**Preparation 11.5 – May 13th**

Rebecca Costa-Brown sat at her desk, arguably the most important desk in America, and filed paperwork. It could be argued that the president held more power, and in a legislative sense he absolutely did, but power was not merely a matter of legal capabilities, but of the ability to enforce change on the world. Her office received a fraction of the scrutiny, had a fraction of the limitations, and could implement orders in a fraction of the time. Just as she’d designed.

The paperwork she was completing was another aspect of that design. There was a delicate balance between delegation and direct oversight that had to be walked in order to keep the optimal level of control needed to keep the system in stasis. If it weren’t for her enhanced intelligence and tirelessness, she would’ve been overwhelmed by the amount of information she was required to process each day, walking the edge of exceptional without being obviously superhuman. It had been enough to overwhelm her predecessor, allowing her to gain this position and keep it. Any who usurped *her* position found themselves crumbling under the workload, returning her to her rightful place. After the second attempt, those who would be inclined to take her station found different positions to aspire to.

Approving the transfer of Clipper to Minneapolis, having improved her Mover capabilities to better fit in with the paradigm Director Scovel, she cleared her desk in preparation for the video conference that one of her directors had demanded. Pushing her monitor backwards so her camera was in the proper position for maximum psychological effect, she waited the remaining ten seconds for her assistant to contact her, telling her that she had a call coming. Appreciating the short lull, she accepted it, her screen showing her the woman in question.

“Director Piggot, you wished to talk to me?” Rebecca asked calmly. “I hope this is not about your requests for other heroes to be assigned to your department, as that has already been officially denied and the rationale given.” This was of course the *exact* reason she was calling, but certain fictions were required to be upheld to keep things polite. As the other woman grit her teeth, unable to hide her frustration, the Chief Director *did* feel some sympathy for the woman, but that didn’t matter. Emily Piggot had been handpicked to manage the East-North-East department of the PRT *because* she was the best to allow Doctor Mother’s experiment to come to fruition.

Given the likely outcome even *if* they managed to kill Scion, the breakdown of society was guaranteed. Both she and Numberman had run the calculations, and while some strongholds of control could be kept, it was inevitable that lawlessness would descend upon large portions of the civilized world, as it already had elsewhere. The gradual appearance of parahumans had allowed governments to maintain their power, which would not last through the coming cataclysm. Both of them could run theoretically models, but they needed experimental data to hone their predications and Brockton Bay was that experiment.

Emily Piggot had been psychologically scarred by the Nilbog incident, instilling within her a distrust of parahumans and a reticence to move with anything short of overwhelming force. Her promotion and direction to the ENE office ensured that, as long as Rebecca kept her staffed with enough heroes to handle the situation, and no more than that, then the other woman would would hold back the Protectorate and let the non-aligned parahumans do as they wished. Too few heroes, and her claims for support would spur the other directors to help, but with enough to handle the situation all she came across as was greedy.

Director Piggot took a breath and replied in a strained voice, “Chief Director Costa-Brown, the situation has changed. We now have confirmation that it was the Penumbral Defenders who clashed with the Empire Eighty-Eight. They *killed* several of the villains, escalating the situation, and shortly after bombed a warehouse that the Undersiders, killing over a *dozen* nearby. They’re escalating things to a dangerous degree”

Unbeknownst to the Director, the Chief Director had already reviewed the report, despite it being filed only two hours previously. It was an underhanded trick, as Director Piggot was counting on her having glanced over it before her call, but not having read the full document in detail. It would’ve been enough to give weight to the woman’s words without being able to pick out what was being left out. “And you have proof that this was the Penumbral Defenders? If anything, this sounds like a *de*-escalation of events from what you previously had to deal with. Should I approve the transfer requests I’ve received, given the lowering of the Villain population you are currently reporting?”

A look of fear shot across the smaller woman’s face, too fast for anyone other than Rebecca to have caught it. “The Penumbral Defenders are threatening the position of the PRT,” Emily stated evenly. “By moving without our permission, they are undermining us in the eyes of the public and are committing crimes-”

“Which are not crimes, given they are officially registered,” the Chief Director interrupted, “and those actions that *are* crimes you have no evidence of. Do you even have witnesses that will testify *and* circumstantial evidence to back them with at the very least, Director Piggot?”

Flushing with anger, the woman replied, “We have witnesses that will testify under oath!”

Rebecca let the statement hang, before asking, “And evidence?” At Emily’s silence she continued, “You know the official doctrine of the Parahuman Response Teams, Director Piggot.” She let the statement hang for a moment before offering the woman a way out. “However, as Chief Director I could be persuaded to temporarily re-assign personnel, if other concerns were addressed.”

It was an incredibly blatant offer, the kind that the other woman would be suspicious of, but which she would take at face values once the difficulty of the task was revealed. Emily had a head for tactics, not politics, after all. “What could I do to help you, *Chief Director?*” she ground out, obviously upset at having to deal with the even the simplest of realpolitik.

“There’s a villain operating in your city; he calls himself Boardwalk. We have reason to believe he is behind several previously unsolved incidents. We would like him taken in for questioning.” This was an absolute lie, of course. As far as they could tell, he had likely Triggered only a few weeks ago and had only operated in Brockton Bay. It didn’t matter, she had a file of ‘incidents’ that she could use when needed, and this qualified. Someone that Contessa *couldn’t* Path was a threat to the plan that couldn’t be allowed to run free.

Director Piggot didn’t look happy but believed what she was told. “He’s broken out of the Rig once already, when the Protectorate received *orders* to detain him. Asking him to come in won’t work anymore,” she replied crossly, Miss Militia likely informing her of the Chief Director’s orders. Given what was known about the parahuman, Rebecca’s plan would’ve worked, but he’d been *far* more powerful than he’d let on.

“I’ve reviewed the footage,” she replied, not addressing Director Piggot’s thinly veiled accusation. “It is what confirmed his involvement in the incidents in question beyond a shadow of a doubt. This is why I would be willing to divert resources for what would normally be an official directive.”

“Boardwalk has been working with the Penumbral Defenders, should they be taken in as well?” the other woman pressed. Emily obviously wanted official attention on the PD, assuming the greater force of the PRT would be enough to quash the blackmail material they had on her. It wasn’t *true* blackmail, as nothing was officially being asked, but the intention was the same. With Armsmaster moved and the Brockton Bay Wards under a competent leader, it was a temporary bargaining chip that, in a year’s time, would be close to worthless. Director Piggot wanted Rebecca to take the heat, triggering that political landmine instead of her. However, the risk was not worth the reward even if she *hadn’t* had an agent in the Penumbral Defenders.

She’d questioned Break on Boardwalk a few days prior as Alexandria, but while he’d met the parahuman in question a few times, he didn’t know more than surface details him. Break’s partner, Lee Elric a.k.a. Vejovis, was the one who was in contact with the parahuman in question. Boardwalk had also seen Doormaker’s portal, having been the one to shoot Eidolon with a knife, so was cognizant of *some* hidden organization, complicating matters. Break had stated that he hadn’t told Boardwalk about the specifics, and that the parahuman had never asked. Even behind his mask, Alexandria could easily read the man’s fervent honesty behind his attempts to seem nonchalant.

“If you can find evidence that they knew of Boardwalk’s previous dealings, then I shall consider it,” the Chief Director responded without promising anything. “Is there anything else you wanted to discuss, Director Piggot?”

“Can I at least have an additional member to replace Armsmaster?” Emily tried. From her body language, she disliked what she likely saw as begging, but was desperate.

“His removal is why I approved the retention of Paninla,” Rebecca gently rebuked. “While she did not have his experience, his worth to the PRT, given what has come to light, was not equal to what his station would suggest.” After what had been said, it would do to appear conciliatory, but firm.

“The machine army has gone quiet, which has always signaled an attempt to breach containment; we’re dealing with the aftermath of the Slaughterhouse Nine’s work in New York, which was worse than usual; and we’re still trying to clean up the mess Heartbreaker left,” she ‘revealed’ to Director Piggot. “If I could send you more resources, I would, but we’re stretched as is. Giving you more support would short someone else of support they would need.” *Just like you were shorted in Ellisburg,* was not stated, and was put subtly enough to get the point across without seeming like she was doing so intentionally.

The shorter woman nodded, mollified, “I understand. Thank you for talking to me, Chief Director.”

“Anytime,” she replied, “I’m glad we could address your concerns. I’m sorry to cut this short, but I have something else that requires my attention.” Emily nodded, and Rebecca ended the call. She hadn’t lied, the Machine army *had* gone quiet, recovery efforts in Poughkeepsie were ongoing, and they were *still* finding Heartbreaker’s victims. If she hadn’t known better, she would’ve been worried about what Heartbreaker could have done with the sheer number of assets he’d gained that worked in the Canadian government, the PRT, and elsewhere. Half the Montreal team was in confinement, though they had the resources to reverse the damage done if they needed to use him.

Calling up the next emergency that needed her attention, she was glad things in Brockton Bay were quieting down.

Everything was going wrong.

*It shoulda been great*, she thought, tears in her eyes. The Asians were gone and *something* had happened to the Nazis, so it should’ve been all beers and blunts for her and Skidsy. *Well, it is for* ***him***, she told herself, sitting in the driver seat of her baby, running her hands over the wheel while her skin felt like it was going to crawl off her and over to the crystals sitting in the tray where he’d left them. She wanted to take smoke it, snort it, hell, she’d shove it up her ass like he’d convinced her to do that one time, but she wasn’t going to take anything *that* cunt made.

Fucking Snowball.

She thought she and Skidsy had something special, that they’d be together like Baby and Johnny, but she’d only been his until he got something *better*. She thought she knew how it worked. She’d build the things that kept *him* safe, and he’d keep her safe, love her like she loved him. She’d make him feel good, and he’d return the favor, not dump *that* and walk off after not seeing her for *days*, getting’ mad at her when she wanted a little suga’.

She sobbed, feeling worse than she had in years.

She didn’t care that he’d smacked her around, she probably deserved it for yellin’, and it wouldn’t be the first time, but he always came back a bit later, always apologizing and makin’ it up to her with some lovin’.

It’d been hours.

She knew all she had to do was take the shards and she wouldn’t care, she could lose herself in working on her baby, or maybe something else. *Maybe if I built something* ***really*** *good then he’d come back*, she hoped, but she knew it wasn’t going to happen. Skidsy liked to show off her babies, but he didn’t *really* care if he didn’t have anyone to show off *to.* The only other villain left was that Sherlock Holmes lookin’ asshole, and he didn’t give a shit about showin’ off. She heard he had Tinkers working for him, and they were probably classy shits that wouldn’t give her the so much as a ‘fuck you’.

Her chest hurt, and she hiccuped, snot running down her face, not having the energy to wipe it off as she cried. She knew she wasn’t that bad off, her family was there for her, makin’ sure she ate when she came over, even if she din’t want to. They were the only thing that kept her goin’ sometimes, and what did she do? She pushed ‘em away. They usually came back, even though she din’t deserve it, but Skidsy normally came back, and *he* wasn’t. He was fuckin’ those ***bitches***.

Yeah sometimes some whore would try to snuggle up to her S- to Skidsy, and yeah he’d fuck ‘em when she was busy, but he’d *always* made time for her. None of *those* bitches had had powers though. Now she was busy, and she *wasn’t* going to share a bed with those *skanks*. She had standards, goddamnit!

Whirlygig wasn’t that bad, like some chicks Sheryl had hung out with when she was high, Skidsy was busy, and she was waitin’ on parts. Kinda lanky, Latina, probably, and nothin’ special. Hell, she seemed like the type Sheryl coulda pointed Skidsy towards when she was real busy without havin’ to worry ‘bout nuthin’ goin’ on. No it was fucking *Snowball.*

Turns out, Skidsy was an ass man. Sheryl had a bit of junk in her trunk, but that bitch had a fuckin’ *junkyard*, and was just as fuckin’ dirty. Sheryl sometimes got a bit of stuff on her when she was busy, but the smell of engine grease was just *sexy*. That cunt just smelled like *whore.*

She wiped her face off, more pissed than tired. That wouldn’t be bad enough, but that slut’s fuckin’ *power.* She made fuckin drugs! Right outta thin fuckin’ air! Crack, smack, Angel dust, bitch even made Oxy! It was all the same off white, kinda salmon-ish in tint. Skidsy just said it was good branding, but *she* wasn’t gonna take anything that made by the hoe who’d stolen her man had made!

Sheryl waited a long moment, before getting out of the car. *Maybe Skidsy gave me the good stuff. Maybe it’d just* ***looked*** *like it was made by* ***her,*** she told herself, moving to the back of her garage, where he’d put the rock. She wasn’t necessarily gonna *take* it, just *look* at it, double check, just in case.

Wandering over to where it had been, it was *gone.* Not even a bit of dust, whoever had snagged it leaving *nothing* left for her. *Someone took my meth.* ***SOMEONE TOOK MY METH! I’ll FUCKING KILL THEM!*** she raged. She was going to ***kill*** the asshole who took her drugs, the drugs Skidsy had left for her, and then she was going to kill that bitch! And the other bitch too! And Mush, for leaving her alone to deal with all of this shit! And. . . and. . . and what the hell was she thinking? If she killed that bitch, Skidsy would kill *her.*

She should talk to him, tell him how she felt. He couldn’t *still* be doing that whore. Just in case, Sheryl moved to open the laptop Skidsy had gotten her over a year ago. He hadn’t known, but she’d put a camera in his room. He looked so cute when he slept, it always reminded her that he was really a big softie and din’t mean what he said when he got a bad high.

Opening it up and connecting to the camera, she felt her heart sink. He was still going at it, Snowball taking it from behind, doggystyle, while Whirlygig was off to the side, lighting up. Hesitantly, she turned up the sound, and listened to her Skidsy call the woman things that he’d promised he’d only call her. Tell that bitch that he din’t care about her, that Snowball was the top bitch, and that if she wanted he’d kick Squealer out tomorrow.

“Nah, that bitch be useful, but I catch you fuckin’ her I’m cuttin’ you off!” the woman commanded.

She was telling Skidsy how to run the Merchants? Sheryl grinned, ready to watch her Skidsy to put this uppity bitch in her place! He might not always be the same, dependin’ on the drugs he was on, but he *always* made sure everyone knew *he* was in charge of the Merchants. Instead of beatin’ the hell out of the woman, like he’d done to Sheryl when she’d told him what to do when he was fuckin’ her, he just nodded, not missin’ a beat in his thrusting. He even grinned as he told her, “Sure thing sweet cheeks, long as I get to keep getting’ what’s mine!”

Sheryl watched, horrified, as Snowball went back to moaning, and complimenting Skidmark’s dick. Shakily, she reached over and closed the feed, feeling like she was on a bad trip. Skids-Skidmark *never* let anyone tell him what to do, not even *Kaiser*, and Snowball’s cooch was so good that he just let went along with it? What the hell had happened? She hadn’t even *taken* anything!

*Is this withdrawal?* she thought. *Am I hallucinating? It wouldn’t be the first time, but it’s never been this. . . real.* She felt like she was going to die, coming down from god knows how many different things, though most of it was meth. Hesitantly she reached over to re-open the feed, just in case she was-

“Oh yeah take my black anaconda you chocolate whore! I’m gonna drop my-”

*No. No, this is real.* She told herself, closing the window, silence returning to her garage. *What do I do? Do I go home?* ***Can*** *I go home?* She wouldn’t know unless she asked. Opening up the chat program, she sent a message to her aunt.

*RidinHigh9: Hey aunt Barb, can I come home for a bit. Had a fight with Skidmark.*

She didn’t get a response right away so she took the laptop back to her Baby, putting it in its slot on the dash. Sitting in her creations always made her feel better, but instead of the warm feeling she normally got, all she felt was sick to her stomach, like she’d had bad clams. The beeping of her laptop distracted her.

*SmexyB!tch: u sry 4 wat u said*

*Ridinhigh9: Yes.*

Sheryl really was sorry. She hadn’t meant to say it, or to yell at her Aunt. Her Nana had raised her better than that. Nana had also taught both of ‘em to write, but her Aunt still had *her* husband, and was the one she needed help from, so she wasn’t going to say anything.

*SmexyB!tch: U hi*

*Ridinhigh9: No.*

*SmexyB!tch: srsly?*

She growled at the screen. How could Barb think she’d come home if she was high? She never was around Isabella. It sent the wrong message!

*Ridinhigh9: Would I be asking to come home if I was?*

*SmexyB!tch: u wer lst wk*

*Ridinhigh9: Weed doesn’t count!!! I’m not stoned.*

The pause was longer this time, and Sheryl wondered if she’d finally gone to far, if she was really going to be alone. She deserved it, for what she did. For trusting that asshole. For not being able to keep him. For-

*SmexyB!tch: k c u at dnr*

Sheryl let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She had some place to go for a bit, though she wouldn’t want to stay there for long. She’d either have to come back to Skidmark, or he’d come to *take* her back, like he had when she’d stayed home last time. He was usually nice when he did so, nice for Skidmark, but she wasn’t sure he’d be this time. She’d either have to come back or. . .

She pulled the card out of her belt pouch, one corner of it bent from looking at it too many times. It was a business card, fancy-ish, like some high-powered lawyer might have. Nice, but not in your face. The opposite of Skidmark, just like the man who’d given it to her had been. He hadn’t treated her like she was dumb, like she was just another thing of Skidmark’s, and while he hadn’t stared at her tits, he *had* noticed them. *And it wasn’t like she wasn’t staring at his junk either,* she admitted to herself.

She wouldn’t go through with it, not ‘till she was sure, ‘cause she got the feelin’ that was bell she couldn’t un-rung, *‘specially* with what had happened during the truce. Maybe it was the withdrawl talking, but maybe she needed a change in her life, and he might be able to help. She slipped the card back into her pouch. On one side was a phone-number and e-mail address, the other side read:

**VEJOVIS**

**PENUMBRAL DEFENDERS**