Where you want me to take you? Looks like a hospital might be a good bet."

"No need. Just close the doors and drive me back to my base. Keep the phone running, I'll guide you there."

"Nice. More secrets." She cheerfully closes the door, then climbs back in the driver's seat.

The van starts rolling, and you grit your teeth. On the road.

*page_break Finally

*goto fusedrive

*label chenboss

You pull out the phone, calling Pelayo as you feel his approaching thoughts. Focused, looking for the right address. Ward's next to him, being lookout.

"Listen up. There's an alley to your left, right across the closed drycleaners. We're parked there, just back the van in enough that it's hidden from the street, then get out so we can talk."

[i]"Roger that."[/i] Pelayo slows down. [i]"Anything we should watch out for?"[/i]

"There's another van on the way, stop before you hit it."

[i]"Understood, be right there."[/i]

The familiar van drives past, then reverses and backs into the alley. Not too deep, and Pelayo leaves the engine running as Ward steps out. Cautious. Keeping mostly in cover, body guarded by the cybernetic claw.

"Boss?"

*if boss_secret

"It's me, Ward." You give a tired wave from your wheelchair, but notices Ward is looking at Chen. "And that's my driver on the way here. As you can see I needed one."

"Yeah." A quick glance between the two of you. "You're not in your armor."

"If I had been, the car wouldn't have messed me up this badly." you try a lighter tone to brush away some of the mental cobwebs of suspicion.

*else

"It's okay, Ward." You give a tired wave from your wheelchair, but notices Ward is looking at Chen. "That's my driver on the way here, not an ambush. As you can see I needed one."

"Yeah, no kidding. What the hell happened?" Eyes still focused on Chen.

"Car crash. Things turned bad and my getaway car didn't have the best of luck."

"Shit. So it did turn bad." Ward raises a hand and gestures to Pelayo. You recognize it. Area secured.

"Yeah. I'll fill you in later." You let out a pained sigh. "You wanna help me over so I can get back to the base?"

"Sure." Ward steps forward as Pelayo gets out of the van at last. "Wanna give me a hand?" He looks over at Chen, then freezes in recognition.

"It's not a trap," you say with a groan.

"But it is the fucking Marshal," Ward says in disbelief. "What the hell?"

"That's what I want to know." Pelayo has his handgun drawn, aimed squarely at Chen, who has raised his hands. "Long time no see, Marshal Steel."

"Jorge Pelayo." Recognition sparks in Chen's mind. "I see you're not part of the Wolfpack anymore?"

"Merc jobs were starting to get a bit risky for what they pay. I decided to seek more permanent employment. Are we going to have an issue with that?" Pelayo's gun doesn't waver.

*fake_choice

##"Do you two know each other?"

"Do you two know each other?" You're not worried about Pelayo pulling the trigger, you can feel his thoughts and they are calm and controlled. This is just a show of force.

"He's a ranking member of the Wolfpack, we have run into each other on occasion." Chen is also calm, but you can feel him analyze the scene if things would go bad.

"You have arrested me," Pelayo adds, a grim smile on his lips.

"You took a shot at me," Chen replies, face serious. "Let's not repeat the experience."

"Boss?" He doesn't look at you, still keeps the weapon aimed at Chen.

"You can put it away, the Marshal got me this far. Let's not repay him with a bullet."

"Fine." Pelayo reluctantly holsters his gun.

##"Stop posturing and lower the gun. We're on the same side."

"Stop posturing and lower the gun," you snap. "We're all on the same side here, who do you think broke me out?"

"Huh." Pelayo lowers the gun, frowning. "You know he's arrested me, right? He's the Marshal for Christ's sake." But he holsters the gun.

"You've shot at me in the past," Chen supplies readily. "But I hold no grudge over that."

"The past is the past." You're hurting too much for this. "Right now the Marshal is who got me this far, let's not repay him with a bullet."

#I have no patience for this, I'm in control here.

You have no patience for arguments and posturing. Not right now where every bit of you is aching.

"Holster your gun," you snap at Pelayo, leaning hard on his mind until he puts it away with an annoyed curse. "The Marshal got me this far, let's not repay him with a bullet."

"Gotta say, boss, you've got friends in weird places." Ward relaxes slightly, but you can see the claw twitch.

"We all have our pasts, and we can talk about that when we're back at the base. Safely."

"Is he coming?" Pelayo gives Chen a sharp look. You don't have to read his mind to see what he thinks about that.

"No. He got me this far, this is where we part ways." You turn to look at Chen, trying not to think about the gravity of that statement. Or what comes next.

"I didn't see anything. I didn't hear anything." Chen looks between Ward and Pelayo. "And I was never here."

"None of us were," you say with a sigh. "Now get me out of here so he can take off."

"Sure, boss." Ward looks at Pelayo, nodding at the wheelchair. "Stop sulking and give me a hand, I want to go back to sleep."

"Don't move, Marshal." Pelayo grabs the other side of the wheelchair. "We'll handle this."

"Focus on not dropping me," you groan. "These casts are not for show."

You hold your breath as they lift you easily, walking you over to the other van. Even Ward is gentle as they set you down, letting you roll deeper inside.

"I'll keep the boss company," Ward says. "You get us out of here."

"I'll be on my way then," Chen says, giving you a long look before the doors close. "Stay safe."

"You too." Your line of sight is cut off as the doors close, Ward reaching up to turn on the small ceiling light.

*if_base_secret

"Turn on the mike, I need to be able to guide you to the base."

"Sure will," Ward flips the switch and a crackle of static connects you with Pelayo in the front seat.

"Where to, Boss?" He doesn't sound happy with the situation.

"Just get on the road, I'll guide you as we've gotten some distance from here."

*else

"Don't worry," Ward says as he flips the switch to activate the mike to the front, so Pelayo can keep you updated.

"Should we be worried about being followed?" Pelayo sounds staticky but annoyed.

"Just get us on the road for now. We need to get some distance."

"Alright." The van hits a steady pace, taking you far away from here.

*page_break Finally

*goto fusedrive

[1.2.6 Carefully laid plans](#)

[Apr 27, 2023](#)

1.2.6

Chen guilty rescue, about 6000 words before I ran out of steam.

(no minor variables added yet)

Why does this feel familiar? Stuck in a wheelchair, coming down from painkillers and struggling to keep hold of the thoughts around you? Look away, look away, look away or turn to stone. You don't care which, there's too many memories running adjacent to this experience. As the wheels roll you try to find a position that doesn't hurt. Find a way to breathe, even though you're nauseous with agony. You told Chen not to give you any more, you needed to be clear-headed when making your escape.

Right now you regret it.

You should be used to pain by now, but your body still reacts. You never knew how good you had it 'growing up', coddled by the pain-gate turning agony to discomfort. You doubt the Farm truly knows what power it gives to their Re-Genes. The pain-gate allowed you to exercise will over your body's involuntary functions, to let you destroy yourself in measured intervals rather than collapse in protective shock. Did it make things worse on occasion? Yes, of course. Pain is there to protect your body from breaking further, but broken bodies can be fixed. Death is permanent.

*if gate >= 4

Right?

Did the pain-gate break with you against the hard asphalt below that room full of nightmares that was the Heartbreak Incident? Perhaps. Was it taken out or sabotaged while the Farm was stitching your broken body together afterwards? Equally likely. All you're certain of is that after the fall, you had to go through every agonizing breath afterwards. Local anesthesia can only go so far and the blissful darkness of sleep was denied you. Were they afraid to put you under?

*if gate >= 4

They were. And rightly so.

You've blanked out most of those first months, there was nothing there worth remembering, even in your nightmares. A second birth, more traumatic and painful than your first decanting. The farm. Your creators.

Did they put you back together wrong, all those years ago?

*fake_choice

#They put me together wrong, this is their fault.

*if motivation = "fate"

They did something to you, of that you are sure. Put you together wrong. Set you on this path.

It's only right they get to reap the whirlwind of \${villain_name}'s wrath.

*else

Did they put you back together wrong? Is this the Farm's fault?

Probably. \${!villain_name} is their creation, like it or not.

#No, they set me free, finally.

*if motivation = "fate"

They did something to you, alright. They set you free. Set you on this path. Birth is always painful, but you hold no gratitude for your cruel midwives.

It's only right they get to reap the whirlwind of \${villain_name}'s wrath.

*else

The farm didn't do anything but set you free. Whatever bonds you had with your past were cut on that operating table, and what remained shriveled during the captivity afterwards.

The farm might have messed \${name} \${surname} up, but they set \${villain_name} free.

*selectable_if (motivation != "fate") #Maybe. I don't want to think about it.

Maybe the Farm messed you up, but didn't they do that back when they decanted your mewling teenage form all those years ago? You try not to think about it.

What's the use? \${!villain_name} is here to stay.

#The farm has nothing to do with this. This is all me.

*if motivation = "fate"

The Farm has nothing to do with this, this is fate. You were always meant to walk this path, you can feel the weight of inevitability with every step.

\${!villain_name} was always your destiny.

*else

The Farm has nothing to do with this. They're a painful memory, an obstacle in your path. Nothing more. You've crafted \${villain_name} from past mistakes.

Let nobody say you're not responsible where you go from here.

"Anybody around?" Chen's voice is hushed as he tears you from your thoughts, leaning down close to your ear.

"No," you say after a moment's hesitation. You made your way out of the Rangers Headquarters safely, and this time of the night the streets are almost empty.

"I don't think it was wise to fry the alarm system. That's going to make people come running fast."

"The emergency power came on faster than I planned to. I couldn't let the cameras catch us." He keeps wheeling you down an alley, towards a rusty white van parked at the edge of the street. "You said you could keep the guard from noticing."

"Not forever." You look up at Chen as he opens the back doors. No ramp. This will suck. "I'm not at my best right now."

"I have every faith in you in that regard." Is that a smile on Chen's face. "You've been running circles around everybody so far, and right now your life and freedom is on the line."

*fake_choice

#"What a time to start trusting me," I groan.

"What a time to start trusting me," you say with an annoyed groan.

"When should I have started?" Chen rolls you up to the van. "When you were pretending to not be \${villain_name}? When you beat Herald up?"

"I meant that you shouldn't trust me now either," you snap. "It's better that you don't."

"Not even your sense of self-preservation?" He leans down and grabs hold of the wheelchair with both arms, trusting most of your weight to his artificial arm and shoulder.

"Especially not that. How did you think I ended up in this mess?" You wrap your arms around Chen's neck, ignoring the pain as he makes a small jump, landing heavily in the back of the van. Your weight is nothing to his cybernetic legs, but you can see from the pained look on his face that the integration points in his flesh must hurt from the effort.

"Point taken." He puts you down with a grunt of relief.

#"My body is still telling me to faint and get it over with."

"My body is still telling me to faint and get it over with." You have broken out into a sweat despite the cool evening air. This has to be over soon, you're doing your wounded body no favors by moving around.

"I hope you can hold on for a little longer." Chen rolls you up to the van. "We need to get further away before the alarm goes off."

"I know. I'm doing my best." There was no time for a through reprogramming, just a sustained push to keep the guard from noticing the dead cameras.

"Let me know when you can't do it anymore." He leans down and grabs hold of the wheelchair with both arms, trusting most of your weight to his artificial arm and shoulder.

"I will. Assuming I know and don't just pass out." You wrap your arms around Chen's neck, ignoring the pain as he makes a small jump, landing heavily in the back of the van. Your weight is nothing to his cybernetic legs, but you can see from the pained look on his face that the integration points in his flesh must hurt from the effort.

"You've been through worse." He puts you down with a grunt of relief. "Please hold on for a while longer."

#"Stop buttering me up," I sigh. "I'm not falling for that."

"Stop buttering me up," you say with a deep sigh. "I'm not falling for that."

"I'm not buttering anything." Chen rolls you up to the van. "I know what you can do when you're backed into a corner. In fact, I'm counting on it."

"You shouldn't," you snap. "And stop with the Spoon voice. I'm not falling for that."

"Falling for what?" He leans down and grabs hold of the wheelchair with both arms, trusting most of your weight to his artificial arm and shoulder.

"You're distracting me to keep me calm." You wrap your arms around Chen's neck, ignoring the pain as he makes a small jump, landing heavily in the back of the van. Your weight is nothing to his cybernetic legs, but you can see from the pained look on his face that the integration points in his flesh must hurt from the effort.

"Maybe I am." He puts you down with a grunt of relief. "You have to suck it up for a while longer."

"There are no brakes on this thing." You search your wheelchair but find none accessible to you. Hospital issue, made to be handled by someone else, on flat floors.

"Roll up against the back." Chen climbs in after, putting a magnet lock against the back wall. A few straps to fasten your wheelchair to the anchoring point, and you're at least somewhat secured. "That will do."

"As long as you drive carefully." You tug at it, but it seems to hold.

"I always do." He climbs out, shutting the doors behind him. Darkness. A moment later he gets in the front, opening the mall window between you. "I'll drive us some distance, then you can tell me where you want to go."

"Okay. Hurry up." You don't trust your grip anymore, too many things have happened for you to keep focus. How long until the guard remembers to look right? Impossible to say.

"Hold on." The engine rumbles to life and you cling to the straps as the van starts rolling. True to his promise, Chen drives smoothly, avoiding sudden turns.

Leaving you time to think.

You have a phone, if you dare to trust it.

*if tech_savvy

A cursory check reveals nothing strange, but you know you can't be sure.

You could call

*if boss

Pelayo

*elseif rosie

Rosie

*else

Bo

and ask for a pickup. That would be the best option here. Chen broke you out, but you have no idea how far you can trust him. It would be risky to let him know too much, in case he disagrees with your future actions he will have more information to bring you in. On the other hand, if you ask him to drop you off somewhere and makes the call from a different phone, what will you do if

*if boss

Pelayo

*elseif rosie

Rosie

*else

Bo

doesn't pick up? Waiting too long in the street has it's own risk.

You sigh and finger the phone, you need to make a decision.

*temp chendrop false

*temp chencall false

*temp chenstay false

*fake_choice

#I'll ask Chen to drop me off and call on a safe phone later.

You're hurt, but you're not helpless. Even though you're exhausted, your mental powers still works fine. Thanks to Chen, you've got clothes enough to look normal at a first glance. Lots of disabled and injured people in this town, won't be hard to divert attention.

Even easier to borrow an uncompromised phone.

"You can drive me down towards old Jefferson Park." You see Chen nod, and the car turns in the right direction. "I've got a place there you can drop me off at." Nowhere close to home, but there are things open at this hour, and all you need is an unprotected mind and a phone.

"Alright." He nods and keeps driving, the faint vibration playing havoc with your nerves.

That takes care of the contact, but what about your clothes and cast? Could they be bugged? Is that what he want, to find your base? It seems convoluted, but you'll ask for a scanner along with a pickup. That will spot anything untoward before you drag any bugs back home.

You can't afford more mistakes.

*set chendrop true

#I'll call from here, if Chen tracks the call, so be it.

You push the window to the front closed again, not that it will help with any bugs on the phone. It's a risk you're willing to take, if he wanted to track you he could have hidden a bug in your clothes. \$!{swear}. What if he did?

There's a faint ringing in your ears, and you remember that you need to breathe. No panic attacks. Not now. No use getting out of the clothes, the cast might be suspect as well. Better ask for a scanner along with a pickup. That way you can make sure you're not bugged.

You can't afford more mistakes.

*set chencall true

#I'll risk trusting Chen and ask him to wait with me for pickup.

This is a calculated gamble.

*if thief

Chen let you go, which is not that surprising. You're a thief, not exactly something which should be on the Rangers' radar.

*if knowkill

Sure, some people have died, but it's a dangerous world.

This could be an opportunity you can't afford to miss.

*elseif ((anarchist) or (prepare_them))

If Chen is truly letting you go, that means he's thinking about what you are doing. Why. That might be the biggest opportunity you have had yet.

*else

If Chen is truly letting you go, that means that on some level he is okay with what you are doing. Which is interesting.

Could you gain an ally here?

It's too early to know for sure, but letting Chen get closer to your operation might be worth the risk. See that things are not so different on the other side of the fence. Would he agree with staying? Seeing who you're working with? Risk getting recognized?

This could be interesting.

*set chenstay true

*if ((chencall) or (chenstay))

*gosub henchcall

Pushing the window open again, you instruct Chen to head down towards old Jefferson Park. He nods in quiet assent, and starts heading that way.

*page_break This Feels Awkward

*if faker

Should you be happy that Chen believes you're you? Ortega's reaction was not one you predicted. It hurt in ways you don't

*else

You didn't expect Chen to break you out. Breaking the rules for your sake. Ortega might have done that, once upon a time. It hurts a bit that \${he} didn't. Hurts in ways you don't

want to think about right now. Focus on the present. On getting out of here.

\${swear}.

*fake_choice

#I can't help it, I'll bring up Ortega with Chen.

"So how are you going to deal with Ortega?" The words are out before your brain agreed with them, but that's not unusual when it comes to that \${ortega_gender}.

*if faker

"I'll talk to \${him}." Chen sighs deeply. "Once \${he}'s calmed down and can see reason."

"You're assuming a lot if you think that will happen. Can't exactly forget what was said." Even if you want to.

"I know. And I don't have a good answer. Not now."

*else

"I don't know yet." Chen sighs deeply. "It's going to be a mess."

"Are you worried $\{he\}$'s going to figure out you helped me escape?" Chen is an unlikely villain, but you have to admit Ortega can be more clever than you gave $\{him\}$ credit for.

"No." The answer is confident. "But I'm worried what $\{he\}$ 'll do while looking for you."

"If $\{he\}$ thinks the Farm has got me..." you don't finish the sentence, because you don't like where this is going. Would Ortega do something stupid? Something even more stupid than the stunt that landed you here?

"I'm going to try to distract $\{him\}$ from that line of thought. And I think $\{he\}$'s more likely to think... Hollow Ground is to blame." There's an effort to the last words, as if they hurt to say. I

"That would make sense." You lean your forehead against the glass as Chen slows down at a stoplight. You can feel his thoughts racing, tangling each other into a ball of unease. "Considering the crash."

"I can..." a pause and an annoyed groan. "Hollow Ground is a myth but I can use that regardless. Ortega believes it, that's the important thing."

"Just make sure $\{he\}$ doesn't do anything stupid." There's more to it than this, you can feel it. But you're too tired to deal with it now. Hollow Ground will have to wait.

For now.

#I'll ask Chen why he broke me out.

You're not in shape for any deeper conversation, but you need to know why. It's a stupid risk to take for the Marshal of the Los Diablos Rangers, you're not sure even Chen thinks he can get away with this forever.

"Why did you do it?" It's not exactly a whisper, but you're prepared for him to ignore it.

"Because I wanted to." An honest answer that says nothing.

"Don't be an ass, I'm hurting too much for wordplay." His thoughts are muddled and on guard, you can't read them without expending energy you don't have.

"You're hurting too much to have a serious discussion about it right now." Chen slows down at a red light, chancing a look back over his shoulder at you. "We can talk later."

"What makes you think I won't just skip town?" It's only half a joke, you're not skipping anywhere right now. But unlike Ortega, he doesn't bite at your setup.

"Because you're doing this for a reason. And I want to know more."

*if thief

"I'm a thief," you joke. "They're not paying you enough as Marshal?"

"It's not about that, and you know it." You can feel a hard kernel of determination inside him, but he's not letting you have a peek. Bastard.

*elseif ((anarchist) or (prepare_them))

"I'd be happy to tell you," you say with a grimace. "When I can be sure I can trust you."

"We both need time to think, there's no hurry. You need time to heal before anything can happen." You can feel a hard kernel of determination inside him, he's been thinking about this for a while.

*else

"And maybe want in?" Your smile is more of a grimace. "Can't blame you for being tempted."

"I'm not sure if tempted is the right word. But I am curious." You can feel a hard kernel of determination inside him, but he's not letting you have a peek. Bastard.

"We'll arrange a talk later then." Once you're healed. Once you can defend yourself and argue your case.

Or, once you've sobered up from this brainfog and decided that secrecy will serve you best in the end.

*page_break Risk Versus Reward

#I'll keep silent and try to read Chen's surface thoughts.

You don't feel like talking, but you can't escape Chen's thoughts. Not this close. Not with your body full of adrenaline and painkillers. He's trying to guard them, but anxiety makes for loud brainwaves, and the small window between you can't filter them out.

He's angry at you. He's worried about you. He's angry at himself for doing this. He's worried that he waited too long to do it. Are you followed?

You can see him check the mirrors, driving in a lazy, relaxed manner but taking routes that no car would normally take. Every time he slows down at a stoplight he looks carefully in the mirrors, but so far there has been no cause for suspicion. Yet. He does a U-turn on an empty street and doubles back for a while, which is a good way to spot anybody following, but there's no need for that. He's forgotten you're a telepath it seems. If someone follows, you can make them turn away.

Or worse.

*if knownkiller

He's worried about that. What you can do. What you will do. You've killed. If you kill again it will be on his shoulders. Should he ask you not to? Would you listen?

He doesn't think you would. And he's already made this decision. It's a calculated risk. Acceptable damage. He doesn't like it, but he's decided to trust your judgment. Trust.

*else

He doesn't like that. What you have done. What you might do in the future. It is a risk setting you free, but he's made his decision. He's decided to trust you. Trust.

\${swear}.

You don't know what you expected, but it wasn't that. What are you supposed to make of this?

*if steeldoubt >= 40

Of the fact that he's fed up enough with everything that he's not even worried about his career if he gets found out?

*if steeldoubt >= 60

Worse, part of him would actually cherish it. An outside force pushing him to make decisions he wouldn't have made on his own.

It looks like you might want to have a longer talk with the Marshal once your legs have healed and your brain recovered some amount of subterfuge. You wouldn't dare to have it now, not when you're hurting like this. Pain makes you too honest.

You can't afford that. Not even with Chen.

*page_break Not now

#I'll keep silent and scan the surroundings for enemies.

You can't allow yourself to let your guard down now. If you get away safely you can talk about whatever you want. Right now, a distraction can be deadly.

So you banish all questions and drift outward, pushing back the headache to feel for intent and curiosity.

It hurts. Hurts more than it should. The drugs are robbing you off precision, you're a broken bull in a china shop, searching through the shards for clues. You miss the Rat King, they could have helped you with this. Have you gotten lazy? They've had your back for long enough that you feel naked without their warm presence curled up around your brain-stem.

*if auctioncaptured

*if ((hg_relationship = "nuisance") or (hg_relationship = "danger"))

They saved your life. You would never have got out of that basement if it wasn't for them.

*if animatedarmor

You had no idea they could actually control your armor. That can come in useful in the future. Maybe you should

*if tech_savvy

build

*else

get

then their own body when you're not wearing the armor? Something that can move? You'll have to ask them what they'd like.

*if rangersarmor

The Rangers have your armor now. Which means they have the Rat King. You would have been more worried about it if it wasn't Chen that broke you out. Even if you can't ask him to get you your armor back, you can certainly explain the Rat King's plight. He'll understand.

"Chen?" Your words are distracted, you're still keeping half a mind on your surroundings. "What are you planning to do with my armor?"

"Keep it for now. You certainly can't use it for a while." For now. You didn't miss that little nugget.

"There's something I'd want from it though. Or at least have you taking care of." You force yourself to focus on him fully, this is important. "There's a small module at the back of the neck that contains a friend of mine. the Rat King."

"The what now?" The surprise is not faked, looks like Chen is not in the know about everything. Good to know.

"It's a cluster of linked rat brains. They help me control the armor. And they're my friends."

"Shit. How long can they last without maintenance?"

"Preferably once a week, their nutrient pack lasts longer, but the fluid needs to be filtered regularly."

"I'll take care of it. You don't need to worry, they'll be safe." You can feel that he means it, as safe as Spoon would be with you. Some creatures don't need to be involved in whatever war you're fighting.

*fake_choice They Are Lucky That Way

Chen slows down as the van approaches a red light, there are people waiting at the crossing. Drunk thoughts. Easy thoughts. You abandon them and range wider, fearing an ambush. Sleeping people. An angry man watching a movie makes you frown, but the anger has nothing to do with you. The light flashes green and you take off, on the move again.

You don't think anybody's following.

You think you're safe.

*page_break For Now

*if chendrop

*goto prechendropoff

*if chenstay

*goto chenstaymeet

*else

*goto chendropoff

*label henchcall

Time to call

*if boss

Pelayo.

*elseif rosie

Rosie.

*else

Bo.

The phone feels clumsy in your hand, cheap plastic, easily disposable. Your fingers are swollen and sore, you twisted one hand on the crash, so you type in the number with the other.

*if boss

[i]"Don't tell me you've lost your phone again Nehal, I told you not to call me from an unsecured one..."[/i] Pelayo sounds tired and annoyed, it's too early in the morning to be awake unless you're out partying.

"It's not Nehal, It's \${villain_name}." You try to to mimic how you usually speak. "I need a pickup."

[i]"I'll rescind my lecture then, good to hear from you."[/i] Pelayo sounds relieved, you suppose not hearing from you after the meeting would have worried him.
[i]"Was afraid something had happened."[/i]

"It did," you admit. "But I'll handle it. Get a car down to..." you ponder a moment getting your bearings before you tell him the address. "Make it a big one. And bring a scanner for bugs"

[i]"Understood. I'll get the van and let Nehal sleep."[/i] In the background you hear a muffled voice you think might be Ward go [i]"Is that the boss?"[/i]

"Bring Ward just in case." You don't want to take any risks, you might need backup. Not to mention help into the van. "I'll be there soon, if you get there before I do, wait for me."

[i]"Sure. Give me a call if plans change."[/i]

*elseif rosie

[i]"Who the hell is this?"[/i] Rosie sounds like you woke her up, and she's not happy about it. It's too early in the morning to be awake unless you're out partying.

"It's \${villain_name}," you say, trying to mimic how you usually speak. "I need a pickup."

[i]"Ah, that explains it. Good to hear from you, boss."[/i] Rosie yawns, sounding relieved. You suppose not hearing from you after the meeting would have worried her. [i]"Was afraid something had happened."[/i]

"It did," you admit. "But I'll handle it. Get a car down to..." you ponder a moment getting your bearings before you tell him the address. "Make it a big one, and bring the scanner in case I have picked up some bugs."

[i]"A big one? I can borrow a van, is that enough?"[/i]

"That would be perfect." You don't want to take any risks revealing you are hurt. Not in advance. "I'll be there soon, if you get there before I do, wait for me."

[i]"Alrighty, stay safe, boss. See you soon."[/i]

*else

[i]"What?"[/i] Bo sounds sleepy, it's too early in the morning to be awake unless you're out partying. [i]"Who is it?"[/i]

"It's \${villain_name}," you say, trying to mimic how you usually speak. "I need a pickup."

[i]"Boss!"[/i] Bo sounds relieved, you suppose not hearing from you after the meeting would have worried him. [i]"Was afraid something had happened, been hearing some troubling shit."[/i]

"It did," you admit. You don't ask what rumors, you can easily guess what that would be. Your crash was in a public place, and Ortega is recognizable. "Don't worry, I'll handle it. Get a car down to..." you ponder a moment getting your bearings before you tell him the address. "Make it a big one, and bring the scanner. I might have picked up some bugs."

[i]"Understood. Is a van alright?"[/i]

"That would be perfect." You don't want to take any risks revealing you are hurt. Not in advance. "I'll be there soon, if you get there before, wait for me."

[i]"Of course. See you soon."[/i]

You hang up, breathing a sigh of relief.

*if boss_secret

It's going to be awkward meeting face to face, but at this point you need to trust someone while you heal. You can't wait for your head to recover enough to jump into your puppet, that would be even more dangerous. Leaving your broken body undefended.

*else

One potential disaster averted.

*return

*label prehendropoff

"We're getting close." Chen slows down as you approach old Jefferson Park. "Where do you want me to drop you off?"

"Drive slow, I'll let you know." You close your eyes and feel for suitable minds. Some bars are still open, people fresh off the night shift dropping in for a drink. "There, that alley ahead, turn right."

"Alright." Chen turns, the alley narrow enough that the van almost scrapes some empty bins. You know it's empty of squatters, but he doesn't, and slows down to a crawl. "What now?"

"Stop and let me out. It's clear straight ahead, right? You can drive out of here?"

"I can, but..." you can feel his concern as a visceral thing, a sour taste at the back of his tongue. "Are you sure I should leave you here alone?"

"Yes," you say, trying to sound as convincing as possible. "You need to let me out now. I have people coming. I can handle this."

"Fine." Chen get out of the van, and a moment later, the doors swing open. "I don't like it, but I will trust you." Unlike you not trusting him. He doesn't need to say the unspoken part out loud for you to get it.

"Thank you." You let out a sigh of relief, you had worried he'd be more stubborn about this. "I mean it."

"Just take care of yourself," he mumbles as he removes the straps securing your wheelchair. "I don't want anything worse to happen before we..." he doesn't finish the sentence. Too many things it could be.

"Just get out of here safely and don't hang around to peek." You clench your jaw as he rolls you over to the edge. "I would know."

"I promise." Chen grips the chair, heaving you out and down with one swift, painful move.

"\$!{swear}!" You try not to hyperventilate from pain. "Now go, hurry!"

"Be safe." There's a moment of hesitation as your eyes meet, then Chen climbs back in the seat, and starts the engine. The Van rolls out at the other end, leaving you alone in the shadows.

Finally.

You don't wait, instead you will one of the patrons leaving the bar down the street to head this way. An irresistible lure, and maybe you tugged too hard, because he's almost running as he turns the corner. Doesn't matter, people might think he's desperate for a piss. You make sure to plant that thought as you force him to give you his phone.

Perfect.

*gosub henchcall

You let out a sigh of relief, putting the phone back in the man's pocket. The pain in your head is bad, but you place a blurry memory of having relieved himself here in his head, and send him on his way.

Good. Now all you have to do is wait.

*goto fusedpickup

*label chendropoff

"We're getting close." Chen slows down as you approach old Jefferson Park. "Where do you want me to drop you off?"

"You heard me talk, don't pretend you don't remember the adress."

"I didn't mean to listen in." He doesn't sound particularly sorry either.

"If I had been worried about that I wouldn't have called in the car." You sigh and look out through the window ahead. You're getting close, so you close your eyes and scan the surroundings. There's nobody around, looks like you're first on the scene. Good, that simplifies things. "There, that alley ahead, turn right."

"Alright." Chen turns, the alley narrow enough that the van almost scrapes some empty bins. You know it's empty of squatters, but he doesn't, and slows down to a crawl. "What now?"

"Stop and let me out. It's clear straight ahead, right? You can drive out of here?"

"I can, but..." you can feel his concern as a visceral thing, a sour taste at the back of his tongue. "Are you sure I should leave you here alone?"

"Yes," you say, trying to sound as convincing as possible. "You need to let me out now. I have people coming. I can handle this."

"Fine." Chen get out of the van, and a moment later, the doors swing open. "I don't like it, but I will trust you." Unlike you not trusting him. He doesn't need to say the unspoken part out loud for you to get it.

"Thank you." You let out a sigh of relief, you had worried he'd be more stubborn about this. "I mean it."

"Just take care of yourself," he mumbles as he removes the straps securing your wheelchair. "I don't want anything worse to happen before we..." he doesn't finish the sentence. Too many things it could be.

"Just get out of here safely and don't hang around to peek." You clench your jaw as he rolls you over to the edge. "I would know."

"I promise." Chen grips the chair, heaving you out and down with one swift, painful move.

"\$!{swear}!" You try not to hyperventilate from pain. "Now go, hurry!"

"Be safe." There's a moment of hesitation as your eyes meet, then Chen climbs back in the seat, and starts the engine. The Van rolls out at the other end, leaving you alone in the shadows.

Finally.

*goto fusedpickup

*label chenstaymeet

"We're getting close." Chen slows down as you approach old Jefferson Park. "Where do you want me to drop you off?"

"You heard me talk, don't pretend you don't remember the adress." He was always nosy, maybe that's why you're going to trust him with this. Give him enough rope to tangle himself to your cause.

"I didn't mean to listen in." He doesn't sound particularly sorry either.

"If I had been worried about that I wouldn't have called in the car." You sigh and look out through the window ahead. You're getting close, so you close your eyes and scan the surroundings. There's nobody around, looks like you're first on the scene. "There, that alley ahead, turn right."

"Alright." Chen turns, the alley narrow enough that the van almost scrapes some empty bins. You know it's empty of squatters, but he doesn't, and slows down to a crawl. "What now?"

"Stop and open the doors. No need to get me out yet, if we do this smart we can roll me from one van to the other."

"Are you sure you want me to stay?" You can feel his concern as a visceral thing, a sour taste at the back of his tongue. "I'm the Marshal, your people might not appreciate that."

-continue later, just need to figure out how everyone reacts first.

[1.2.5 Raccoons.](#)

[Apr 22, 2023](#)

Well, bit hungover from yesterdays work party but managed to bang out 3650 words or so of Argent and Sidestep shenanigans.

(guilty escape with Argent, no minor variables added yet)

Pain. Sharp. Blinding. Centered in your chest, broken ribs grinding sore muscles, every movement of your legs leaving you nauseous with agony.

You've gotten used to pain by now, even though you still hate it. You never knew how good you had it 'growing up', coddled by the pain-gate turning agony to discomfort. You doubt the Farm truly knows what power it gives to their Re-Genes. The pain-gate allowed you to exercise will over your body's involuntary functions, to let you destroy yourself in measured intervals rather than collapse in protective shock. Did it make things worse on occasion? Yes, of course. Pain is there to protect your body from breaking further, but broken bodies can be fixed. Death is permanent.

*if gate >= 4

Right?

Did the pain-gate break with you against the hard asphalt below that room full of nightmares that was the Heartbreak Incident? Perhaps. Was it taken out or sabotaged while the Farm was stitching your broken body together afterwards? Equally likely. All you're certain of is that after the fall, you had to go through every agonizing breath afterwards. Local anesthesia can only go so far and the blissful darkness of sleep was denied you. Were they afraid to put you under?

*if gate >= 4

They were. And rightly so.

You've blanked out most of those first months, there was nothing there worth remembering, even in your nightmares. A second birth, more traumatic and painful than your first decanting. The farm. Your creators.

Did they put you back together wrong, all those years ago?

*fake_choice

#They put me together wrong, this is their fault.

*if motivation = "fate"

They did something to you, of that you are sure. Put you together wrong. Set you on this path.

It's only right they get to reap the whirlwind of \${villain_name}'s wrath.

*else

Did they put you back together wrong? Is this the Farm's fault?

Probably. \${!villain_name} is their creation, like it or not.

#No, they set me free, finally.

*if motivation = "fate"

They did something to you, alright. They set you free. Set you on this path. Birth is always painful, but you hold no gratitude for your cruel midwives.

It's only right they get to reap the whirlwind of \${villain_name}'s wrath.

*else

The farm didn't do anything but set you free. Whatever bonds you had with your past were cut on that operating table, and what remained shriveled during the captivity afterwards.

The farm might have messed \${name} \${surname} up, but they set \${villain_name} free.

*selectable_if (motivation != "fate") #Maybe. I don't want to think about it.

Maybe the Farm messed you up, but didn't they do that back when they decanted your mewling teenage form all those years ago? You try not to think about it.

What's the use? \${!villain_name} is here to stay.

#The farm has nothing to do with this. This is all me.

*if motivation = "fate"

The Farm has nothing to do with this, this is fate. You were always meant to walk this path, you can feel the weight of inevitability with every step.

\${!villain_name} was always your destiny.

*else

The Farm has nothing to do with this. They're a painful memory, an obstacle in your path. Nothing more. You've crafted \${villain_name} from past mistakes.

Let nobody say you're not responsible where you go from here.

"Don't black out on me." Lady Argent's voice cuts through the pain, and you leave your memories of the Farm behind to focus on the present pain. You're slung over Argent's shoulder, wrapped in bedsheets that does little to dampen the pain of her bony shoulder digging into your sore body. She's got an arm wrapped around your leg casts, but even at her most gentle, every movement hurts.

*if tall

Your head dangles uncomfortably close to the ground,

*if hairstyle = "long"

your hair brushing against the dirty asphalt.

*else

if your hair was longer it would have dragged behind you.

She's so short.

"It... just hurts to breathe." And your legs doesn't help. "Nobdy's watching. Keep going." You've escaped the Rangers Headquarters, but the streets of Los Diablos are not safe. You might be able to turn people's attention away from your awkward duo, but you're already pushing your aching body. You need to get to the meeting point fast.

"Shit." The profanity is small and annoyed. "Hang in there." She sprints across the road after you've given her the all clear, and stops in a darkened alley to let you down on the ground.

"Ow, \${swear}," you swear through gritted teeth. The ground is softer than her shoulder though, and it is a relief to let your legs rest against the ground. "You can't dump me here, it's too close."

"I know. Shut up, I'm thinking." She's pacing, silvery body turned golden in the orange streetlights.

"Not the best planned escape, is it?" Your breath feels as ragged as your words.

"I came to see why your plan had failed, I hadn't planned on breaking you out." She tilts her head, looking down at you. "Would you rather I had not?"

"No," you admit, despite the cold sweat on your forehead. "But that doesn't mean I'm not going to point out sloppy work when I see it."

"You're the one that landed yourself in the hospital," she points out with a small smirk. "Don't move, I'll be right back."

"Not like I'm gonna go for a walk," you hiss after her, scanning the surroundings for thoughts. None focused on you, the awake ones belong to the occasional driver heading down the street. And... oh no, a group of raccoons ransacking the bins of a nearby grocery store.

*fake_choice

#I pull back my thoughts quickly and become nothing.

Animals are not much less dangerous than people, and you're painfully aware that you're trapped here on the ground. You can't crawl fast, and you'd rather not have them crawl all over you. Luckily they are busy with their feast, and you sink back into your familiar thought-void, becoming less interesting than whatever they ave going on.

Animals don't have the same kind of minds that humans do, but the Rat King have taught you that doesn't mean they don't have thoughts. Feelings. Drive. There's secrets in there that don't need to be exposed. You can't risk distraction. Not now.

You're too exposed to afford to be sloppy.

#I'll linger to distract myself with their antics.

Raccoons are strange, like all animals are. Their minds are streams instead of oceans, trickling by, giddy with activity and life. No brooding. No introspection. Just happiness, fear, hunger and joy. A family unit, the bubbles of love and care popping with rivalry over the same piece of discarded sausage.

It's not thoughts exactly, and once upon a time you would have dismissed them as important. The Rat King helped changed that, show you that maybe an animal mind wasn't less as much as strange. Understanding always slammed your face in the wall when it came to animals before, but you've learned to relax and not bother with that.

You don't need to understand when you can experience. You don't need to paddle a boat when you can drift along the river, trying to decipher senses and emotions you have only vague approximations of.

Was this what it felt like becoming human?

A sound disturbs the raccoons, and they scamper away, choosing fear and caution over curiosity. That's how they stay alive.

You'd do well to learn from them.

Scanning the area reveals nothing new, but Lady Argent's mind is approaching. No hint of fear or haste, so you pull back lest you'd disturb the sharks.

"Got your ride," she calls out as he approaches, dragging a grocery shopping cart behind her.

"You can't be serious." You stare at her in disbelief, but she shrugs. "Why not steal a car?"

"Don't need to leave that kind of evidence behind." She uses her sharpened fingers to snip off the front end of the cart so you can fit easier. "There were no safe cars around here, certainly none I could talk into helping."

"This is ridiculous." You look at the cart, it's one of the longer ones for big hauls, but your feet are still going to stick out.

"Stop whining, let me get you up here." She leans down, and you suppress a scream as she lifts you effortlessly off the ground. It hurts to be placed in the cart, but once you're scooted to the back, the casts support your legs enough that it's bearable.

"I'm not whining," you whine. "You really do have the worst bedside manner."

"I'm risking my career for a known criminal." She starts pushing the cart down the alley. "You'd think $\text{\$}\{che\}$ 'd be grateful"

*fake_choice

#"I am, I just need to get the tension out somehow."

"I am grateful," you say, leaning back in the cart. The sheets are slipping and your arms are bare, but you can't pull it up since you're sitting on it. "I just need to get the tension out. Somehow."

"I understand." Lady Argent is moving as fast as the cart can handle, but her voice is soft in your ear. "So do I."

"Glad we undrestand each other." You let the silence linger, the sounds of cart wheels on asphalt loud enough to drown your unease. Almost. "Doesn't mean I'm not grateful, though."

#"You'd think so." My laugh is sharp. "I'm used to disappointing people."

"You'd think so," you say with a sharp laugh, more of a growl than something truly mirthful "I'm used to disappointing people."

"Sounds like a terrible thing to get used to." Lady Argent is moving as fast as the cart can handle, but her voice sounds almost sad.

"I've had to get used to worse things." You let the silence linger, but when the sounds of cart wheels on asphalt don't drown out your conscience you add a soft "But thank you."

#"Thought Ortega would have warned you I'm like this."

"Thought Ortega would have warned you I'm like this." You smile through the pain, better to keep your mind on other things.

*if ortegaargentpoly

"You say that as if it's a bad thing." Lady Argent is moving as fast as the cart can handle, her laugh as sharp as the rattling sounds of cart wheels on asphalt. "You know where $\text{\$}\{his\}$ tastes lie."

"Assholes both of us." You grip the sides of the cart to steady yourself, trying to ignore the fact that your arms are bare. You're sitting on the sheets, not like you can pull them up. Not right now. "Thank you for not leaving me back there."

*else

"Ortega talks a lot of shit." Lady Argent is moving as fast as the cart can handle, but the rattling from the cart wheels doesn't drown her sigh. "I prefer to form my own opinions."

"Thank you for that." You grip the sides of the cart to steady yourself, trying to ignore the fact that your arms are bare. You're sitting on the sheets, not like you can pull them up. Not right now. "Thank you for not leaving me back there."

"No matter the kind of shit you've pulled, I couldn't leave you there." You can feel her unease, your fate hits too close to home. This could have been her, if her secrets had been found out. Nobody would let her walk around the city a free woman, not with what she carries.

"Are you going to tell the others?" Even if she'd lie to you, you can tell a lot from her initial mental reaction.

"No." She thinks it's the truth, what is one more secret?

*if ortegaargentpoly

Kissing won't change her priorities.

"Ortega's going to blow a gasket."

*if ortega_relationship = "Re-Gene copy"

!{he} might not think you are the real {name}, but you are still a walking clue to {his} past obsession. Not to mention the fact that you are {villain_name}, though you can't shake the feeling that's secondary to {him}.

*else

What will {he} think when you're suddenly gone? That the things you said would happen did?

"Do you want me to tell {him}?"

"Tell {him} what? That you broke me out? That'd land you in no end of trouble, and you know it."

"That's not what I asked. Do you want {him} to know you're..." a pause as she's considering what word to use. "...safe?"

*fake_choice

#"Yes, {he} deserves that much."

"Yes," you admit with a sigh. You can't deny how you feel, even if it would be simpler to do so. "{he} deserves that much."

"I'll find a way of doing it that doesn't leave either of us in trouble." Lady Argent keeps pushing the cart, but you can feel her mind racing.

"How?"

"I don't know yet," she admits. "I'll think about it."

#"Yes, {he}'d tear up Los Diablos looking otherwise."

"Yes," you say with a frustrated sigh. You wish Ortega wasn't so... Ortega, but you might as well wish for pigs to fly."{he}'d tear up Los Diablos looking otherwise."

"You've got a point. I'll have to find a way of doing it that doesn't leave either of us in trouble." Lady Argent keeps pushing the cart, but you can feel her mind racing.

"How?"

"I don't know yet," she admits. "I'll think about it."

#"If you can do it without risk to yourself."

"If you can do it without risk to yourself." You know Ortega won't rest until {he} has some answers, but giving {him} some might land you both in trouble.

"I'm not going to do anything stupid." Lady Argent keeps pushing the cart, but you can feel her mind racing. "I'll figure out some way to handle it without involving us."

"How?"

"I don't know yet," she admits. "I'll think about it."

#"No. It's safer to tell {him} nothing."

"No," you say reluctantly. Your escape has gone smoothly if uncomfortably so far, you can't risk that just to give Ortega a good night's sleep. "It's safer to tell {him} nothing."

"Agreed." Lady Argent keeps pushing the cart, but you can feel her mind racing. "I'll do my best to keep {him} off the track."

*if ortega_relationship = "broken trust"

She clicks her tongue in annoyance. "It's not going to be easy."

#"No, {he} doesn't deserve to know."

"No," you say with emphasis. Ortega is not a part of your life anymore, *hemadethatabundantlyclear.*"!{he} doesn't deserve to know."

"Brutal." Lady Argent keeps pushing the cart, but you can feel her mind racing. "But I get it. I'll do my best to keep {him} off the track."

*if ortega_relationship = "broken trust"

She clicks her tongue in annoyance. "It's not going to be easy."

*if ortega_relationship = "Re-Gene copy" #"!{he} doesn't think I'm real, don't tell {him} anything."

"\${he} doesn't think I'm real," you scoff. "Don't tell \${him} anything." You remember the look in Ortega's eyes, you don't think there's anything left for you there.

"\${he}'s being an asshole." Lady Argent keeps pushing the cart, but you can feel her mind racing. Upset on your behalf. "I can't blame you for being angry. I'll do my best to keep \${him} off the track."

"Thank you." Too much gratitude in one day, must be the painkillers. Or the pain. Both of them are making you woozy. "How much further?"

"Not far." She slows down, taking her bearings. "Just another block."

"Good." You breathe a sigh of relief. "Just get me to the intersection and leave me there, out of sight."

"Seriously?" She keeps walking, pushing the cart ahead of her. "Just leave you there?"

"Yeah. You've got a problem with that?" You try to decipher the pitter-patter of her thoughts, but she's guarding her core well, if not her worries.

"Your legs are broken. You're running a fever. Your breathing sounds like your ribs have been smashed. And you're dressed in a hospital shift leaving your ass bare, and a couple of sheets. I've seen hobos more equipped for surviving in the streets."

"Hobos are better equipped than most for that," you correct. You should know, you were one of them once. "And I'm a telepath. I can take care of myself."

"Oh, I stand corrected." She lets go of the cart, and it slowly grinds to a halt. "I didn't know you had this covered."

Almost imperceptibly slowly, the cart begins to roll backwards, down the slight incline.

*fake_choice

#"Come on, Angie," I look around nervously. "Don't be an asshole."

"Come on, Angie." You echo Ortega's nickname as you look around nervously. "Don't be an asshole."

"I'm just making a point." But she catches the cart and begins to push it towards your destination once more.

"I know I need your help, I'm not arguing that." You let out a frustrated huff. "But you don't need to stick around and play nursemaid once we're there."

#"If I crash and die," I tease, "I'll come back and haunt you."

"If I crash and die," you tease, giving her a forlorn look over your shoulder. "I will come back and haunt you."

"Really?" Argent rubs her chin thoughtfully, then finally she reaches out to catch the cart before it can gather speed. "I'd better deliver you safely then. You've already been in one crash."

"Really?" You look up at her. "You'd miss out on my angry ghost?"

*if argentkiss

"Hard to kiss a ghost." She leans down to place a peck on your forehead. Her hair lands heavily on your face like liquid metal.

"Smooth," you tease. "But I still don't need a nursemaid."

*else

"I've got enough already," she teases back. "Don't need yours too."

"And I don't need you to stick around playing nursemaid."

#"Are you five?" I snap. "This is my life you're playing with."

"Are you five?" You give her a glare over your shoulder. "This is my life you're playing with here."

"Fine." Argent catches the cart, and begins to push it towards your destination. "I was just making a point."

"I know I need your help, I'm not arguing that." You let out a frustrated huff. "But you don't need to stick around and play nursemaid once we're there."

"Fine." She sighs deeply. "I just want to remind you that if I hadn't decided to check if your plan was working you'd still be stuck back there."

"I'm not going to introduce Lady Argent to the people picking me up."

"Your henchmen you mean? Why not?"

"Because you're scary. You think they'd gonna pull up to a Ranger? They'd think it was a trap and hit the gas."

"You've got a point." She doesn't sound like she's too pleased with it. "I will wait behind the house. If something goes wrong you can do your little telepathy thing and call me in, right?"

"Little telepathy thing." You sigh and shake your head. "But fine, we can do that. Just help me pull the sheets up first so I can keep some of my dignity."

"Are they going to be alright with..." She brushes her fingertips over your arm, and you nearly jump.

"They have to."

*if boss_secret

You haven't shown your face to anybody. That's going to be bad enough. But it's not like you have a choice, you need someone to get you out of here, and your normal second set of hands is unavailable.

*else

At least you've shown your face. That's better than nothing. It's not

like you have a choice, you need someone to get you out of here, and your normal second set of hands is unavailable. You can't wait for whatever drugs they have pumped you full with so you can get out of this broken shell and into someone that can do so work.

\$(puppet_name) is going to be invaluable in the coming weeks.

"Do you want me to leave you here?" Argent helps pull the sheets up so you can cover your arms. She's parked you in the shadow of a building near the side road where you've told

*if boss

Pelayo

*elseif rosie

Rosie

*else

Bo

to pick you up.

"Yeah, but you can hang around until I can sense their approach." She's made you nervous, and so many things can happen in Los Diablos. Better to have company for now. You don't doubt she'd hang around to see who it is regardless, so you might as well embrace what little safety you have left.

*goto fusedpickup

[Time for your questions of the month!](#)

[Apr 21, 2023](#)

Gimme your questions about game, process or writing in general. Now only a little more than a month left at work before I start writing full time, it is hectic, but the countdown has started.

It's going to be nice, I feel so filled with Revelations ideas.

[1.2.4 In the air and regretting every second.](#)

[Apr 15, 2023](#)

So, managed to work almost a full Saturday, though I was interrupted by phonecalls and making dinner. Not hyperfocus, just normal writing. Still, managed 9250 words in one sitting. Looks like 10 000 a day is easily doable. Nice to see my brain is recovering.

(Guilty escape with Herald, being carried as a blanket burrito. Not fully coded, but some variables. Friendly hench relations and good leadership, no minor variables added yet.)

...

On the scale of undignified escapes, surely this must rank in the top three. The clouds are heavy overhead, the nighttime lights of Los Diablos turning them a sickly yellowish orange. You can almost smell the coming rain, which, if it arrives in time to catch you would surely make this top one. Herald's arms are holding you tightly, but not painfully so. It's not like when flying with Sentinel, there you both had to cling on for life. Would probably be safer to be harnessed in, which is one reason you didn't go flying often back in the day. Funny how things change.

Not by choice though. Never by choice.

If you had one, you would certainly not pick to be soaring low across the Los Diablos skies wrapped up like a takeaway burrito, filled with enough painkillers to make it almost funny. Almost. You feel lightheaded, but has decided not to look down. You need to trust Herald with this, getting you to the right address, unseen. All you can do is try to focus on finding everyone who's intent on looking up and making them not do so. Not that there are many about at this hour, and the ones that are tend to be more interested in looking down, to make sure their feet don't trip them up. Drunks. Tired shift workers. Ambitious office moles working late. Not many choppers out, and they are even easier. Nothing to see here.

*fake_choice

#We make a good team, me and Daniel.

*if (shint) #The Skies feel safe tonight. Unlike last time.

#It feels good to have something to focus on.

#You hate that you make a good team.

You make a good team, you and Herald. No you and Daniel. No matter how much you hate it, that part at least is true. You've given him such a hard time during training, and you're not sure to be flattered or annoyed that he's actually listened. Learned. Or maybe he told the truth all along. Training is different for him than real danger. There's nothing of the distracted hesitation you're used to around you. He's focused on his surroundings and what he's doing, not on you.

Funny that it would take a broken heart to get him there.

Getting closer to your destination, Daniel slows down, dropping low, skimming the rooftops. There's no rush in your stomach as he does so, no sense of motion or acceleration that would usually be there in a flier's dive. You're still not sure how his powers work, but there's more to it than flight. You don't feel gravity pulling on you. There's nothing keeping your broken legs straight other than a thin layer of blankets over the casts, and yet they feel more comfortable now than in the hospital. You feel more like you're floating than flying, he's holding you tight but he's not carrying you.

Gravity? It would be the simplest explanation. You've never heard of a boost with the ability to affect that before, but it would explain why the scientists never figured it out. Looking in the wrong place. Refusing to see what was right in front of them. Just like you. And him. You can feel his thoughts avoiding that particular hurdle. That you're a villain. That you're [b]the[/b] villain. The one that hurt him. Broke his heart.

"Nobody's watching," you whisper to steer his thoughts away from the place neither of you want to go. "Take us down."

"Roger." Daniel sinks down into an alley, stopping right before his feet touch the ground. Hovering effortlessly with you in his arms. "Now what?"

"They should be here soon to pick me up." You can't sense any thoughts, which is not surprising. The alley is next to a major road, out of sight but too loud for a comfortable night's sleep, even for the homeless. The buildings here are all warehouses, turning their backs on the road. "You can put me down now and get on with your life."

"What?" Daniel's grip tenses slightly. "I'm not going to leave you here. The ground is filthy, and you can't move. What are you going to do if they don't show up? Or if someone else does first?"

"If you're think I'm going to let you see who I am working with, you're crazy." You hadn't planned this far, and hate it that he has a point. Even your arms are wrapped inside your burrito, the tattoos too obvious to show to the world.

"If you think I'm leaving you at the mercy of the alley rats, you are."

"There are no rats here, don't be so dramatic," you sigh. This is a clean alley, considering. No garbage or broken glass. Just the general detritus of a place seldom visited. "And you know I'm crazy. Even your rose-colored glasses must be broken by now."

*fake_choice

#I've ruined it all, haven't I? Ruined us.

"Don't call yourself that. Please." Daniel sighs, but he still doesn't look at you.

"Why not?" You join him staring at the wall. Nothing of interest there, but at least it won't judge you. "It's the easier alternative."

"For you? Or for me?"

"Does it matter?" You wish you could push away, you need to pace but lack the legs and freedom to do so. "We both know this was stupid. Isn't it better to chalk it up to insanity than bad decisions?"

"I don't think this was stupid." Quiet words. Almost whispered. You can still feel them in his chest. "And I don't think you were crazy when you fought me—" hurt me, his mind provides "—just desperate."

"I was angry," you admit, because why not. "Angry at you."

"At me?" The surprise makes him look down at you, and stupidly enough you meet his gaze. "Why?"

"Because you looked like you had it all." You swallow, steadying your voice. "Powerful. Famous. handsome. Popular. Not having to hide. I saw you at the covers standing there smiling next to Ortega and..."

"And you couldn't." He finishes your sentence for you. "Did you feel like I had taken your place?"

"Yes." Petty but true.

"Do you want to know a secret?" He's not looking away, and his grim face has softened to a smile. "So did I."

*set angryheraldadmit true

#Maybe he will see the truth now. Finally.

#And yet he helps me, and I hate it. Every second of it.

"Crazy?" Daniel lets out a breath that's more a huff than a sigh. You can feel the irritation balloon, butterflies rising from the field. "You're not—"

"Then you must admit I have a point," you snap, interrupting him before he can say something unforgivably soft. "You can't have it both ways."

"So I can't disagree with you without thinking you're crazy?" Daniel shakes his head, and not for the first time you're grateful that he seems to have decided not to look at you. The alley wall is more interesting than your face. Less dangerous. But his thoughts reveal more than his face ever would.

"You're angry," you say with an unseen sneer. "You're furious. Don't think I can't feel it. Why not allow yourself to let it out for once in your life?"

"Don't." You can feel Daniel's breathing. Quicker than normal. "I know what you're doing. This isn't the time to pick a fight."

"What? Because I can't fight back? That didn't stop me when I kicked your ass." Nasty words. Sharp. The look on your face would be a weapon, but he's not looking.

"I wasn't helpless," he says quietly. "I just messed up."

"I'm not helpless just because my legs are broken," you growl. "I'm a telepath."

"I know." It's as if your words settled something in Daniel's mind. All of a sudden it's calm once more, and he lands heavily on his feet. "And once we had left the hospital you could have taken control of me. Made me fly wherever you wanted instead of asking. Made me leave you, instead of trying to tell me to."

"Don't analyze me."

"I'm not. I'm just saying that maybe you want me to be here. That you don't want to be dumped on the side of the street like garbage. Or—" he looks down at you, at your face for the first time. "—you don't want to hurt me. Not like that. Not now."

"Sap," you start, but the sentence remains unfinished. In the distance, you've picked up an approaching mind. Familiar.

*if boss

*goto bossburrito

*elseif rosie

*goto rosieburrito

*else

*goto boburrito

*label boburrito

Boris. There's no way you could mistake it for anybody else, at least not when he's driving. The thoughts slide liquid over the surroundings, half on the road, half on the maps supplementing his navigation.

*if boss_secret

A sting of relief hits you right in the chest, followed by worry. You haven't shown your face to Bo before, there is no way to keep that secret now. Or of what you are. But that's is a problem for the future, what matters now is that you will be out of here.

*else

A sting of relief hits you right in the chest. You'll be out of here soon.

Finally.

"You can put me down now," you say, bracing yourself for the pain. "My ride is coming."

"I'm not putting you down." An immovable object if there ever was one.

"Well you can't remain here. You're a hero." Why can't Daniel understand the point? It's not that complicated.

"I broke you out," he points out. "And I promise I won't arrest whoever it is."

"But you'll see their face. What makes you think they won't put a bullet in your head?" Bo is generally peaceful, but there's an edge there you've been aware of since your first meeting. You doubt he'd hesitate to shoot someone.

"Because I'm holding you. And I promise I won't arrest them."

"You're hopeless," you say with a groan. That he hasn't been killed yet is a miracle. "At least try not to float, maybe he won't recognize you."

"Alright." Daniel makes himself as solidly attacked to the ground as he can, and you feel gravity tug on you once more. It doesn't feel nice.

*fake_choice

#I'll trust Bo to keep his cool.

#I'll make sure Bo is calm when he arrives.

Boris' mind comes closer as he turns off the main road, circling down towards your alley. You can sense a moment of alarm as he spots two figures instead of one, but you quickly smooth it down. You don't need a scene, not now.

The car pulls to a stop, engine still running. Instead of getting out, Bo lowers the side window, leaning out.

"Here for the pickup?" he says, vague enough that it can mean anything.

"The pickup's me," you admit, trying to match the cadence of your vocal distorters.

*if boss_secret

"\${villain_name}. Slightly indisposed."

"\${villain_name}?" Bo's voice is filled with disbelief.

"Don't tell me you thought I could never take the armor off," you say, gently pushing the disbelief to the side. You can't afford to have no not believe you, and you can't start listing things to convince him with Herald here.

"I mean, I was wondering—" a nervous laugh "—but what the hell has happened to you, boss?"

*else

"And I guess you can see why."

"I mean I do have eyes," Bo's eyes have gone wide. "What the hell happened to you, boss?"

"Car crash." You wish it sounded more glamorous. "The meeting didn't go as planned. You gonna help me in or what?"

"Of course." He gets out, laughing nervously. "If you'd told me I would have got a van. I guess you can sit sideways in the backseat but I doubt it will be comfy."

"Comfier than jail." You watch Boris, grateful that Herald has kept his mouth shut. But he's listening. There's no mistaking that alert tension.

"Sure is. So why don't you get your friend to—" Bo looks up at Herald for the first time, freezing in his tracks. Recognition. *Swear!*

"I can expl—" you start, but is interrupted by Bo cracking up in the biggest grin.

"Mr. Sullivan!" The warmth in the name is not fake, and what's worse is that Herald returns the smile.

"Oh, Mr. Pavlenko, I didn't know you were..." a criminal? You're not sure how herald had planned to finish that sentence.

"Yeah, well..." Boris looks embarrassed. "I mean..."

"I'm not going to arrest anyone," Herald quickly assures. "I promise. I'm just here helping a—" the shortest hesitation "—friend."

"You two know each other?" You're surrounded by a barrage of feelings on both sides, neither of them settling into something comfortable. You're hurting too badly to figure it out on your own.

if herald_dinner

"Yes," Herald admits, voice softening into Daniel. "We had dinner at his cousin's restaurant, remember?"

"As if I could forget," you mutter. "And that explains nothing."

"Mr. Sullivan broke up a hostage situation," Bo clarifies. "Made sure nobody got hurt, or the place got shot up."

else

"Yes," Herald admits, voice softening into Daniel. "I did his cousin a favor. He owns a restaurant that someone wanted to rob, and I talked the culprit down before the LDPD could get there and make things worse."

"As they would have," Bo interjects. "Those bastards don't mind bystanders one bit."

"And now I get the feeling that maybe there was more to that than a simple robbery gone wrong." Daniel sounds more bemused than annoyed.

"Yeah, well..." Bo scratches his neck and looks away. "Maybe the fella was looking for me. Was laying low at the time, and I guess he figured that I'd have a soft spot for my cousin. Tried to take hostages to flush me out."

"He said he just wanted money!"

"Well, no offense but when a Ranger asks you why you're sticking a shotgun in someone's back they ain't liable to say revenge." Bo shrugs. "And since things had escalated, nobody wanted more people involved so my cousin played along."

"I can't believe this." Daniel sounds almost insulted. "I let him go with a warning."

"I know." Bo shrugs. "Which was a bit awkward. But it got the point across."

"What point?" A helpless question.

"That they'd better stay away from my family 'cause they are protected. And it's worked. No trouble since." Bo's smile is wide and sincere. "Look, maybe we didn't exactly tell the whole truth, but you still was less of an ass to a criminal than you could have been. That counts for a lot. People talk."

"I can't believe this." If Daniel hadn't needed both hands to hold you, you think he'd be hiding in them. "And you work for *villain_name*?"

"Pay's well. They ain't a bad boss. As I suspect you might agree with since you're the one carrying them."

"That's not the point." Daniel sighs.

fake_choice

"You're right, the point is I need to get out of here."

"You're right, the point is I need to get out of here." You can't keep the pain from cracking your voice. "Even not accounting for the pain, I'm wrapped in sheets and not wearing pants."

"Oh," Daniel's face heats up to the point you can almost feel it. "Of course. Are you sure you don't need help?"

"That's up to the boss," Bo says with a neutral shrug.

"We can manage." You look at the car. "Maybe help me in it though?"

#"What is the point then?" I can't help but be curious.

"What's the point then?" You can't help but be curious, the fact that Daniel knows Bo is a risk, but perhaps also an opportunity.

"I don't even know anymore." Daniel looks to the skies for answer, but then he looks back at you. "I don't know anything anymore. But I think we'd better get out of here before something happens."

"I agree." It's not the best place to have a conversation, let alone the argument you can feel brewing under the surface. "Can you help load me up?"

#I'm curious, I'll scan Bo's mind as they talk.

"Look," Bo says, as you stay quiet and doesn't interfere. "You did a good deed, and that's what matters, right? I'm grateful you did. My cousin practically has a shrine to you. It was his daughter he'd taken hostage."

"I would have done that for anybody." Daniel almost sounds embarrassed.

"Yeah, but you did it for us. That matters." Bo's voice is light, but underneath, his mind is hard. He's truly grateful for what Daniel did, not anything he would have expected from a hero. But the man that held up the restaurant and Daniel released later?

That man is dead. A better warning than anything.

"Not to interrupt, but I think we'd better go." You don't want Daniel to find that out, it might complicate things.

"Yes," Daniel straightens up, looking awkwardly at Bo. "Are you going to be able to handle this?"

"Yes," you say before Bo has a chance to answer. "But maybe you can help be get in the car?"

*goto 12basefuse

*label rosieburrito

Rosie. Neon-bright flashes of annoyance, struggling with finding the right exit. Finally. No wonder she's late if she's had to stop and look at the map this often. But she's here. Finally.

*if boss_secret

A sting of relief hits you right in the chest, followed by worry. You haven't shown your face to Rosie, there is no way to keep that secret now. Or of what you are. But that's is a problem for the future, what matters now is that you will be out of here.

*else

A sting of relief hits you right in the chest. You'll be out of here soon.

Finally.

"You can put me down now," you say, bracing yourself for the pain. "My ride is coming."

"I'm not putting you down." An immovable object if there ever was one.

"Well you can't remain here. You're a hero." Why can't Daniel understand the point? It's not that complicated.

"I broke you out," he points out. "And I promise I won't arrest whoever it is."

"But you'll see their face. What makes you think they won't put a bullet in your head?" Rosie's got a temper, you doubt she'd think twice about knocking him out.

"Because I'm holding you. And I promise I won't arrest them."

"You're hopeless," you say with a groan. That he hasn't been killed yet is a miracle. "At least try not to float, maybe she won't recognize you."

"Alright." Daniel makes himself as solidly attacked to the ground as he can, and you feel gravity tug on you once more. It doesn't feel nice.

*fake_choice

#I'll trust Rosie to keep her cool.

#I'll make sure Rosie is calm when she arrives.

Rosie's mind comes closer as she finally finds the right turn and creeps closer to your alley. You can sense a moment of alarm as she spots two figures instead of one, but you quickly smooth it down. You don't need a scene, not now.

The car pulls to a stop, and Rosie steps out, light on her feet and ready for trouble.

"I'm here to pick some stuff up?" she says, trying to pick the two of you out in the shadows.

"The stuff's me," you admit, trying to match the cadence of your vocal distorters as Herald steps forward with you in his arms.

*if boss_secret

"\${villain_name}. Slightly indisposed."

"\${villain_name}?" Rosie tilts her head, hands on her hips. Apparently neither you nor Herald looks too intimidating right now. "Seriously?"

"Don't tell me you thought I could never take the armor off," you say, gently pushing the disbelief to the side. You can't afford to have her not believe you, and you can't start listing things to convince him with Herald here.

"I mean, sure," she takes a step forward, filled with concern. "Just didn't expect you packed up like a takeout order. What happened?"

*else

"And I guess you can see why."

"Yeah, I doubt you're packed up like a takeout order without reason." Rosie looks worried. "What happened?"

"Car crash." You wish it sounded more glamorous. "The meeting didn't go as planned. You gonna help me get in the car or what?"

"Sure, but it's gonna be cramped." She looks between you and the car. "Could have got a van if you specified. Guess maybe the backseat if you keep your legs up? Not going to be comfortable, though."

"More comfortable than jail." You watch Rosie, grateful that Herald has kept his mouth shut. But he's listening. There's no mistaking that alert tension.

"I mean that's true, but there's no need to—" Rosie looks up at Herald for the first time, eyes narrowing. Recognition. \${swear}!

"It's not what it looks like." Daniel keeps very still, like a cat not wanting to provoke a response. "I'm here to help."

"Sure you are, hotshot." She's squaring off with him, no fear, just a desire to protect that surprise you both with its intensity. "Drop them."

"Don't," you quickly say. "My legs are broken, that would hurt."

"Oh yeah, forgot about that." She looks embarrassed. "You sure you're alright, boss?"

*fake_choice

#"I will be once we're out of here." I will it to be true.

"I will be once we're out of here." You can't doubt that now, not in front of Rosie, and certainly not in front of Daniel. You have been weak enough to last a lifetime. At least your expected span.

"If you say so, boss." Rosie gives Daniel a long, suspicious look. "If he's got anything to do with—"

"He doesn't."

"I'm not going to hurt \${chim}." Daniel speaks softly, as if he was afraid she'd jump him if she thought he was a threat. "I'm the one that got him out of there."

#"I'm not, but he's not to blame. He helped me get out."

"I'm not. But he's not to blame." It hurts to say, but it's the truth. You're not sure why, but it's not like you could say no.

"If you say so, boss." Rosie gives Daniel a long, suspicious look. "I don't trust him."

"I'm not going to hurt \${chim}." Daniel speaks softly, as if he was afraid she'd jump him if she thought he was a threat.

"I mean it." You don't have the patience for this, right now they're on the same side, like it or not. "He was the one that helped me get out."

#"Do I look okay? I'm a mess and so is everything else."

"Do I look okay?" You can't help the crack in your voice. "I'm a mess, and so is everything else."

"Don't know what to say to that, boss." Rosie shrugs. "But you're not under arrest, and some hotshot Ranger is giving you the bridal carry. Can't be all bad."

"I'm not—" Daniel protests and you can feel the flush from here. "Anyway, \${chis} legs are broken, this is the best way."

"It's not because I like being a burrito," you assure, feeling a bit better by his embarrassment. "It was his suggestion."

"I needed to get you out of there fast, I didn't have much choice." A nervous laugh.

"Oh, really?" Rosie gives Daniel a new look of appreciation. "So hotshot here was the one that got you out of jail, boss? Impressive. Or stupid."

"Not jail. It was just the hospital," Daniel pleads. "And I'm not the criminal here."

"You are now." Maybe it's digging in the knife, but you can't help it. "I was under arrest. Doubt the Marshal would like this."

"Yep," Rosie readily agrees. "Does that mean he's one of us now?"

"No—" an exasperated laugh. "I'm not. And the Marshal doesn't need to know."

"I'm not arguing that. Nobody needs to know." You give Daniel a stern glance. "Especially not you-know-who."

"I'm not going to tell \${him}, if you're worried about that. I don't see that going well." You can sense how tense Daniel has become. Maybe he's starting to realize that there are consequences to his actions.

"I've better get out of here fast," you say, suddenly paranoid that Ortega might have found out somehow. Might have stalked you. You wouldn't know, would you?

"Let's get you in the car." Rosie moves up to Daniel, who glides back slightly.

"Let me," he suggests. "I have an easier time moving \${chim}."

"Boss?" Rosie gives you a questioning look.

"He's right," you admit. This is going to hurt as it is, no need to make it worse. "Just be careful, alright?" You look up, and meets his eyes briefly before he looks away.

*goto 12basefuse

*label bossburrito

Pelayo. You can pick up his mind easily, though it's focused on the road. Good, he didn't bring Nehal, you were afraid he would. Is that Ward as well? Bringing a backup. Just in case there's trouble. Good thinking.

*if boss_secret

A sting of relief hits you right in the chest, followed by worry. You haven't shown your face to them before, there is no way to keep that secret now. Or of what you are. But that's is a problem for the future, what matters now is that you will be out of here.

*else

A sting of relief hits you right in the chest. You'll be out of here soon.

Finally.

"You can put me down now," you say, bracing yourself for the pain. "My ride is coming."

"I'm not putting you down." An immovable object if there ever was one.

"Well you can't remain here. You're a hero." Why can't Daniel understand the point? It's not that complicated.

"I broke you out," he points out. "And I promise I won't arrest whoever it is."

"But you'll see their faces. What makes you think they won't put a bullet in your head?" Pelayo wouldn't hesitate, and Ward might insist.

"Because I'm holding you. And I promise I won't arrest them."

"You're hopeless," you say with a groan. That he hasn't been killed yet is a miracle. "At least try not to float, maybe he won't recognize you."

"Alright." Daniel makes himself as solidly attached to the ground as he can, and you feel gravity tug on you once more. It doesn't feel nice.

*fake_choice

#I'll trust Pelayo to handle this.

#I'll make sure they are calm when they arrive.

Pelayo's mind comes closer as he turns off the main road, circling down towards the alley. Ward is reading the map, which means he can be focused on where he's going. A faint worry about an ambush, and you sense a moment of alarm as he spots two figures instead of one. You quickly smooth it down, making sure that Ward sinks deeper into the seat. Nothing dangerous. You don't need a scene, not now.

The car pulls to a stop, and Ward gets out, keeping the car between you as cover. Just in case. Pelayo opens the door, one foot on the ground, but he leaves the car running. Just in case.

"Alright, we're here. Got something to pick up," he continues, vague enough that it can mean anything.

"The pickup's me," you admit, trying to match the cadence of your vocal distorters.

*if boss_secret

"\${villain_name}. Slightly indisposed."

"\${villain_name}?" Pelayo gets out of the car entirely, while Ward whistles quietly behind him.

"Don't tell me you thought I could never take the armor off," you say, gently pushing their disbelief to the side. You can't afford to have no not believe you, and you can't start listing things to convince him with Herald here.

"No," Pelayo admits. "But we were taking bet what you'd look like."

"And nobody bet burrito." Ward can't stop the chuckle. "Sorry boss, no disrespect intended but what the hell happened?"

*else

"And I guess you can see why."

"Hard to miss," Ward chuckles. "Sorry boss, no disrespect intended but what the hell happened?"

"Car crash." You wish it sounded more glamorous. "The meeting didn't go as planned. You gonna help me get in the car or what?"

"I think I'd better handle that." Pelayo takes a step forward, while Ward shrugs apologetically. The oversized metal claw isn't exactly gentle.

"You think we can fit \${chim} in the car?" Ward pats the top of it. "Told you we should have gotten the van."

"We can put \${chim} in the backseat. Keep the legs on the seat. You'll be riding sideways, I'm afraid. Won't be comfortable."

"Comfier than jail." You sigh deeply, grateful that Herald has kept his mouth shut. But he's listening. There's no mistaking that alert tension.

"It is. Come on, let's get your friend to—" Pelayo looks up at Herald for the first time, freezing in his tracks. Recognition. \${swear}!

"Problems?" Ward reacts instantly, reaching for a gun.

*fake_choice

#"Stand down!" I snap, I am charge here.

"Stand down," you snap, and Ward immediately lets go of the weapon.

"I'm sorry, boss. Just thought that—"

"You're not paid to think." Harsh words, but Daniel is squeezing you hard, and you don't doubt he'd flee if threatened. Taking you with him.

"Still," Pelayo hadn't moved, but you can sense his misgivings. "We are paid to protect you. And that's a Ranger."

"A Ranger that has brought me here. That should tell you everything you need."

"I don't know," Pelayo says with narrow eyes. "It could mean a lot of things."

"I'm not here to fight," Daniel says, finally unable to keep quiet. "And I'm certainly not here to arrest anybody. I'm the one that got \${chim} out of there."

#"Cool it, everything's fine." I lean gently on their minds.

"Cool it," you say, pushing down Ward's nervous tick. "Everything is fine." You will them to believe it.

"If you say so, boss." Pelayo gives Daniel a long, suspicious look. "If he's got anthing to do with—"

"He doesn't."

"I'm not going to hurt \${chim}." Daniel speaks softly, as if he was afraid of things escalating if he brought attention to himself. "I'm the one that got him out of there."

#"Herald's with me," I say, "you're safe."

"Herald's with me," you say, doing your best to sound convincing. "You're safe."

"If you say so, boss." Ward gives Daniel a long, suspicious look. "I don't trust him."

"I'm not going to hurt \${chim}." Daniel speaks softly, as if he was afraid things would escalate if he said the wrong word.

"Heroes have strange definitions of hurt." Pelayo is frozen to the ground, unmoving. "I don't like this, boss."

"Suck it up." You don't have the patience for this, right now they're on the same side, like it or not. "He's not going to do stop us. Not when he was the one that helped me get out."

"Right." Pelayo sounds like he doesn't believe it, but Ward chuckles.

"What? Did a Ranger break you out of jail? Not sure if that's impressive or profoundly stupid."

"It wasn't jail. Just a hospital," Daniel pleads. "And I'm not a criminal. I just wanted to help."

"You're a criminal now." Maybe it's digging in the knife, but you can't help it. "I was under arrest. Doubt the Marshal would like this."

"Yep," Ward readily agrees. "Does that mean he's one of us now? Hope not, Nehal'd be all over him."

"Wait—" an exasperated laugh. "I'm not one of you. This was a one-time thing. And the Marshal doesn't need to know."

"I'm not arguing that. Nobody needs to know." You give Daniel a stern glance. "Especially not you-know-who."

"I'm not going to tell \${him}, if you're worried about that. I don't see that going well." You can sense how tense Daniel has become. Maybe he's starting to realize that there are consequences to his actions.

"I've better get out of here fast," you say, suddenly paranoid that Ortega might have found out somehow. Might have stalked you. You wouldn't know, would you?

"Let's load you up then." Pelayo looks at you for guidance. "How do you want to do this?"

"Let me help," Daniel suggests. "I have an easier time moving \${chim}."

"Boss?" Pelayo waits for your approval.

"He's right," you admit. This is going to hurt as it is, no need to make it worse. "Just be careful, alright?" You look up, and meets his eyes briefly before he looks away.

*goto 12basefuse

*label 12basefuse

"Of course." Daniel lowers his voice as he gently floats you into the car. Like

*if boss

Pelayo

*elseif bo

Bo

*else

Rosie

said, it's cramped, and you have to lean against the side door to have room for your legs. The engine is still running, and the vibration makes you grit your teeth. "I could—"

"No," you whisper back. "You can't. And neither are you going to follow me. I won't show you my hideout, and I would know if you tried to tail."

"I promise I won't tell anybody."

"That's not the problem." You can do this. Look him in the eyes and imagine it's through the eyeslits of a helmet. "You are. You're a hero. I don't know what kind of momentary insanity that made you help me get out of there, but I can't count on that to last."

"I believed you," he says quietly. "When you said they might be coming for you. And what they would do to you. That's why I got you out. I don't think you faked that fear."

*fake_choice

#"I didn't, but I lied about everything else," I mutter.

"I didn't," you mutter. "But I lied to you about everything else."

"That doesn't mean I am going to let you die." Daniel says, still leaning into the car. "But I haven't forgiven what you did."

"Didn't think you would." He's a hero. You're not. You hurt him. Lied to him. You're lucky he's as soft-hearted as he is. "But thank you for getting me out."

"Stay safe." He pulls back and closes the door behind him, making sure it doesn't slam your feet.

"Forget me." You're not sure he hears the words through the closed doors. In fact, you're not even sure you said them. Maybe it's better that way.

#"What does it matter to you? I used you," I snap.

"What does it matter to you?" Your voice is sharp, because you don't get it. Can't trust what you do get. "I used you."

"You did." Daniel busies himself making sure your legs are as secure as they can on the backseat. "And maybe I used you." The admission is soft and surprising. "I'm not as selfless as everyone seems to think."

"It doesn't matter though, does it? Not in the end?" You're still here, eyes open, on opposite sides of a battlefield. Perhaps there's a truce now, but it can't last.

"It doesn't." He pulls back and closes the door behind him, making sure it doesn't slam your feet. "I'm not sure I can forgive what you did." You wouldn't have caught the last words through the closed doors if they hadn't been whispered as loudly in his mind.

"You shouldn't," you whisper back, equally unheard.

#"I didn't ask you to save me either," I say angrily.

"I didn't ask you to save me either." Pain is easier to deal with when you're angry. "This is on your head."

"Don't you think I know that?" Daniel is still leaning into the car, voice low for privacy. "Don't you think I'm as furious at myself as I'm at you?"

"But you never show it, \${hnick}." Your smile is sharp, helplessness has never become you. "You just keep smiling through it."

"I'm not smiling now." And that is the truth. "And neither am I going to fight you."

"Why not?" you taunt. "Maybe you'd have a shot at winning."

"You'll have to find someone else to hurt you." A sigh, but a determined one. "I'm done." And then he pulls back and closes the door behind him, hard enough to make you jump. Too close to your feet.

There is a moment of silence as Daniel walks away, then he takes to the air and is gone.

*if boss

Pelayo gets back behind the wheel while Ward is looking at the skies. Making sure Herald is gone.

"Get back in here," Pelayo says, patience cracking.

"Alright, alright. Just wanted to make sure." Ward sinks down heavily in the seat, claw cradled awkwardly. "You think he's gonna follow us?"

"No." You're sure of that. Daniel wanted nothing more to do with you. "Go. Take the long rout to make sure nobody else is."

"Roger." Pelayo guides the car back on the main road, while Ward picks up a scanner. Better to be sure than trailed.

You let out a tired breath, trying to keep yourself from moving too much. It won't be a comfortable ride, but at least it'll be a safe one. You hope the painkillers will last.

*elseif bo

Bo looks up, then gets in the car. For a moment it looks like he's going to say something, but a look at you in the backseat makes him think twice. Instead he guides the car back on the road, falling in to a familiar pattern of diversion. Making sure you nobody is following. You do the same, grateful that Herald's mind

is nowhere to be felt.

*else

Rosie mutters to herself as she gets back behind the wheel. You're not sure what, but you think half of it is curses about the mess that her life has become. Dealing with Rangers was not on her menu. But despite her quiet complaints she guides the car back on the road, following your directions. You need to take a reroute, to make sure nobody is following. At least Herald's mind is nowhere to be felt, but you can't trust that there aren't others there.

It's a long drive back to your base.

[The Void 7 - Steel](#)

[Apr 14, 2023](#)

My brain is being bad due to oversocialising for several weeks in a row, but I managed to wrestle it into finally finishing this. Steel was hard to write, he turned out third person. Wouldn't let me in his head.

The Green Sky compound, lit up by floodlights, everything covered by a thin layer of dust and sand. Wei Chen is standing in the courtyard, Sergeant Steel armor securely sealed, scanning the area. The interference is a staticky buzz on his HUD, a common occurrence when Ashfall is involved. Neither he nor Sentinel is good for electronics, though Sentinel's ever-present dust can be dealt with by changing filters. Not so Ashfall's 'ash.' It is odd, though. Normally the interference disappears once Ashfall reforms.

Not so now.

Could it be something inside the compound? Most likely, the Void had always had an odd effect on machinery. One of the reasons he was not one of the first on the scene. A reason he did not agree with. He should have been. Maybe then it would have been less of a clusterfuck.

"Now, what the hell happened here?" Chen looks around, but everybody is suspiciously busy with their own tasks. Ashfall has pulled on the spare skinsuit they bring for these occasions and is not meeting his gaze. Instead, he's assiduously checking the restraints on the row of Green Sky cultists that are still conscious. Anathema is still below, checking for holdouts and Sentinel... Sentinel finishes the bottle of sugary electrolytes he jokingly calls his 'recovery juice' and walks over, face grim.

"They're gone. We think." His calm demeanor is a mask; the dust rises in lazy spirals around him.

"And by 'they,' you mean Charge and Sidestep." Not a question. Out of the range of the comms too. Unless they were taken or broken. The latter is not new when Charge is involved, but that doesn't stop the sick feeling in his stomach.

"And the Void. Among others." Sentinel sighs. "We don't have a clear headcount, but there are some heavy hitters we assumed would be here that aren't."

"What is the current assumption?" He's afraid to ask, but he needs a sitrep before he can make any decisions. His armor is still almost fully loaded; mopping up the remaining cultists hadn't been hard. Charge and Ashfall had been through, and what they hadn't taken down, Sentinel had.

"The best one? That the Void ran, and Charge wouldn't wait for backup and followed. You know Ortega..." The sigh is heavy but fond. "And Sidestep would follow them through Hell if they had to."

"You're not wrong." Chen echoes the sigh. Had Charge tried to call in, but the comms had broken in the fight? It was almost certain they wouldn't have lasted, not with the Ashfall trick they had planned. "And the worst one?"

"That they have been captured, and Void took them elsewhere." Sentinel's eyes shift briefly to Ashfall, who has straightened up but still avoids his eyes. That is not a good sign. "It wasn't looking good last Ashfall saw them."

"Took them where?" His voice is hard, even to his own ears. "And why aren't we following?"

"Anathema is down below looking for alternative exits. I'll be in the air again as soon as I've caught my breath. Need to refuel before I can fly if I don't want to risk going splat if my energy runs out a mile up." Sentinel's smile is pained. "I'm only human."

"Some would say otherwise." Chen sighs again. "Sorry, that was unfair."

"It was." Short. Hard.

"And what about calling in help?" As they should have from the start. The Void was too much of an unknown. The plan was good and accounted for all they knew. But what of the things that they didn't?

"Go check with Anathema. If they haven't found anything down there, I'll swallow my pride and call in Thunderhead."

"You think she will answer, considering what happened last time?" Not that Chen didn't understand; telepaths made him uneasy. Nobody liked being undressed in front of strangers. "Not to mention the fact that this could be argued to be her turf."

"She's going to answer if I'm the one asking." Sentinel looked uncomfortable. "We're just going to have to be ready for the lectures."

"She'll have to stand in line behind me for that." Chen looked over at Ashfall, but that was a discussion for later. "I'll go find Anathema."

"Let me know if they've found anything. I'll be in the air." Sentinel pulled down the visual array over his face once more. It made him look inhuman, almost insectoid. A small price to pay for the scanning capabilities.

"Good luck." Chen braced himself as Sentinel took off, the winds causing even his heavy armor to stumble. Once the dust settled, he looked at Ashfall. "Can you handle things up here?"

"I can." Ashfall looked pale, almost haunted in the floodlights. "You go find the others."

"Keep your communicator close if anything happens." With those warning words, Chen turned and headed into the compound.

Chen didn't like this one bit. Ashfall looked cracked. He had seen fellow soldiers with shoulders like that, eyes flickering everywhere but forward. Something had happened. Something he wouldn't like. But the site was not secured; he had to trust that Ashfall could keep things together if given the trust to do so. Sometimes that was all that was necessary to help someone through a tough situation. Trust. The feeling of being needed. He hoped that would be enough.

The compound was scoured from the inside out, and the furniture turned to wreckage in the wake of Sentinel's fury. It was pushed up in piled against the walls, but there were no heat signatures, so he didn't think anybody was left buried. It wouldn't have been long enough to let them grow cold. The door at the back gaped open, wide enough that he could step through if he edged sideways.

Hopefully, the stairs would hold his weight.

Stone steps. Wide. Not built in an excavated shaft, they felt more cut from the sandstone itself. Smooth. He activated the full range of lights and banished the shadows surrounding him. The walls were covered in garish paintings of recognizable individuals. Half graffiti, half icons, standing tall and proud, surrounded by the symbols of their stations. Religion. He had always hated dealing with cults. So many people hung their self-worth on being a part of something that it easily turned sour in the wrong hands.

But was he any different?

He scanned the flames, the water, and the jagged metal barbs as he descended into the black and the green. Not a good feeling; he felt out of his depths. Like when he had signed up for the army and ended up sitting in a bus heading southwest together with others who knew just as little as he did. The knowledge that he could disappear, and nobody would ask.

Or care.

"Anathema?" He spoke quietly into the communicator, not out loud into the room he had entered. Scorched walls. A stench of fire and ozone, more imagined than real. There was no answer, but the reach was not good underground. Thick walls blocked not only screams. Not a good thought and Chen dismissed it, weapon ready as he searched the place. Room by room. Empty. Wrecked. There were marks in the walls, deep handprints where Anathema had reached in, seeking hidden doors. The edges were smooth and worn down until the acid was neutralized. Not unlike the stairs.

An unbidden thought.

"Anathema?" he repeated, louder this time, through the external speakers. The words echoed strangely in the tunnels. How big was this place? His descent was automatically tracked, but it felt longer than it had been. Like he had walked in curves where the HUD said a straight line. Could he even trust the maps? Or his screen?

Or himself?

Chen shook his head and then made the decision to open his faceplate. It slid back easily, and he could smell the chill air, faintly tinged with oil and soot. The shadows were deeper without computerized assistance, but he turned up the lights of his armor to compensate. In the distance, he heard a faint sound. Footsteps? "Anathema?"

No answer.

He couldn't sneak but tried to be quiet as he walked towards the sound. It echoed strangely, and the directional acoustics of his armor couldn't pinpoint from where they came. He had to trust his hearing.

And himself.

The footsteps turned to sobs that turned to heavy breaths, and Chen turned the corner to see Anathema standing in the middle of a large room where his lights barely reached the ceiling. Unlike all the other rounded surfaces, this one had straight walls and a flat ceiling, strangely mundane in the organic. It was painted in jagged lines that seemed to twist when he tried to focus on him. The effect was strangely unearthly. "Anathema?"

"Yeah." Anathema pulled back their hands from their face but didn't turn around. They looked strangely vulnerable, bare feet on stone, warm and organic in contrast to the strict lines. "I'm okay. I'm not sure Charge and Sidestep are."

"What do you mean?" Chen didn't lower his weapon, but he had no idea when he had drawn it. There was no trace of anybody else.

"They're not here." Anathema stepped forward, then ran both hands through their curly hair. "So they're probably with Void."

"Why would the Void take captives?" He activated one of the scanners, but it only echoed what he already knew. The room was empty. So why was he feeling nervous? "Or do you think they're dead?"

"No." Anathema looked grim, their face bereft of its usual smile. "I think Void is going to try to turn them."

"Turn them." Chen scoffed; the notion seemed absurd. Two of the most stubborn people he had met didn't seem like good recruiting material.

"Don't laugh." Anathema gestured to the room. "We need to find them before it's too late."

"We will. What is this place?" He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong here. The light bounced weirdly, and he was starting to feel nauseous.

"The Tesseract." Anathema turned and walked two steps into the room, and for a moment, they felt impossibly distant. "I tried to get it to work for me. But I can't. Not anymore."

"You've been here before." It wasn't a question, not with that look on their face. Chen had suspected but had been reluctant to bring it up. It had seemed so far-fetched.

"Yes." A soft sigh. "I suppose Sentinel has told you by now?"

"No. Sentinel hasn't told me anything." With anything other than looks. "I was hoping you would."

"I grew up here." Anathema smiled, then shook their head. "Not in this exact place, but with the Green Sky. They took me in when..." A twitch. "Anyway, Marshal Hood got me out. Or, well, he attacked one of the compounds, and I decided to help him. I wanted out. But sometimes you don't have the strength to start walking on your own."

"Nobody could have stopped you." Invulnerable. Dripping steel-eating acid.

"You don't understand." Anathema came closer, rubbing their hands together. "You've always been strong like that. Doing what you need to. I wouldn't have known where to start. Where to go. Whether things were better out there. Hood helped."

"Hood recruited you into the Rangers." Not a question, pieces adding up.

"It was my suggestion. I wanted to help. It's not like anything could hurt me." They laughed. "And maybe I could help others. I was already used to working in teams."

"So why didn't you let us know?" Did he feel betrayed?

"He faked my identity. Hood knew how to bend the rules like that. Sentinel knew, but I don't think he wanted it to spread. Said I deserved a fresh start."

"I meant right now. Before this operation." It would have changed things. "We deserved to know."

"I said as much as I could." Anathema grimaced and looked up at Chen. Confrontational. Hiding guilt? "Where do you think the maps came from? The intel that Sentinel 'found?'"

"So what went wrong?" Something did. And he was one step behind.

"I was supposed to go in with Sidestep." Anathema looked like they were about to start crying, so Chen looked away. "I think they felt how nervous I was and offered to go alone. Faster. Quieter. You know they lobbied for that from the start."

"I do." Chen sighed. "And I said that wasn't wise because things could get hairy without backup."

"I don't know if they were discovered." Anathema's voice was shaky. "But the lights went out, so they did their job at least. I think Ortega must have run into trouble."

"Not the first time." If Charge was in trouble, Sidestep would move in. And likewise. He wished either of them would take a moment to think first. "Ashfall looked sick. I don't think he was prepared."

"Nobody can be." A tap on Chen's armor and Anathema was there, looking up. "Nobody knows how they'll react meeting Void. Don't blame him."

"I'll blame myself for agreeing to be rearguard." It was a relief to see Anathema pulling themselves together. "We should have gone in force."

"Maybe." A pregnant pause. "Or we'll have more people lost. At least now we can try to find them."

"Do you have any idea where they've gone?" That was the big question.

"I thought..." Anathema gestures to the room. "I thought I could find answers here. But I can't. It's been too long."

"Any other hideouts close by?" If they had a teleporter, there was a range. Nothing was infinite, even the power of boosts.

"Not sure. Some we only got to by traveling the walkways." A shiver.

"The walkways?"

"By following Void. This is one of the starting points. To get us into the right mindset." A helpless laugh. "I can't do it anymore. The lines won't unfold. I can't see the path."

"Maybe that's a good thing." Chen couldn't say he understood what was going through Anathema's mind, but he knew desperation and guilt when he saw it.

"Maybe. Not for Charge and Sidestep."

"We'll find them." Chen hoped he sounded more sure than he was. "Do you think we could find them if we could find this 'path'?"

"At least we would know a direction even if we couldn't walk it." Anathema rubbed their arm again. "It's hard. I don't know how many that's not me or Void would survive."

"They had acolytes. How did they?"

"If you ingest Void's blood, you'll be able to."

"I had forgotten about that." Chen grimaced. Blood drinking. Rumors of cannibalism. Things he would not ask Anathema about. "Well, there's nothing down here anyway, let's get up. Sentinel is scanning the skies, he might have found something."

"A needle in a haystack." But Anathema followed anyway.

"Not so hard if you're equipped with a magnet. Sidestep might be hard to find, but Charge's mods will light up like a Christmas tree in a wilderness like this."

"And where Charge is, Sidestep will be." A lighter tone of voice, almost a smile.

"Exactly. And we can have a talk with Ashfall. I've given him enough time to collect himself. Time to cough up exactly what happened down there."

Chen walked with purpose, doing his best to banish any doubts and bad thoughts. They could wait until this was over and Ortega was patched up in the hospital, another close escape to their name. You didn't think about worst case scenarios in the field. You focused on what you could do. How you could stay alive. How you could keep your friends alive.

Ortega, he muttered to himself as he made his way up the stairs. *Where the hell are you?*

[Small Breaks news](#)

[Apr 11, 2023](#)

Me and Emma have finally signed the contract to publish our comic Breaks with a new publisher! Looking forward to some nice new editions, I'll let you know when there are more details.

Just feels nice to have that taken care of!

EDIT: Forgot to link the web version. You can read it all on Tapas: <https://tapas.io/episode/190485>

[breaks](#)

[New discord link](#)

[Apr 8, 2023](#)

Try this link instead, I have no idea why they keep breaking!

Don't be afraid to DM me if it does....

...

...

<https://discord.gg/scparKrYcB>

[QnA March!](#)

[Apr 8, 2023](#)

Alright, I am back from France, everything went fine, and I've spent the day answer questions. Hopefully I can get back on track now and actually get things done! Thank you so much for your well wishes!

Can sidestep grow protective of HG if they consider them family?

Of course. That will be one of the paths on the game.

How do re-genes deal with losing someone close to them? How do they deal with someone close to them getting rebooted?

Death is the toughest part. You're not allowed to grieve outright, since that means you've grown too much feelings and might be in danger yourself. So there's no official ceremonies or rites. Instead, the Re-Genes grieve in their own way, by incorporating parts of the fallen comrade in their own behavior. It might be things like adding parts of the fallen Re-Gene's name to their own, and I am not talking about the Farm code names for them. I am talking about the personal names the Re-Genes have chosen, which is a combination of their finger/knocking language which I talked about in an earlier FAQ. So they might add parts of that one to their own. Sometimes fallen Re-Genes who have truly influenced people might give birth to phrases that stay in their language, detailing either their death or something they were known for while alive. A bit like famous quotes, but names remembered.

When someone gets wiped/rebooted, it's harder. The Re-Genes knows what has happened, and that it can happen to them at any point. As such, they go out their way to be kind to them, and if they are lucky enough to get a similar placement, old friends to their best to ease the new one into the community without anybody noticing. It is not unknown for rebooted Re-Genes to regain parts of their memory down the line if prompted, especially lately. Some Re-Genes say that the wipe used to be more complete, or perhaps it is just that they are getting better at figuring how to retrieve what had been lost.

Depending on the circumstances/relationship can Sidestep tease or mock HG and Nocturne for not revealing the truth to the Jake of being red-threaded?

Oh I bet. That won't be a pleasant conversation for anybody involved, and Sidestep can certainly add to the pain there.

How did HG's mother react to the younger sibling's arrest and death?

She was devastated, the sibling was her little baby, born quite later than the others. Her husband died not long after, so the Sibling would have filled that hole a lot.

Why was HG secretive of their powers even with their family?

For a long time it was simply because HG didn't understand them. It's not something that's easy to figure out, but once they did, they thought that secrecy was best. Even if HG loved their family, it was too easy to imagine how every act of theirs would now be suspect if anybody knew the truth. Secrecy was better.

So HG is a high ruthless person so I'm wondering can they be impressed/disturbed by even more ruthless Sidestep?

Oh yes. The gives-no-fucks contrarian/ruthless/murdering Sidestep can get quite high HG-rep.

Will Jake ever get to see his family again?

I don't know.

If the younger sibling had survived would they had helped with the crime family business or would they have wanted to be independent? How would have HG reacted if they wanted to strike out on their own?

It is purely speculative, and I think it would have varied between Siblings. As it was, when they died they wanted to be a part of the family business, but they also had issues with authority and wanting to do things their way. It could have gone either way as they went into their late teens. HG would have allowed a little rebellion, but becoming a threat? Hmmm... that would have to be fixed.

How would Regina react to High Ruthless Sidestep? Can we make her truly fearful of sidestep?

Oh yes. Right now she feels like she would have an edge on Sidestep when they meet again (for various secret reasons), but when/if she realizes exactly what Sidestep has become, she would be terrified of some of them. But, once again, it would vary on playthrough.

How would Sidestep mindscape looked like before HB and after? '

That is up to headcanon since Sidesteps are so different from each other. But I would say that after HB, whatever landscape was there before would be cracked and broken, filled with holes and corridors, like someone smashing a mirror that kept reflecting nightmares back.

Can Sidestep grow aware of being Red-threaded? Depending on their bond with HG how much can sidestep's feeling vary?

Yes, Sidestep can pick things up after a while if they are clever and are put in situations that would strain the bond. Sidestep has a very fractured mind that is hard to thread for an extended period of time.

I'm not sure yet, but I think the bond can vary between found family, and mortal enemy.

Did Sidestep call other re-genes their sibling after escaping or is that something they learned during their cuckoo days?

The concept of siblings is something they learned during their cuckoo days in order to fit better into human society. It was natural to think of their batchmates that way, but how wide that term will go can vary. Some Sidesteps might see every Re-Gene as that, while others might have reserved that for the ones from the same batch, who is long gone by now.

Is it possible to see HG mindscape in book 3?

Yes, things like that are not dependent on having done it in book two.

do you have any though what were HG younger sibling's last coherent thoughts?

No idea.

Malin have you watched/read Naoki Urasawa's Monster series? If not I recommend to watch it!

I have not, but I will check it out!

In Rebirth during the acquisition of rat king MC thinks they would have preferred to let the rangers deal with Psychopathor instead of the special directive if they hadn't pulled the shenanigans with Argent. So let's imagine an AU where MC decides to get the rat king before nanovore and calls the rangers about psychopath. What would happen? Considering it would probably be an all hands on deck mission all the ranger would have attended? Would MC be spotted or identified by one of the rangers?

The Rangers would have been able to take down Psychopathor. Chen would have made the call to have Argent frontline that with his support. Ortega and Herald would have been told to deal with the Wolf Pack, which would have annoyed Ortega a LOT. Argent would have thought it would be easy, but it would have been surprisingly hard since the Rat King would have really messed up her technopathy and able to read the armor. So she would have made the decision to cut away the plasma rifle early, giving Sidestep the same opportunity.

Sidestep would have been the most worried about Ortega spotting them since the unreadable mind is annoying, but Ortega would have been too focused on taking care of the Wolfpack early to get the final blow on Psychopathor once Argent had breached the armor. The one who would have possibly spotted Sidestep would be Herald, which would lead to some juicy clues in that direction.

What happened to psychopther after he was caught by the special directive?

Spoilers. You will learn.

Not sure if this question is too spoilery: what's going to be in the Rebirth update?

A ton of minor bug/language fixes, some expansions on character creation options, some small extensions/choices in certain scenes and hopefully a similar save system.

Any book/comic/manga you had as an inspiration for this story, when you first started writing fallen hero?

Yes, my partner's superhero comic script. Still unpublished (and needs a rewrite)

Was it ever shared how exactly Chen landed on Ortega's list of people they've punched for Sidestep?

No, but there could be many options, and might happen again in the future.

Would you ever consider writing any more dark/bad ending snippets like the one you did with Herald on your Tumblr?

Not at the moment, I will be too busy writing the new game!

Will there be more mentions of the piercings Sidestep can have in the story? Specifically the tongue piercing- I only recall Ortega saying how much they like it after kissing in the headquarters

Yeah, I'll try to work that in, but it's really hard to do without it feeling very forced.

Do you have a detailed description of each of the Rangers' uniforms?

Nope, none at all! Just like appearances, it's vague.

Charge is blue and white, with a lightning bolt motif. Steel's armor is bluegrey, the color scene varies with the armor. Argent is pale/pastel/powder blue with bare arms and legs. Herald is indigo blue. And that's it.

Is Sidestep aware that they have the potential to be Heartbreak

I am sure some Sidesteps do, and others repress that knowledge. And some are not on the road to that yet, but are keeping their mental abilities on a safer level.

I love the Rat King; do they each have their own names/do they even want that? Are there individual personalities? What's their favorite thing about Sidestep? Do they have opinions on other characters? Did they have bodies before? How old are they?

They don't have names as we see it, but they have identities and personalities. Once Sidestep starts untangling the various strands in the thought-bubble that is the Rat King, they might want to add names. But that could also be dangerous, since that would threaten the cohesion, which is why it is easier to see them as a whole. Otherwise, madness. But each individual mind has a separate role in the Rat King composite, there is one mind that is more curious and does the scouting bits, one that is more caring and reads emotions and interacts, one that is more aggressive and physical, one that's more protective and one that's cautious and keeps an eye out. It is a bit like how our brain lobes are specialized on different things.

They did have bodies, but very very briefly. They became joined before their eyes opened, and the boost process gave them the senses they recognize as theirs. In a way, the armor is the closest thing to a real body they have. They are older than you'd think, the brains have outlived the normal lifespan of a rat several times over.

One of the things I love most about interactive media is how choices that don't "do" anything—that don't change the story, your stats, or even much flavor text—can be some of the most memorable parts of the experience. Fallen Hero includes a fair deal of this kind of mechanically-neutral interactivity; for instance, the choice of how to greet the Rat King changes a grand total of one (1) sentence, but it's very important to me that we get that choice! Are there any choices like this that you're particularly fond of or think were important to include? Have you ever been surprised by how much readers cared about a seemingly "unimportant" choice?

I think I see things the other way around. I don't see the mechanics as the center, I see the story. And thus, a choice that changes very little and no stats, can be equally important for the story as a choice that adds stats or sets flags. For me, the big difference between them is whether they need to be REMEMBERED by the game or not. Like in the Rat King choice you mentioned, it's not something that needs to be remembered and called back to later in the book. However, it will be remembered in the reader's brain, and set an emotional beat for the rest of the scene.

The reason for ALL the stats, flags and mechanics in the book is to enable me to tailor the story as closely as I can to very variable Sidesteps. There's no building element of making a great character to pass challenges, failure and tragedy is an equally valid story as success and victory. It's just a different one, and the stats are there to find out which story you are making.

No, wait, I lied. There is one other reason for the stats, and that is to surprise you. To make the story feel reactive, like there's life under the hood, and that people do things when you are not looking. Some are pure story stats, like pcv, while others are dual ones.

I can't remember any favorites on the top of my head, but a lot of those are buried in dialogue. I have to admit I was surprised that people noticed and cared, and that was one of the reason why Retribution became so sprawling. Nothing like having people to notice and care about your work for me to want to work even harder.

I was really tickled to discover that the game acknowledges if your character turns out to have the same name as Herald! Did you have any plans to do the same in other characters' introductions/name reveals (e.g., if the MC is named Ximena/Jimena), or is that just not realistic to implement?

Danny was a common enough name that it made sense, but I didn't go around to do it for every single name. Maybe I should have.

Can boosts donate blood? That seems like it **should be disqualifying, but maybe things are different in the wild west?**

Nope, they are not allowed to donate. Though there are Boosts that sell their blood, there is a lucrative market for boosted blood to be used by people who feels that might be a safer way to maybe get powers.

It seems like Hollow Ground always says their "request" out loud when threading someone. If this isn't a spoiler, do their powers depend on the target hearing and understanding the suggestion? (i.e., would it be a problem if they couldn't hear or misunderstood HG's words?) Or is it just HG's intentions that matter?

The words matter, and the target does indeed need to hear and understand the words spoken. It is the words, not the intention that is the trigger.

This is a very silly question, but... what would Hollow Ground have done if the MC chose an outfit with, say, opera gloves? Sighed and revised their dress code instructions for next time? Arranged for the gloves to meet with an unfortunate spilled drink accident on the way in? Found an excuse to touch their guest's face in a totally non-weird manner?

Probably the latter. HG is not worried about leaving a weird or even creepy expression. The threading will take care of that.

Any chance our hero (er, villain) will have occasion to visit a zoo at some point? Or is that basically sensory overload for a telepath?

That might be a bit of a sensory overload. But I think there are not any big zoo's left in Los Diablos, more private collections of rarities by companies or individuals. There is a big aquarium though, and a visit there is planned.

Does Sidestep have issues eating? I imagine the farm didn't teach the re-genes skills like that if not avoiding it all together and having some sort of supplement instead. Would something like that have been noticed since Ortega loves to take them to eat/Elena loves to cook for them?

That is entirely up to the Sidestep. But, Re-Genes are raised on regular if rather bland food, so it wouldn't be a strange experience when leaving the Farm. All the snack foods and alcohol was new though, the concept of candy was a revelation for some.

Would the RO's insist on patching up Step not that they know he's a re-gene? How would it go over if they still refused?

That is something that will happen in game, and like with most things it will be up to choice. Some Sidesteps might get over their bare skin rather quickly when people know their secrets, while others might still have the same hangups.

I believe it was mentioned in a pervious Q&A about the oldest known re-gene/life expectance and that they wouldn't look their age. I perceived that to mean that they would look younger although maybe not FAR younger. If Step at the given age of 30 looked shockingly good given the time passing would Ortega or Chen have made note of it?

I meant it as a comment on the fact that they are decanted as teens. So they are always going to look 12-15 years younger than they day they were "born". After that, they age naturally.

Would Sidestep have ever falsified some sort of family memory/backstory if asked in conversation in the early days, just something on the fly to curb suspicions?

That is up to headcanon. Sidestep could have made up different things each time, just stonewalled, or had a carefully constructed fake alias. That is entirely up to the Sidestep. Maybe there will be a choice to set that in game.

Did Ortega, Chen or Themmy ever witness Step getting out of hand when they were helping on a mission/caught out doing their own vigilante shit? Like just taking a beating a tad too far or almost using a lethal weapon because 'oh shit he dropped his gun- that could end things quick,' type thing?

I can see that for some Sidesteps, especially the ones that have had physical training. But on the other hand, some Sidesteps might have been extremely careful with people's lives and seen them as more worth than their own. So once more, it will vary.

Is Step getting to see their old mug in Ortega's apartment coming for people who didn't do the Ortega Apartment Hangout but *are* on the no leg rights innocent staying in Ortega's apartment pathing?

Oh yes. Like many of the one-shot things in Retribution, they can be discovered at later points in other paths.

Depending on the puppets training in boxing or aikido, if step frequented the places and is obviously no noob, is it possible Ortega noticed them and was watching the puppet for god knows how long, perhaps out of curiosity and like 'Wow that normal guy/gal is really...would maybe a little scary facing off against someone else..' Lowkey I can see Sidestep garnering a lot of fleeting attention at the gym aside from the puppets attractiveness.

Oh yes. That is one of the reasons that Ortega decided that the puppet might be more than they seem (apart from the Joes visits and rumors). Someone fighting that well, but with a style that was not clean/sporty, but very much tinged with experience in real fighting.

Ortega- putting those fingers in his mouth AGAIN. Does this man have an oral fixation or is he just trying to catch Step off-guard? (As if he has to try that hard)

Ortega does indeed love to put things in their, and in other's mouths. But let's be honest here, half of it is also trying to make Sidestep crack...

If Sidestep starts hanging out with or building a friendship/romantic relationship with the other Rangers besides Ortega how do they feel about the relationship development given how much effort it took Ortega to befriend Step?

Ortega wouldn't feel bad about it. The current Sidestep is very different from the skittish, near feral person that Ortega befriended back in the day. In fact, Ortega would probably feel a bit proud. Not that they'd ever say that, because that would be very condescending...

Given it's possible to end Retri exposed as the villain or draw the attention of the Farm and there are a few instances where Sidestep muses that if things go sideways they could abandon their civilian life. Even though it's unlikely the ROs will let Sidestep succeed would there be an option to attempt?

For revealed Sidesteps there definitely would be decisions to make, much like when you can choose to abandon the puppet apartment in one of the paths due to the risks involved in keeping it with the puppet becoming a suspect. To what extent the RO's will accept being ghosted will vary, especially depending on their reaction to Sidestep being the villain. Revelations will have a lot more content on the villain side, and it is possible some Sidesteps will try to break any contact that is not adversarial.

In endings where Step is exposed as the villain and told Argent at the auction with a high relationship she doesn't confront you at the hospital. In this case what is her plan if Step has the regenerator?

Argent has plans... and you will learn about them in Revelations. If their relationship is not bad she has enough time to think about things and go about it the smart way. Confronting Sidestep at the hospital and scar them or worse was not smart and will put her in a bad position with the rest of the team.

If Ortega had told Chen their theory about Sidestep being related to HG in the past (or a version that implied Step had criminal family given Steel doesn't believe in HG) would that have effected Chen's suspicions of Step?

Yes, that would have filled in a lot of question marks for Chen, and he would probably have agreed with Ortega's assessment. However, he would still have been "wtf are you doing, this is not a safe person to have associated to the team" which would have led to a similar behavior towards Sidestep.

And given that Sidestep is not as good an actor in hiding their poor mental health and the HB scar acts as a facet of their trauma/mental health, how evident is high/low HB scar value to other characters?

I would say it is a lot more obvious to Ortega and Chen, who has a Sidestep from before to compare to. Daniel knows something is wrong with high scar Steps, but only has his own golden view of the past to compare to, so his assessment is off. Argent gets vibes, more or less rancid ones.

Why is heartbreak called heartbreak?? (both the incident and the person).

It was coined by the media, because the incident happened close to Valentine's day, and included many people taking their own lives. Bear in mind, the media often uses it as the "heartbreak attack" because the official version is that¹³ it was a terrorist plot that went out of hand. Only the Rangers and other people with clearance uses the term Heartbreak for the person behind it. In fact, the official term is "UBI-131402" (unknown boost incident 2013 02 14), Heartbreak is just easier to say.

How long was heartbreak's journey until they got to the building?

Long. From outside of California. It took a long time before their powers started overloading to the extent of affecting people that badly, so it's only as they approached that the effects became impossible to ignore.

Was heartbreak a human or a regene?

Human.

if word got out that hollow ground was a telepath, would the farm show interest/try to go after them?

Oh yes, 100%.

did the heartbreak experiment have anything to do with the core?

Yes. Not saying what though.

did heartbreak have anything to do with the void/green sky before the experiment??

Nope. None at all.

what was heartbreak's civilian life like? did they have a family?

Yes, they had a family, and a pretty nice life. Not going into details, because you might be able to find out more in Revelations.

did the farm perform the heartbreak experiment on sidestep??

Hehehehe. Not gonna answer that.

if sidestep stuck a post-it note drawing of a dick on ortega's conspiracy board how would they take it?

Probably be very amused, and incorporate it in the plots just to see what Sidestep says/does the next time they come around. Things like "a thread connecting the post-it-dick to Hollow Ground, with a smaller note saying 'HG's real identity?'"

was there something else in heartbreak's mind during the heartbreak incident? another passenger?

That's a nice way of putting it.

did any of the rangers visit sidestep's grave?? did any visit regularly???

Ortega visits a lot. Chen visited on occasion. Sentinel visited often at the start, but not lately. Ashfall visited until he moved to SF.

What does ratkingspoon mean?

In certain paths, you have the option of being suspicious of Chen's phonecall post crash, and bring the Rat King with you to meet with him. If you follow back to Chen's apartment, this means that the Rat King will meet and interact with Spoon. This is a tag for the future so I can see if they have met.

mortum mentions that being a mod is painful, is ortega or chen addicted to any pain medicine like they say?

Neither of them would say they are. With Chen, I can sort of agree. He does his best to keep the dose low, and for the bad days. He works hard on handling any strain and discomfort by detaching mods and getting around in his wheelchair while at home. He mostly uses medication after battles/injuries/more stressful actions than normal. If he retired, he feels he wouldn't need them more than any regular person with body issues that sometimes acts up.

Ortega on the other hand might be addicted. Unlike Chen, they can't really stop using their mods. No, that's not entirely true. It is possible for Ortega (especially in the past) to go into power save mode, and let their body relax from the strain. But since that would mean they'd need a wheelchair and acknowledgment of their own mortality, that was only done out of necessity and at a hospital. Ortega hated it, and would rather suffer through the discomfort. These days, with the internal plasma generator, the process of disconnecting is a lot more complex. The generator doesn't stop, so the power still needs to be siphoned off somewhere. There's no relaxation. So Ortega self-medicates in two ways. Using their body, experiencing physical discomfort and even pain feels better than rest, so Ortega tends to work themselves to the bone rather than taking a nap. However, flesh is flesh, and Ortega is getting older, and the temptation to dull the myriad aches and pains with medication is very strong. They would say they're not addicted, it's all doctor's prescriptions, but well... we all know that's not entirely true in how they are used.

what kind of branches exist within the special directive besides the farm??

I would see it as a triangle. On one corner is the Farm, the supply source, the science center, the brain. On the top is the Special Directive, the active hand, the outward force. On the last corner is the Directorate, which is very small and the part that interacts with the US government. It's usually not more than three people plus their staff. The Cuckoo project is a part of the Special Directive.

are psychics and telepaths the same thing?? what are their differences, if they have any????

I would call telepaths a subclass of Psychics. Psychics is a blanket term for boost powers that involves the mind, with few changes to the physical bodies. Telepaths narrow this down to reading/influencing the mind of another person.

Ace would be in the psychic class with their precognition, as would Argent with her technopathy. Someone with the power to influence dreams might be an edge case, they might be classified as a telepath depending on the details of their power use. Interestingly enough, there are also psychics who are not boosts, and who have existed before the boost drugs were discovered.

who bought the building after the heartbreak incident?

It was bought by a series of development companies, but none of them managed to do anything with the site. It currently lies in escrow, and there are no plans of further development until certain things have been cleared up.

when dr mortum mentions that the prototype regenerator is black tech for a reason, what kind of consequences are they talking about? consequences to the user?

Hehe. Oh you will learn all about that in game.

what was anathema's opinion on the catastrofiend??

A horrifying monster, and an illustration of what can go wrong if you follow certain drives to the end.

About argent, does her family have any boosting??? did she recieve any type of medical procedure before hand??? a transfusion or transplant??? was she already a technopath before her accident, or born a technopath???

Argent's family is very normal, no boosts there. She didn't have any special medical procedures done as child, just normal stuff like appendix removal. She had not noticed her technopath abilities until the nanosurge.

can the regenerator be used to grow back entire limbs? would chen want to use it?

It is unclear at present. You don't know the extent of the regenerator, other than it apparently can repair skin. Chen would be undecided. There is already the possibility with a lot of money to have organic transplants, but with things like hands or legs, there's no guarantee they'd work better than the mechanical ones, even though they would look more pleasing to the eye.

Can sunstream fly?

Yes, by surrounding herself with her powers. Faster than Danny, but a lot less maneuverable. It takes a lot out of her.

Would Jake be able to access the same "dimensions" the void used?

What makes you sure he doesn't already?

How would Sidestep's nightmares affect their love interests individually if in close proximity to them?

That is something you will have to find out in game.

What kind of pet would the love interests be interested in taking care of if they could?

Chen likes dogs, as we know. Ortega doesn't think they could be responsible for a pet, but loves horses. Danny would have a cat, but likes all animals. Argent won't have more pets, but if she could, it might be a really spoiled ferret. I think Mortum might be a rat person.

would spoon get nightmares if we stayed with Chen??

No, dogs dream on a different wavelength.

Ortega's mind is completely walled from telepathy, but walls can only go so high, if a telepath was powerful enough could they peak over that wall? or is it not a wall and it's a genuine obscurity

A powerful telepath could break through, but navigating that shit is hard!

Does Mortum know anything about the heartbreak experiment?

Yes. Not much, but some parts.

Has Sentinel ever done sniping jobs back when he was a ranger?

Now that's a question that might be hard to answer, he would certainly never admit to it.

Does the shooting at the diner still happen if the puppet doesn't go? Does Ortega go alone?

Ortega goes alone, the event still happens.

Does Sentinel keep in touch with Ortega and/or Chen?

Yes, not on a daily basis, but they are still friends.

Was Sentinel ever aware of the farm's existence?

Hmmm. I don't think so.

What's Sentinel's opinion on Regenes? Has he ever worked with them in the past?

Sentinel knows about Re-Genes, and sees the whole thing as supremely fucked up. He hasn't worked closely with them, but he has seen them in action.

How about Sentinel's opinion on Hollow Ground?

A myth by people who like to invent conspiracies to explain the world.

Has Sentinel been threaded by Hollow Ground?

Well... at least in the past, yes.

Did Sentinel keep his wingsuit after he retired, or did the government take it back?

Sentinel kept all his stuff, and he's got other things these days. He's still active when it comes to disaster relief and things like that, so he needs them.

Where was Sentinel when Hood was killed?

Off on a mission.

where was sentinel when chen was shot? was he already retired by then?

Sentinel was in the last days of active duty then. He was off on a mission, and in the process of negotiating his retirement since new members were coming in.

Is it possible to have a—positive is a strong word LMAO but a relationship with the imposter that is not antagonistic/can become so? The second, more indulgent, could we perhaps engage in rescuing our RO as a villain at some point 🙏. Thank you! I hope you have a good trip.

There are positive outcomes possible with the imposter, but much will depend on exactly what is in there. As for rescuing the RO as a villain, that is a classic, isn't it? It would be sweet.

Would Ortega (or any of the Rangers, really) join a Sidestep that has killed if they agree with their general goal, even if it's just to hold them back from killing even more?

Yes.

-One of the earlier Q&A's mentioned one of HG's older brother's had taken the boost drug and died from it, if the answer still remains true, would his powers have been along the same lines as HG's or different if he had survived?

It is true, and it is difficult to discern what they would have been. Most likely they would have been different, since his body couldn't handle the strain and tore itself apart in the process. That's usually not the case for mental powers.

-What kind of powers would the mob boss crew gain if they were to take the boost drug?

Hmmm, that would be a bit of a lottery. Think Ward would be physical/fighty, Nehal flight/travel, Pelayo physical/ranged and ZaZa i get the feeling might get something weird.

-Thunderhead and HG, if they used their powers on each other, which of their powers would have worked faster?

Thunderhead has the range there, HG is touch only. And she's more powerful.

-What would Thunderhead and HG have made of each other, considering their powers are along the same lines?

Thunderhead would have exterminated HG like the cockroach they are. HG would have had Thunderhead shot from a range where she couldn't feel it coming.

-Is it possible for the mob boss crew to betray Sidestep? And would that occur in book 3 or 4? If the crew were to betray Sidestep, would they still stick together as a team?

I mean... I do keep track of certain stats, yes. Things can happen. They have grown to like each other, so might continue to stick together.

-How does Nocturne feel about anarchist Sidestep potentially agreeing to work with HG, considering she thought anarchists to be dangerous and risky?

She wouldn't be happy, but better keep them close so she can influence them to act according to her wishes.

-Wild shot in the dark: but could the Crack be HG's younger sibling all grown up or is the sibling very much dead?

Nope. The sibling is dead.

-What memories did Shroud catch from Ace when she devoured their mind?

All of them, but in a jumbled up stew.

-Did Lady Argent have any particular hero she liked or looked up to while growing up?

Yes. She was a fan of the Long Beach heroes, and Skybright.

-What aspects of herself has Nocturne exactly allowed the red threads to influence?

All her insecurities and fears.

-What is Nocturne attracted to in Jake?

He's actually surprisingly nice once you get close, and very down to earth about a lot of things. He wasn't intimidated by her.

-What has been the most interesting part about creating and developing characters in a story where choices can shape the varying connections/relationships?

That I don't always know what will happen until I write it! I love discovering relationships and interactions! It is so interesting to see the different paths characters can take, and the way their personality can be affected. What sides they show. I see each of them as the main character of their own little story, and it is fun to explore where it might go.

-How did you go about planning and developing the characters story arcs/themes since choices can also shape the characters and their potential paths?

I know the characters and what they want. They each have an arch that will happen unless something influences it. So, every major interaction from Sidestep/the reader influences that arc, and it branches out like a small tree. Some are quite contained, like Chen, while others branch wildly like Argent or Herald. It's a bit like inventing AU's, but they take place in the same story. Fun as hell!

-How would the old man react to HG's/Nocturne's potential deaths or them being taken down? Pleased? Displeased?

Sad. Nervous. Unsure.

-What did HG and Nocturne potentially think or feel if Sidestep didn't shake hands with HG but agreed to HG's offer? Are they hoping it's better luck next time?

Yep, patience is the name of the game. If they work together, chances are Sidestep will let their guard down sooner or later.

-What does Nocturne's instincts say about Mayor Alvarez?

Dangerous. Ambitious. Sharp like a razor. Not sure if she can be used, but if she could, the things they could make together.

-Did the ominous/overwhelming sun in Norma Lee's painting remind Herald of his older brother?

Yes. Very much so.

-One of the New Years "Cursed Facts" mentioned that Mortum would love to run a villain gossip column, what kind of gossips would Mortum write if they didn't have the self-preservation to withhold from doing it? Are there any particular villains Mortum would especially have interesting gossip on?

Mortum knows a lot of things that goes on behind the scenes. It's like remaining sober at the office party and watching everyone get drunk and make fools of themselves and then keeping tabs of it in case of future need. A column would be a lot of personal gossip, talk of failures people have covered up, intrigues and stuff. Taking down pompous fakes.

-Did the younger sibling feel stifled by HG's protective streak?

Yes. Especially at that edge.

-Herald is mentioned to have faith in people, how much faith do the rest of the Rangers and Dr. Mortum have on people?

Chen has more faith than he thinks he does. Argent has little faith, but a bone-deep conviction that people can change if given the motivation. Herald has a lot of faith, which is not a surprise. Mortum is very cynical, but has a need to be able to trust people that they have not managed to excise. Ortega is the one who has the least faith, they think most people are shit, so they need to take care of the ones that are not.

-What would HG's family have made of Sidestep?

Oldest brother would be a bit impressed and also wary. The other one who died would have been suspicious and confrontational. The mother would have liked them.

-What kind of "mental images" or memories have HG's parents left in HG's mind?

Maybe you'll find out. It was mostly a good relationship though.

-What would HG's father had thought of HG becoming the kingpin?

Proud, wouldn't have thought HG had it in them.

-How well-known are Vera and Sky-Raider in the villain/hero circles?

Pretty well known, neither of them are new, they have been around for years. Solid midlist villains that are smart enough not to go out with a bang but get the job done.

-Sky-Raider seemed to be familiar with Dr. Mortum through business, does Vera have any connections with any of the characters introduced so far in the game?

Sky-Raider has worked with Mortum a lot, they are not super close, but could perhaps be called friends. Mortum also knows Vera, but they are a lot more suspicious about her motivations for interactions. She can be a bit of a magpie, and Mortum has a lot to steal. Vera also often works with HG, is sort of a rival to Herald, and has had interactions with Owl and the Handyman. Chen knows about Sky-Rider but they have not fought, same with Ortega. Herald had a fight with Sky-Raider when he was a company hero, it was more of a draw. Ortega has talked to and fought Vera on more than one occasion. They have fun fighting.

Do either Vera or Sky-Raider attend the annual villain parties or do they prefer their privacy?

Oh yes, neither of them are too private.

One Q&A mentioned Nocturne theorized HG's powers could help her survive the boost drug, if HG was actively using their powers while Nocturne took the boost drug, did their powers somehow influence/affect, to a limited degree, some aspects of Nocturne's powers as well?

That is hard to determine, it is possible but Nocturne doesn't think so.

I've been reading the old Lores posts and wanted to say that Ortega's point of view is incredibly interesting. I know there is no canon way that Sidestep's face/identity is revealed but could we in the future (Patreon Or game) have Ortega's point of view of what he thought after the reveal? The paranoia growing without him being sure if it was a coincidence or not, the conflicting feelings of liking Step too much but at the same time thinking he is a relative and connected to one of the most dangerous crime organizations in the city. How was the internal dialogue with himself? what was it like to deal with the feeling (platonic and romantic) of wanting step in their lives despite everything?

Honestly, that sounds really interesting. We will deal a bit with it in Revelations, but I will probably write an Ortega POV in the future, but it will be a long time off since I want to keep some secrets for Revelations.

Can we dethread Jake or Mortum in Book 3?

Yes, there will be opportunities for that.

In Book 3 Can we reclaim our body If we stuck as puppet?

Yes, that will be possible.

If in book 3 we stuck as puppet. Can we still gain precognition stat?

Oh yes, at that point you might really need it.

Ortega said that they won't lose Sidestep again in Hospital ending (If Sidestep stuck as puppet and Mortum help them kidnap their body) What do they mean ? Is it mean that they won't lose leak to HG or they just worry about Sidestep ? or both ?

That will be dependent on Ortega's relationship to Sidestep. In most cases it will be worry for Sidestep, but even if a lot of bridges have been burned, there's still trauma there. Even if they are enemies now, Ortega still watched Sidestep fall to their "death" and they don't want that to happen again. Ortega wants a resolution this time, not an absence. That would destroy them.

Considering how far AIs and robotics have come along-Step/Ortega/Chen, how come that Sidestep is not more paranoid about spy drones and surveillance cameras? Sidestep could easily obfuscate someone's impression of themselves to be of a different person, say a hotel front desk, but the cameras in the concierge will have captured their faces/figures right?

Well, we can easily argue that sidestep Should be more concerned about this, but depending on their telepathy has made them lazy in some respects. It's easy to imagine that you know everything when you can read the minds around you. However, there is actually a lot less surveillance in LD than you'd think. With the strong privacy laws against unwanted photography, most normal businesses won't have cameras or access to spydrones. Things like stores, gas stations and hotels won't have the surveillance cameras we know from our world, and everybody having a cellphone in their pocket to record things is not a thing. Everywhere the public can go unrestricted is mostly safe.

Surveillance is a threat in places like closed company compounds and government offices, but Sidestep mostly goes there as the villain. When they have to, they usually dress nondescript and keep their head down. The "don't notice me" hunch works somewhat on cameras, at least if you don't know what/who you are watching for. Drones would be a threat, and perhaps Sidestep should be more careful about it. So far they have been relying on their instincts to know when they are watched, but with an operator far enough away that might be problematic.

Another related question would be that given how sneaky Ortega is, how come they haven't sic a miniature camera drone (shaped like a bird or a fly etc) or something to the likes of that and follow Sidestep straight to their villainous base already? A telepath can't sense a drone right?

What makes you think they haven't? But, in more serious notes, Ortega might have to bring in someone else to help with that. Exterior electronics doesn't survive long around Ortega, as their insulated brick of a phone shows. Piloting a delicate drone for an extended period of time would not work. So, it would all depend on whether Ortega trusted someone else enough to actually help with this.

Also semi related, how connected are the people to the internet? Aka personal computers, smart phones, smart appliances/everything being connected to the internet/public wifi network in Fallen Hero? And how far are the non-general AIs along, aka the non sapient cousin of Sidestep? How powerful is the equivalent of Google Maps/Siri/chatGPT in this world?

The internet is a lot less far along in the FH world. Since there was no space race (instead cybernetic/power armor), the first satellites were launched in the late nineties, and were mostly under military control. There was no shared world wide web launched by universities, instead it was a more controlled corporate landscape that formed. The internet for the regular net surfer in FH is similar to what it was in the nineties, but with better graphics. Things like a PS5 level of game system is common, while a World of Warcraft like MMO has not been made yet. Something cool and high tech to play in your room, on a lan with friends, or on your local intranet is common but to connect with others across the world? Nope.

So, there are no smart phones, there are mobile phones used for calls. There are personal computers, but if you want to connect somewhere cool it's like going on the dark web. You need to know what you're doing, and have some faintly illegal tech to be safe. There is no public wifi, most is cable. That is a lot easier for companies to control. If you live in LD, chances are you buy your access to the corporate internet from one of three providers. That means you can't easily connect to providers on the other nets, because the companies have an interest in keeping you trapped in their infrastructure. Think Explorer Vs Netscape for browsers, but with internets instead.

Things like GPS and commercial versions of stuff like google maps is new and not as good as today, it depends on access to satellites only recently available to companies. A lot is static and downloaded, not constantly updated with real time positioning. There is a tech revolution brewing here if satellite tech gets more widespread, and there's a fight between companies that wants to stop that because it threatens their control, and others that wants it because if they are early adopters they can take over.

AI is more advanced than today, but again it is concentrated to large companies, the military and government. This is not something Joe average will interact with, these are things that runs stock trading, battleships and drug research programs.

In summary, in our world there is not very much of a tech divide between people in the USA. Yes, companies have larger, faster and better things, but a normal person still have a smartphone and uses the internet in their daily life. In the FH world the infotech divide is as big as the economic divide is in our USA. Most people haven't been online much, cellphones are common, but not everywhere.

What age was Sidestep when they were decanted? The books mention teenager I believe but I was just curious if you could give a specific age?

It is up to headcanon. I would say between 11-16 is the widest stretch, but the middle of that is the most common.

Will it be possible to get a 'bad' ending in book 3 where Sidestep can die before book 4?

I am considering it. It will likely not happen, but who knows? I wouldn't rule it out.

Will we get to see more of romanced Danny being protective of Sidestep in book 3? I love that that sweet Flyboy.

Oh yes, unless you have managed to turn him against you... that might be a not so sweet Danny anymore.

- When you try to dethread Chen while you are exhausted, you collapse. If you brought the Rat King with you, the scene says "[...] He's surrounded by a ghostly halo of worried rats". Was Chen able to feel the Rat King when that happened?

I think so. But I don't think he understood what it was, and most likely saw it as just an hallucination.

- What kind of tea(s) does Chen drink? It was mentioned when you go over to his apartment he offers you something like jasmine tea.

Jasmine, various greens, white tea when feeling fancy, black tea like Assam when he's working late. The latter can upset his stomach though. He tends to the more subtle flavors, not loud and fruity. No sugar, no milk.

- Not sure if you answered this and no need to since it might be spoiler-y, but will we get a chance to befriend Ace?

That will be an option.

My questions for you are on the processes that you go through with writing. How do you set yourself up for success?

Focus on finishing things. Most people think their work is no good and keep rewriting the start. Don't do that. Continue writing and finish the story, then rewrite, or write another one. And connected to that, focus on shorter works first and not your nine volume epic. This is THE most important piece of advice I can give. Learn to **finish** things. Everything else can come later.

And how do you recognize that your writing something you can utilize and something that strayed from the original thought? I'm curious to know what you think/do with your writing when suddenly your 2000 words deep into something that should probably be put on the side?

Here is the thing. It depends on how your brain works. For example, if you are a planner, and have planned your story beforehand, that might mean that you need to adjust your plans. Take a moment to sit down and think. Is what you have written something that works within your plans with some adjustment? If so, fine. Is it so out left field that it would change the entire story? Then you have a choice to make. Do you like what you have written more than the story you had planned? Then sit down and change the story, and try to figure out where things will go. Do you like it, but it doesn't fit? Cut it out, put it in a blank document named something so you can easily find it again, and go back to your proper story. The other one can be made into their own thing eventually. I have lots of those snippets, as I call them.

However, if you are a pantsier (someone that has a vague plan but mostly goes with the flow), good! That means that your brain is going somewhere. Go as far as you can until you run out of juice. And when you look at it, try to figure out if this is something you want to continue on. If not, read back to the last point where you get the right feeling. Maybe you have to cut the last few paragraphs when things got stale and your brain was winding down.

In the end, it comes from experience, and learning to recognize what is fun to write and how to keep writing that and turning it into a story rather than forcing yourself to write things you feel should be there but are boring to do.

Hopefully that's not an unfair question to ask, I sometimes attempt to write but often think I'd rather read on how other people structure lol.

I love talking about writing. I can do it all day.

Hi! As an aroace I naturally gravitate to stories of difficult friendships, camaraderie forged in fire, and blood brotherhood almost above anything else. Now FH has the "difficult" part down to a T, and that's already such an amazingly rare thing in IF that I really can't thank you enough. It's my lifeblood. But after reading the Void series I can't help but wonder if it will ever be possible for Sidestep's current reluctant acceptance of friendship to mature into a more mutual, proactive commitment? "We're in this for life", "I would follow you to hell and back", or even a simple but honest declaration of "I want to help you"?

Yeah, I think so! Like always it will depend on path and choice, but I for one want to write a path where Sidestep finally goes all in and accepts that yeah, this is it. I can truly trust someone. Difficulties is nothing without a payoff.

Weirdly enough, I'm super interested in the character you named Verdant (plant growth and healing powers are the two powers I'd choose if I got super powers): Is there a 'known' black market trade (besides the military-sponsored one) in trafficking boosts with super-specific abilities that people with enough power or money might want to take advantage of on an individual scale? (Is that what happened to the telepaths?)

There is indeed a known black market, mostly for things like boosted blood, and sometimes organs and bodyparts. But, now and then, useful boosts can be caught alive and trafficked for various purposes. This is indeed what has happened to the telepaths.

Just finished my fifth playthrough and i gotta give u props on how detailed and rich the story is. The more times i immerse myself in the universe, the more questions i get. In the best way possible. So many questions for the series future.

1. In book 1, after villain debut. Ortega mentions about wanting to work with other heroes. Unfortunately, they don't make the squad(some get picked up by the army). Will we be able to hear from them again?

Most likely, yes.

2. I get found out as the bad guy .While hospitalized, Lady Argent takes my eye. Will i be able to get revenge on her?

Of course! This is a story about revenge, what is adding one more thing to the list?

3. Will we ever get our puppet to use the armor in the future?

Yes. I was debating doing that in Retribution, but that scene got cut for Revelations.

4. Will there be a situation where the puppet get "memory wiped" to avoid suspension? Or to make Morton angry at the MC(im evil that way)

That is indeed one way to solve this bloodlessly.

5. Is the puppet boosted?

Oh yes, they are.

-I desperately want a sidestep hoodie! Is producing merch something you might consider in the future?

I have been considering it, but it's a big thing. I might look into it once I have time.

-Do you have any tips on FINISHING a project? The last 10% always seems to take forever...

Just do it. Do it crappy. Do it sloppy. Do it badly. Don't worry if there is a payoff. Don't worry if the questions are answered. Just write those annoying words. Then, wait a couple of weeks and reread everything from the start to end. Chances are you will be able to spot what is missing from the ending then. You can't write a good ending on the first draft, if it happens, be grateful, but don't count on it. Just get it done so you can see the whole thing or move on.

-Would Ace's precognition allow them to see if a person would survive a dose of the hero drug? Could sidestep ever be desperate enough to take a second dose willingly?

I think Ace might be able to get some clues on high precognition, at least if the boosting will affect them. That's a lot of the limits on Ace's power, it's very focused on their own experiences. I doubt Sidestep would try to get boosted again, but who knows?

-What's on Ortega's birthday wish list?

That Sidestep remembers this time.

- I was reading through some of the prior threads, and was confused, why is Sidestep sometimes referred to as HG's younger siblings? I noticed questions tend to have that assumption, is that confirmed or head-Canon?

Ortega thinks that Sidestep is HG's younger sibling, and think they have proof of it. However, Sidestep is a Re-Gene. How these two mutually exclusive things can be put together is something you'll learn in Revelations.

- Can Step actually... Become Ace? Like, ditch their original body entirely? I have 2 Steps who would want to do so due to wanting a real chance at a 'fresh start.' If so, is a requirement of that the loss of their telepathy?

I have been so tempted. However, I don't think even I could handle the amount of variables that will entail for future books. However, I might write in proper endings for certain paths in Book three, for people who wants to do things like that. I truly don't know yet, it is something that needs a lot of work, and I don't know if I can do it and it would be good. But if they did, they would lose their telepathy.

- I assume this one is spoilers, but can a Step who made HG think they are dangerous still gain their trust against a common enemy?

Yes. Just because you're dangerous doesn't mean you are untrustworthy.

Hello! I was wondering why Ortega calls Sidestep to the hospital after the accident!

Hehe. Well. I am not sure how much you have learned in the game, but Ortega believes that Sidestep is HG's younger sibling. And Ortega just crashed while escaping from HG's club where there had been a planned meeting between HG and the new villain... So there can be many reasons. Maybe Ortega figured that the best way to avoid any further attack would be to have someone there that HG didn't want hurt. Maybe they wanted to see if Sidestep would slip up and know something, either about HG, or the new villain. Especially if Ortega's clues about Sidestep's activities are high... Or perhaps Ortega just likes/loves Sidestep and wanted to see them after nearly getting killed. Lots of variables there.

If you decide to pursue the Herald romance route while also romancing Ortega, Herald makes several mentions of not wanting to be 'that guy'. What guy?? What is he talking about?

The "other man", the one getting between Sidestep and Ortega. He's very aware that he's the new kid on the block, and don't want to break up what Ortega and Sidestep has. His biggest issue is that he has a hard time understanding what that is exactly...

How's the gaming industry in FH? Do consoles such as Game boy or Nintendo 64 exist, or more advanced? How popular is it?

Consoles are graphically as advanced as the PS5 and other modern ones, but with very little online connectivity. There it's more like it was in the PS1 days, games are self-contained or on the same telly multiplayer.

Is Dr Mortum named himself after Caput Mortuum or is it something else?

Hehe good spot! That is indeed one of the inspirations, it is a play on death, with teacher replacing head and some easier spelling. It's a bit of a symbol of dr. Mortum creating themselves from nothing, what you can learn from the smallest and most useless things in life.

Will trans Sidesteps be able to pursue bottom surgery in future books?

Not sure about the timeline, it might be possible.

Second question: In a particular path of Retribution, we can see the Rat King piloting our armour on their own and doing a pretty damn good job of it. In the future books, is something that can be explored further, and if so, will we have to have seen it in Retribution to pursue it further?

Yes, it will be able to be explored further. But it can also be discovered in book three, you don't have to have seen it in book two.

Is anything retained after a regene gets reset/wiped? Like muscle memory/reflexes or anything like that?

Yeah, things like that remains, it is mostly the higher memory functions that are affected.

Do scars go 'through' regene tattoos as well, or do they get broken up by the tattoos? Or is it that the scarring has to be pretty extreme to show on the tattoos as well?

The scarring has to be extreme to show, otherwise the tattoo will indeed heal over the scar, leaving the tattoo smooth and the scar visible on either sides. The scar needs to go under the skin and into the flesh for that to happen.

Do you have an idea of if there will be a scene/scenes of a genderquestioning Sidestep experimenting with presentation/etc before doing anything more 'official' like coming out/medically transitioning/etc? Or will that be more headcanon/fanfic territory?

I don't know yet, but I can imagine that would be good. Might make for good scenes!

In the same vein, will a genderquestioning Sidestep be able to discuss it with other characters (or discuss it more, with Mortum)?

Yeah, that would definitely be something you can talk about with people close to you.

Will it be possible to romance Argent without revealing our villain identity in the future?

Hmm, I don't know. Sidestep the person isn't really Argent's type, but I can't rule it out. We will see. Sidestep needs to find some way of showing Argent that they are still dangerous.

Also, what's the difference between the 'amiable' and 'respectful' relationships with Argent in how she thinks about/treats the MC?

Amiable is that Argent likes Sidestep and isn't annoyed by them. Respectful is that she realizes that Sidestep is not just a has-been, and actually competent.

And in the trans reveal with a highly suspicious Ortega, what were they planning on doing/saying if the MC had actually confessed to being the villain?

I haven't written it, so I have no idea!

Did Sidestep learn how to play instruments at the farm?

Some might have, that is up to headcanon. Things like piano might have been good for infiltration.

Why are cuckoos created with tattoos that span most of their bodies? I know they don't have them everywhere to facilitate infiltration but they still cover a lot of the body and in a place as hot as Los Diablos they might have been considered to cause more suspicion.

The need to keep the cuckoos uncomfortable and aware of their own inhumanity overrides any practicality in this matter. In fact, that they could not dress like others is a good thing. Think of people in service jobs in hot climates, they can't strip down to shorts and bare arms regardless of comfort.

What inspired you to create Ortega? Maybe an old question but I think Ortega is the best representation of Latin American culture I've seen and I love it.

I was writing an SF story set after the big one in a ruined Los Angeles, and considering the setting it made sense if looking at population figures. That's the technical explanation. But honestly, I don't know. I often start writing and see what pops in my head, and there was Ortega in that first short story, name and all. Maybe I had read too much Locas. It just made sense.

For a Sidestep who is friendly/helping out with the Rangers, what sorts of things are they helping out with? I've always wondered what that would entail.

For helping out: Things like helping with stakeouts, following people, finding information for streetwise ones, or tech stuff for tech savvy ones. Being a lookout on occasion.

For friendly, just hanging out with people at the HQ, playing chess with Shen or distracting Ortega from being a nuisance to everybody.

What kinds of books does Ortega have on their shelf? Any particular genres or subjects?

Being one of the biggest readers of the cast, what kind of books does Ortega like to read?

Lots of mysteries and thrillers. Bunch of classics. Much in Spanish, some in English. Also facts, sociology, criminology, history, political analysis... lots of weird shit.

If Chen had somehow discovered the truth about Sidestep before HB would he have been as sympathetic as he is in the present, or would he have felt vindicated in his suspicion and jump to the worst conclusion?

He would probably have jumped to the worst conclusion.

Does Sidestep know that their nightmares can 'leak' and affect others?

I don't think so. They have avoided sleeping for a while now, shifting into the puppet instead.

Who are typically present during decanting and first assessment(s) of a regene?

A staff of doctors and specialists well experienced in doing these things, as well as a security detail in the background in case things go badly. This might include some trusted Re-Genes with powers useful for keeping things under control. The Re-Genes allowed to be present at these decantings are very respected among the others, because they get the privilege of seeing others born.

With sufficient training, could the puppet's precognition be a viable replacement for telepathy for the dodgy, move-predicting 'Sidestep' fighting style? (Substituting surface-thought skimming with quick precog flashes)

Yes, a puppetstuck Sidestep could adapt to that fast once they're good enough precogs. It would feel different, but the reflexes are familiar.

Did Argent find anything at the HB site that piqued her interest into digging further? Did she share her findings with Ortega or Chen?

Yes, but not too deep. And she hasn't shared her findings, they trouble her and reveals too much of her secrets and her past.

In what year did Argent go looking at the HB site? Was this before or after Marek's investigation?

It would have been before I think.

What year did Herald visit the site? Was it while the site was still graffitied or later?

Herald was soon before Marek's investigation, and yes, he saw the graffiti.

What's Deadeye's personal life like?

Pretty much like a classic american gangster movie. She's been in the game a long time, she knows the moves and likes the lifestyle. Lots of time spent at work on in clubs, not much of a social life outside her Deadeye identity.

Is Dr. Finch LGBT+? Do you plan on allowing gender and/or sexuality to come up in future therapy sessions we might see?

Dr. Finch is married, and a lesbian. Not exactly the most trouble-free marriage either, she has her own therapist, and so has her wife. I am not sure if it will come up, it is a possibility, especially for Steps that are not in a position to talk about it with Mortum.

If the new villain is not a known telepath, do the rangers think they're just a trained person with a powersuit, or do they suspect they are boosted/modded?

So far the leading bet would be modded with a powerarmor. That is the most common combination.

Did Angie end up catching the Red Rover, if Sidestep used them as bait?

Yep.

Is the tree and the balloon in it, from rebirth's heartbreak vision, an imagery from the same or different person?

I can't answer this without spoilers I don't want to give.

Assuming Step is a known telepath and is on good terms with Hollow Ground, will the two of them be able to discuss the missing telepaths / deal with the tracker together?

Yes, that would definitely be on the top of their list.

What kind of preparations does Steel have in place for when Resolution 32 falls?

A few. None that he is happy with. It's a massive cloud on the horizon, and he's not sure how to feel about it.

If i remember correctly in the first book you get an achievement by making sidestep and the puppet look like each other is there something not nothing going on there or we are going to see that show up later in book

It's one of what I would call "red herrings". There are a few things like this, whose main purpose is to look significant while there might be other things going on in the background that are more important. I have a few in Rebirth, and some on Retribution. There is some dialogue that goes with it, and some reactions, but there's no dark, deep secret involved. Sometimes people just look similar.

If you had to assign a value to Ortega's Sidestep scar, what would it be at the beginning of Rebirth before they saw sidestep in the diner?

I would say it would be about 70 at that time.

What kind of treats does the Rat-King likes 😊

Adventures! Roof jumping. Running really fast. Hanging out with other rats. Seeing new things and people and animals.

Would Argent's doubts, relationship with the villain, and status within the ranger team impact her decision-making regarding the regenerator (using it or not)?

Yes. This won't be an easy decision for her.

Will Ortega ever talk to Sidestep about their hallucinations of Sidestep during the years they were presumed dead?

Yeah. I think so.

Did hollow ground ever save their youngest sibling from drowning?

Yes. Heh. Good spot.

How would hollow ground have reacted if they saw sidestep's face when they were still pretty young, shortly after first farm escape?

Like they had been slapped in the face. Impossible to ignore.

If Danny has the limp, could the regenerator help him recover full range of strength and mobility?

I think he would manage that better with sticking to the proper exercise and maybe another minor operation.

How do the nanovores get what they need from Argent eating food normally, if they're not directly eating someone?

Warning, this will be slightly gross. The nanovores are not just a coating on Argent's skin, they are replacing several of her bodyparts like eyes, hands and feet. Like colonies of single-cell organisms, they form a complex system, where some of them have penetrated deep into her body. They can absorb nutrients from several points in her digestive system, mostly from the stomach and the rectum. Yes, Argent doesn't need to go to the bathroom. At all.

How long do the effects of numbers last? At what point would it be necessary to take a second dose and are there any short term consequences of double dosing? Is it possible to tw drugs overdose on them?

They last about as long as a normal painkiller, four hours or so. The onset is fast, but the effect peters out at the end, so there will be a long tail of distorted and somewhat readable thoughts at the end. To ensure full coverage, every three hours is recommended. These times will of course be a lot shorter for a strong telepath, there the full effect might be as little as an hour. Migrain is a common sideeffect, almost certain if double dosing or using it too often. The liver also takes a beating, and it's unwise to use them too often. You can overdose, heart arrhythmia is common then, and can lead to death.

Does Step have any gates open that aren't counted in the variable? (Like one from the nanosurge, from heartbreak itself, etc)

Nope. I would say that the nanosured opened the possibility for gates to exist, and Heartbreak and the events afterwards were the reason the gates need to be shut.

One thing I find interesting about Argent and Sidestep is the parallel between the two. Both have issues with their own skin (Sidestep being a ReGene and Argent's skin being nanovores), both are loners, and (depending on Sidestep's goals) both want a way to change their current situation to achieve a more normal life (Argent and Sidestep want regenerator for the same reason).

My question is: Have you thought about these parallels between them since book 1?

Yes, that is a similarity that has been there from the start. Argent's birth coincided with Sidestep's greatest moment. They are tied in ways they never realized.

Does sidestep have a farm scar?

Sidestep IS a farm scar.

Did Mortum try to research the puppets background prior to being requested to look into Shroud? If so what did they find?

Yes, when they were first contacted they did that. They didn't find anything untoward, Sidestep had crafted the background well.

Okay Malin.. here's a self indulgent one, and I know it's always a bit headcanony-y and dependent on the writing etc, but--based on the game stats in some hypothetical where they would have one, if you were to Build-a-Puppet for the main cast (Rangers + Mortum), what kind of Puppet would each of them get? same / opposite gender + mirror image? Which ones would be hit by the Gender (dis)comfort or be totally unaffected?

I mean... it would depend on what puppet the player built for them? As for the gender feels, I can see Ortega being comfortable in an opposite puppet but never question why. Chen would feel very uncomfortable as a female puppet and use it seldom. Argent would be all in puppet no matter of gender, but a male puppet would be just as elegant and soft as she wants to be. Would be perceived as very gay, possibly to the point of camp. I think Daniel is the only one who might actually have some gender thoughts in a differently sexed puppet, realizing how different people treat him and what is expected of him. For Mortum the puppet is a tool kept at arm's length. No feelings there.

If argent is forced to fight the catastrofiend alone at the auction and the nanos take over after she falls unconscious, she is still ravenous and kind of out of sorts a couple days later when step goes to HQ. What's going on there between her and the nanovores? Fallen out of sync a bit? Need more food to repopulate the colony? Just in a lot of pain from how intense the fight was? How long does it usually take her to recover from that kind of fight?

Mostly lots of food to replace the colony. They didn't devour more of Argent for energy, so a lot of them died off or went into power-save mode. While the Catastrofiend can't hurt them, neither is it very palatable, and so the couldn't just eat it. It costs a lot of energy to puppet Argent around. It can take her a week or more to fully recover from a full nano-activation incident.

How much is a mindscape is built on how a person sees themselves as well as how step interprets them through that lens?

It is a combination. If there are two people inside another's mindscape, they would see a slightly different version depending on the target's feelings about them.

spoilers for the latest patreon story is it possible to become "stuck" in one of the inbetween spaces that sidestep describes the void using?

Yes, it is.

Void spoilers: what exactly did ortega mean by sidestep having become weirder since the nanosurge?

Well, Sidestep's powers went into overdrive after having stopped it, so Ortega saw firsthand how Sidestep changed as their telepathic powers grew. Reacting to things thought and not said, to things outside line of sight, the avoidance of crowds, the occasional emotional bleedover and meltdowns.

Void spoilers is it cold, in these in between spaces that sidestep describes the void as using?

I think some are cold, some are uncomfortably hot or stinging. It varies.

Void spoilers: Sidestep and Ortega talk about sidestep being incidental. Used to get to someone else. What were the circumstances when that happened to Sidestep before?

Sidestep started out being known as Charge's Sidestep, it's not the first time a villain has focused on them to get to Charge.

Is void still stuck in whatever place sidestep pushed them into?

No, you will see what happened soon.

How did Ortega get their hands on Hollow Ground's picture?

Instamatic camera.

I'm a court reporter, so I have to ask: do masked heroes have to go to court if they work with authorities/are able to be found and subpoenaed? Only I'd love to get to type out

Q. Now, Mx. Anathema, at what point did you realize Mr. -- Ms. -- The Catastrofiend planned on cutting off the bank manager's left pinkie?

Oh yes. A lot of the time the statements are made before and recorded, but on occasion they have to appear.

Sentinel is a bit more dubious than other heroes in the sense that he's a lot more pragmatic and understands the things that need to be done don't always align with heroics: would Sentinel ever consider joining/supporting a villain Sidestep depending on their motivation or plans?

Maybe you will see.

Coming back to this, would they read an autobiography from Sidestep, if it included the details of their life at the Farm? 🙄 Or would they not be interested/be too gruesome for them to want to read what it was like for them growing up there?

If by they, you mean Ortega, the answer is yes, they would.

Has Danny ever considered using melee weapons, since he's weak in hand to hand combat? Maybe something non-lethal like a baton. Expanding on that, did Sentinel ever try to convince Danny to use a weapon.

Danny has on occasion used melee weapons, but mostly improvised ones. He doesn't like how he feel when he has something like a baton in his hand. Sentinel thought that was stupid.

How long can someone dosed with void blood access Void's powers? Does the amount of blood consumed influence:

1. how long the powers can last

2. the extent of voids powers that can be accessed, and/or

3. how fatal it can be?

Yes to all three. And it depends on the individual how long they can cling to the powers. People used to it can ride that high for days if they're lucky.

If the car crash had send Sidestep into a coma, what would've been their fate? How would each love interest have reacted?

Intensive care in the Ranger's HQ and everybody worried about them.

Possible tw referenced cannibalism are there any known incidences of kuru disease/other prion diseases among the green sky members or at the farm?

Yes, I think that has happened on occasion. It is known that the brain and nervous system is the riskiest bit, but that can also hold the most power. Still safer than boost drugs though.

What can you tell us about the staff that runs the agricultural side of the farm? Are they fellow scientists, completely on the up and up with the farms other activities?

They are fellow scientists aware of what is going on. Nobody gets in there without a clearance.

With high telepathy stats possibly being dangerous. Is that a danger we can still work with or is it more akin to a bad end?

Like everything risky, it's not an auto bad end. It depends on what you do with it.

How does ReGene hair grow when they're being grown in the tanks? Does it grow at the same speed as the rest of them, or does it grow freely to presumably extreme lengths? Does the Farm ever remove them to cut it to decrease its volume in the tank and offer better visibility to the staff, or

do they just get a haircut when they are first properly removed to go through processing? When first decanted, do young ReGene get an actual haircut, or just straight to shaving until they are done being processed?

Hair does need to be cut often, the growth is a drawback of the process. But since the body needs to be inspected regularly as it is, it is not a big issue. They are shaved when decanted if possible, but at times that can't be done due to adverse reactions.

Has any hero seen Argent's eyes when they have three pupils?

Yes.

Rebirth's epilogues with Mortum and our hench were from the Puppet's perspective. For one or both of these epilogues - were they from the imposter's perspective?

No.

We know that boosts can crave certain foods after undergoing the process, tw insects given the nature of her boost, does Vera ever crave insects? Or would a craving be more broad, like simple protein?

People joke that Vera craves bread, and she hates that. Her boost is a big burden on her body though, so she needs a lot of quality protein and carbs. Also keratin supplements.

Will we get an opportunity to send the SD after Shroud, like we did to Psychopathor?

Not sure yet.

Here come a lot of question about Jake's powers.

1. How long can Jake remain intangible?

About a minute, but he often dips in and out.

2. When he becomes intangible to dodge attacks, do his feet remain solid so that he doesn't fall into the ground? Can he choose to apply his powers to only certain parts of his body?

Yes, he can become partially intangible, but even fully intangible there's still a "drag" on physical matter so he doesn't fall through unless pushed.

3. If he were to phase into the ground what would happen?

3.1. Does he keep falling, or can he float/fly while in the ground?

He can't fly, but he's sort of faintly sticky so he can run up walls and also falls much slower. If he is inside physical matter, it creates enough drag that he can climb inside it, and he wouldn't fall deeper.

3.2. Would he be unable to become solid again?

Not if he turned immediately Hard, that would push matter away from him and what can't be pushed would be destroyed. It would hurt like hell.

3.3. If he can become solid again would that kill him, would it destroy whatever he was overlapping with at the time, or would he fuse with the ground?

He would destroy what he is overlapping with causing an explosion.

4. Can Jake breathe while being intangible? Or does he have to hold his breath?

He have to hold his breath.

What was it about Sidestep that made them Danny's favorite hero?

The underdog aspect, and Danny liked watching Sidestep fight. That looked fun.

Is there any tech that can boost telepathy? What about with drugs, like the opposite of dampeners?

Yes, there are drugs and equipment that can boost telepathy. Not safely, and not for long. Drugs to suppress it are easier, Talodine is the most common one, and Sidestep is quite used to it by now.

Strange question, but between Blaze's need for calories, and Locus being a sugar fiend + the baby of the LBH, did he ever buy sweets for the both of them? Possibly to share?

Yeah, I can see that.

when the farm recaptured sidestep, was there a particular incident that made them aware, or was it evidence accumulated over time?

It was a chance encounter.

Building on this question - how high would you say was Sidestep's sd_clue when they got recaptured?

Not as high as Sidestep thinks it was.

What kind of boost is shroud's butler?

Basic fighting boost, strength, endurance, speed and durability. An active one, so it is quite strong, and he can't keep up that form forever. Bit of regeneration too.

What kind of boost is Tina? I assume she is one since she can communicate with the laser dolphins.

Spoilers.

Who among the Rangers, if any, knows Sentinel is back in Los Diablos?

Spoilers.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but Vernon appears to know Hollow Ground is real rather than just a rumor? If that's the case, how did he figure that out? Did he ever meet them in person?

Vernon does, and is smart. He has met Hollow Ground in person.

Would Argent's powers have awakened if she'd never been in contact with the nanosurge event?

Yes, but not in as spectacular fashion. She'd be a lot weaker.

Without the nanovores' protection, how easy is it to read/influence Argent's mind? Are her shields as strong as Chen's? Could Hollow Ground thread her?

It is hard to say how Argent would be without the nanovores, they are so much a part of her. As it is now, she's unthreadable.

Can Bonnie Belle be tracked with telepathy? Or does her shapeshifting powers affect her mind too?

It would be tough, the trail would change with every shift. You would have to be very aware what and who you are looking for, and even then it's not certain.

Did ingesting Void blood alter Step's powers in any permanent way?

Yes.

Building on that - did ingesting Void's blood predispose Sidestep to develop body hopping?

Yes.

1. What is the relationship between Hollow Ground and the old man in retri's epilogue?

A friendly, if exhausting one.

2. Is the old man aware that he is being threaded?

Not at all.

3. How often and where does HG meet this old man to reinforce the threads?

Depends, about once a week.

4. Does HG have any plans to thread Mia?

Not yet.

Is a voluntary Ortega Re-Gene reveal with Chen or Argent (or even Mortum) as moral support a possibility for Revelations?

Possibly, yeah, I would like a scene like that.

Did Sentinel see who shot at Step/Puppet and Ortega to cause the crash?

Spoilers.

If so, did he share this information with Ortega?

Spoilers.

What does void deem as "reaching one's full potential"? Is this "potential that can be achieved" something that they can see with their third eye?

Oh yes, very much so.

Who is more extensively threaded? Nocturne or the old man?

Oh boy, that's a hard one. I would say Nocturne, but it's close.

If Hollow Ground and Locus had strength of mind and subtlety scores, what would they be? (Or is it not a fair metric to apply those to the different styles of telepathy?)

HG would be all subtlety and no force, and Locus would be all force, no subtlety.

Was hollow ground's youngest sibling a sleepwalker?

Not that HG knew of.

Can Step's body hopping ability be classified under root 4 and branch 8?

Yeah, that's close enough.

According to Ljungstrands telepathic classification, which roots and branches do Numbers block? Which are they unable to block?

It affects all branches, the numbers go for the roots themselves.

What languages to Blaze, Locus, and Zephyr speak?

Blaze: English, Spanish, a tiny bit Italian.

Zephyr: English.

Locus: English and whatever language people around her speak.

If they were telepaths, how would the main cast (+ Vera and Skyraider if you have an idea and feel so inclined) use it? What tactics would they lean into most? Who would use body-hopping, and for what purpose?

I honestly have no idea! This is very hypothetical, and I don't know. Ortega would be the least moral about it though.

Regarding Vera,

- is there any niche facts about pigeons you're excited to implement in her power or character / body language / preferences?

I am researching now! But the body language is set in my head already...

- how does her mind feel? How does the "pigeon brain" impact her thoughts, and do you already have details about how that will impact Sidestep's reading of her?

It will certainly be weird and interesting for Sidestep, her thoughts do change markedly in pigeon form.

Regarding Skyraider,

- Steel isn't aware that his old friend from the army Ben has become Skyraider the villain if I'm not mistaken; does he still see Ben in civilian sometimes?

He is not aware that Ben is Sky-Raider, no. And he doesn't know that Ben is in Los Diablos.

- Does Ortega know about Skyraider existing, and about Skyraider having served with Chen?

Yes and no.

- Is Skyraider a mercenary, or is there a more political / personal goal behind his villainy?

Mostly mercenary.

How does chen feel upon learning that not just Step, but also Ben, have turned villain?

You'll find out.

What were boosts' role in the designing and implementing of Resolution 32, if any? Were they represented at all? Are these organisations / representants still active today?

Nothing, they were not involved. At that time, there was no big movement, and there's still not a big one. The kind of people who would boost themselves are not the type to organize grassroots movements.

Can the nine gates be considered cumulative (one after another in the same "line") or disperse (in different parts of the mind, perhaps arranged like a nonagon)?

It's a line.

Is there any possibility in which HG would be able to thread Pyroclast while he's in ash form? Is there a big difference in the way their power is used/how taxing it is on minds like his v more "physical" minds? Would there be a difference to threading him in human form v ash form if both are possible?

Hmmm. Human form would be easier, but I think ash form would still be possible. If HG could speak...

Malin, so a poor soul may rest: who, amongst main and extended cast, surfs

Argent, Blaze, Locus, Zephyr, Ortega, Jake, Skyraider.

Did Blaze ever flirt with Julia and if so did she turn him down? Did it affect his perception of her?

Yes, yes and yes.

Among the Rangers, HG trio, Mortum, Sentinel, and Ashfall, who would survive ingesting Void blood?

Ashfall, Mortum, Ortega, Argent, HG, Jake for sure. The others are more uncertain.

Hey Malin, what's Mitchell look like? Is his shirt, perhaps, made of boyfriend material?

The only thing I know is that Mitchell has glasses and curly hair.

How's the wolfpack doing these days?

Disbanded for now. It will probably be started up again by others soon.

Malin, any hints on what a blazeally path will entail?

Nope.

Can the Rat King possibly hijack one of Steel's armour sets, if it's not in use? 🐭 Would Steel be amenable to letting the girls have a spin on one of his armours?

Steel doesn't have a telepathic interface suitable for the Rat King, so that would sadly be impossible.

[1.1.1 Night, early on.](#)

[Apr 4, 2023](#)

This is what things look like when I write my first drafts, petering out at the end because I had an online meeting at eight. Not spell or grammar checked.

There's a sound in the dark that doesn't fit right, not an echo of the empty corridors of your dreams, but a stumble and a curse. Not at you. For once.

"Ortega?" You mumble the name, half awake and yet it comes easy to your lips. A special kind of curse you don't know whether you'd want broken or not. That's the kind of wishes that can backfire, that can leave you trapped in bed with broken legs and blacklisted painkillers to help you through the night.

"Yeah," comes the reply, and the shape in the dark straightens out all six feet and then bends low to rub \${his} foot. "Just forgot I moved the chairs out here to make room." Make room. For you. Are you to blame for \${his} nighttime bruises as well as \${his} daytime mistakes? Yes. Of course the answer will always be yes. The big question is whether you care.

"You could have lit a lamp," you grumble, and reach out to do just that. The stab of pain reminds you that you are more broken than the furniture, and your curses joins Ortega's in the dark. A familiar chorus.

"Close your eyes," `{he}` warns, half a second before `{he}` turns on the ceiling light, revealing much less of a mess than you expected from the sounds. No broken chair, just a toppled one. Would be that you were as lucky. "Sorry about that," `{he}` straightens the chair. "I didn't want to wake you."

"Maybe I didn't mind being woken." You shift yourself into a more comfortable position, wondering whether you could take another painkiller. When would your liver start to protest? Farm-grown like the rest of you, it should hold up well enough. In the end it doesn't matter, the bottle is still out of reach in your injured state, on the sidetable resting against the wall.

"Nightmares?" Ortega comes into focus as your eyes adjust to the light.

`*if ortega_name = "Julia"`

A worn t-shirt reaching barely mid-thigh and little else. It's shapeless from years of use, but the Charge symbol is still legible. Barely.

`*else`

Boxers. Not much else. It takes you a moment to notice the little lightning bolts on the waistband.

"Wearing your merchandise?" You smirk instead of answering a question you both know the answer to.

"Would you prefer I was wearing yours?" The smile is wide but can't hide the wince as Ortega pulls over one of the chairs to sit down. Not right next to you, far enough for some manner of privacy. `!{he}` shouldn't have turned on the lights if `{he}` wanted that.

"I would prefer it if you were still in the hospital. You look like shit." For once, it's not an exaggeration. The lack of clothes reveals the bruises and cuts, the securely bandaged ankle and the way `{he}` holds himself. Wrong.

"And I would prefer the same for you, and yet here we are." Ortega leans forward, left foot doing it's familiar anxiety dance, heel not quite tapping the floor. "Two stubborn idiots who don't know what's best for us."

"Not going to argue that." You fall silent, but Ortega catches your eyes going to the bottle of pills.

"Need another one?"

"Yeah," you admit, pretending you don't would be stupid at this point. "At least if you want me to have any chance to go back to sleep."

"Would probably be best for both of us." Ortega heaves `{him}`self out of the chair with grunted effort, limping over to the table. After a moment's thought he taps out two for you, handing them over.

"You can stop staring, you know." It was impossible to miss the glance going to your tattoos, but you hid the look on your face as you swallow the pills with the help of the lukewarm water in the bottle next to your bed.

"Sorry." To `{his}` credit, Ortega looks more ashamed than sheepish. "It's probably going to take a while." `!{he}` lips back to the chair, but you don't miss the fact that `{he}` gets a pill of `{his}` own and dry-swallow it as `{his}` back is turned.

"Don't worry," you lie. "I'll be back to wearing proper clothes as soon as I can crawl out to your closet and steal something."

"Hey," there's an amused protest as `{he}` sinks back in the chair. "It's a lot easier to treat your injuries without you having to scramble in and out of a hoodie all the time."

"I don't need the IV for long." If it was up to you it would be out already, but you know you need to recover fast. Every bit helps.

"Probably not," `{he}` acknowledges. "I still wish you would let Dr. Halabi come and fit you with a pair of therapeutic casts. They could shave a lot of days from your recovery."

"Still would mean that someone would see my legs."

"Someone who has already seen them." Ortega signs heavily, rubbing a bruise. "Seriously. I wore one when I broke my arm a few years back. The vibrations doesn't even tickle that much."

"When you say that, it means they tickle a lot. But fine, ask me again in the morning." You don't like being helpless either, and while the painkillers help with your legs, they also make your brain feel number than you'd like. You'd still pick up trouble in advance, but would you sense people who knew how to hide? People using numbers? The thought makes you nauseous.

"I'm sorry," Ortega admits, with that pained look on `{his}` face that means it's a real one. Not just to make peace.

`*if not(tinfoil)`

*goto ofhgtalk

[variables depending on how the crash happened, and the other circumstances. this one doesn't know about Ortega's suspicions about HG, so it's HG talk time]

*label ofhgtalk

"This is mostly my fault."

"Mostly?" You give \${him} an incredulous look.

"Look. This is on you too, if you had talked..."

"Me? You know full well that I don't talk even with a gun to my head because my secrets can and will kill me. This is all on you."

"I know now." Ortega squirms. "And I mean I thought I knew. I thought I was helping you keep your secrets. I was such an idiot."

"Not going to argue that," you mutter tiredly.

"You don't understand." Ortega's foot has started its dance once more. "I thought I knew who you were. Not from the start, you made sure of that. Mysterious. Masked. Can't believe you pulled that off for as long as you did."

"Eating with the mask half-on did suck," you admit. "If you leave it under your nose, you can't taste anything and it gets sticky. If you pull it up over, it scrunches up around the eyes so it gets really hard to see."

"See, that's why I never wore a mask," Ortega says, but the smile is shallow. Looks like you didn't manage to deter \${him} from baring \${his} heart. "But when I saw your face, I couldn't help but start digging."

"Why?" This smells like a confession, but a confession about what?

"You look like Hollow Ground." \${he}'s leaning forward, eyes on you as if \${he} still quite can't believe the resemblance is incidental. "Or, to be precise, you look like \${hghis} \${sibling}."

"What?" You're glad for the drugs, because you don't think you're good at faking confusion. Not after you've seen Hollow Ground yourself.

"Yeah, I had—" am empathetic gesture —files on them since after Hood's death. Father, dead. Oldest brother, a boost, dead. A third one, dead during boosting I think. Hollow Ground, and finally \${hghis} little baby \${sibling}. You. Or so I thought."

"You thought I was—" you break off before you can say human, even if \${he} knows the truth, that would still sting too deep.

"It all made sense." A helpless sigh. "Why you didn't want to show your face. Why you were on the run. How you got that kind of training at that age," \${he} catches your grimace, "Oh yeah, Chen talked to me about that. Though you were some kind of military super soldier. Guess he was closer to the truth than I was."

"He most often is." You wonder if Chen has told Ortega now. About the pictures. About what he knew. Suspected. Somehow you doubt so, not with Ortega joking about this. "Still, why didn't you tell me?"

"I figured you were only staying because you didn't think anybody had figured it out. I was worried you'd cut and run if I brought it up. Especially with the face you made every time I tried to bring up Hollow Ground."

"I can't believe this." You sink back in bed, trying to digest what \${he} has told you. Keeping your secret for all those years, and it was the wrong secret. Hilarious. Tragic.

"Me neither," Ortega admits. "I thought I was so clever, having everything figured out. Everything except—"

"Except the truth," you interrupt, feeling anger take you. Could you have told \${him}? Could you have trusted \${him} all those years ago? Would you have dared?

"Yeah." \${he} lets out another sigh. "Would you have run? I've asked myself that again and again."

*fake_choice

#"I wish I could say no." Could I have trusted \${him}?

"I wish I could say no," you admit. Could you have trusted Ortega to keep your secrets? Back then? You know the answer is no, but part of you wish it could have been yes. Maybe things would have turned out differently. To have an ally. A friend in your corner. Someone who knew.

"I'm glad I didn't take the chance then." The smile is soft, but sad.

#"Probably." Ortega paying attention would be dangerous.

"Probably," you admit. "Even if you were wrong, it meant you noticed too much. Paid attention to me. What I did. Who I was. I don't think I could have risked staying." You always relied on not being noticed. Ortega being immune was annoying.

"I'm glad I didn't then," the smile is soft.

#"Of course." I wouldn't have taken a risk like that.

"Of course," you say with emphasis. "Even if you were wrong, it meant you noticed too much. Paid attention to me. What I did. Who I was. You wouldn't have settled for a no, and would probably have found out what I really was." And that you could not risk.

"I'm glad I didn't then," the smile is soft.

"Sap," you say with an annoyed frown.

(needed to stop writing here, was running out of steam anyway)