

Interlude 6.a: Quantum Liner Collapse

Coil was used to losing.

It came with the territory, really. Luck and chance, variances in skill, tiny, minute details, even down to what a given hero might have eaten for lunch or dinner that caused them to slow down or speed up or take breaks during their patrols — anything at all could have drastic effects on how a given venture of his might go, how a scenario he enacted may pan out.

Traffic accidents that had occurred when his men turned left onto Wabash rather than going straight on Washington, people who had died — sometimes even Wards or Protectorate heroes — because of small, second-or-two delays, times when the Undersiders had been killed or captured because of an unforeseen complication or change in patrol schedules — all of those things and more, he'd seen cause his plans to go up in flames.

Coil was used to losing, because he lost *often* and *catastrophically*.

The difference was that, for Coil, no loss had to be *permanent*. With his power, he could flip the tables and recast the die so that every loss was wiped away as though it had never happened. He had the power to overturn fate itself and command destiny, and it was by doing so that he had gotten to where he was, so very close now to his ultimate end goal of ruling Brockton Bay in all but name.

Coil *always* made the right choice.

And when he didn't, well, it had never actually happened, had it?

Lately, however, that hadn't been true. A mistake or two here and there was acceptable, of course — his power really was better suited to short term risks, and he freely admitted (if only to himself) that some things went wrong in the longer term, farther out than he was comfortable stretching a single split — but his acquisition of Dinah Alcott was *supposed* to reduce the frequency of that, to give him a surety of course that would *let* him run those longer timelines and maximize his effectiveness even in his shorter, more common ones.

Except it *hadn't* happened.

Largely, of course, it had turned out as he wanted it to. He could ask his pet, his Dinah, a brace of questions to fine tune a course of action, and then take that action — or not take it, if the odds of success were too low — with a surety, if not quite a certainty, that opened up entirely new avenues of maneuvering for his end game.

Except. Except, except, *except*. *Except* when Apocrypha became involved. The new Trump on the block, whose powers had been left frightfully vague even in the toppest of top secret PRT files. The only thing anyone had written down on paper or filed in the PRT's official files was her Trump designation and a brief, unhelpful description of her ability to use “powersets.”

And whenever she and her ill-defined powers got involved, *something* went wrong. Not *always*, not as long as she wasn't pushed and didn't have cause to start pulling out one of her powersets, but after the time his actions had accidentally dragged her into a fight with *Hookwolf*, after — against all

predictions to the contrary and a timeline he'd had close where Bakuda had set off enough bombs to destroy *half the city* — she had *survived* her encounter with Bakuda *unscathed*, any time she became involved in a protracted battle, he'd been forced to cancel the timeline. To not do so would leave him entirely too vulnerable to the possibility that she had done *something* to make it unreliable.

It had, at least, answered the question of whether or not his powers were simulation or the creation of actual timelines.

Even his *pet* had been affected by whatever it was that made Apocrypha so inscrutable, sometimes giving him nonsensical answers instead of numbers or numbers that swung between absolutes that would give a statistician *nightmares*. One-hundred percent, a perfect zero, a flat fifty, even “purple” or “hazlenut” — the moment Apocrypha became involved, *those* were the sort of answers he received.

Worse, the effect seemed to be *spreading*. Now, his *Tattletale* was starting to become unpredictable, as well, throwing off even more of his timelines, making any split suspect and susceptible to faulty results... He'd had to bench the Undersiders, just so that he could get *anything* done without worrying about inaccuracies.

It had been hard, the decision he'd eventually reached. His *Tattletale* was a very useful asset, and her power had been almost indispensable in a number of his ventures, particularly when it came to gathering information and discovering identities.

But no asset was absolutely irreplaceable, and between his powers and his pet, his *Tattletale* was a more acceptable sacrifice. Not an entirely expendable one, but more acceptable.

So, he'd set his plan in motion. Two snipers, picked from his most competent and least squeamish mercenaries, set to take both of his problems out at once. The interference of Vista and Glory Girl had been a surprise, but ultimately not one that was worth stopping for.

It *should* have been over, then. *Should* have. His marksmen had reported in their success, he'd chosen to keep that timeline, and it was all supposed to be over.

Until his teams had returned to base, informed him of their failure to eliminate or even *secure* their targets, and Coil had been left to wonder how things had still gone *wrong*.

From there, there'd only been a handful of options. Apocrypha and his *Tattletale* had both disappeared off the radar in the aftermath — Apocrypha, Taylor Hebert, presumably, to her home, and his *Tattletale*...

He'd spent the better part of a day looking for her. Timeline after timeline, used up until there was nothing more to gain, then discarded. He'd scoured the city, discreetly at first, checking the Loft with the other Undersiders, but though her clothes and her costume and even her laptop were all still there, untouched, she hadn't been there. Then, he'd checked the safehouse she'd thought she was hiding from him, but she hadn't been there, either.

When being discreet turned up nothing, he'd gone with more overt plans, more direct actions that — if they hadn't been throwaway timelines — would've tipped his hand a whole lot more than he wanted. He'd provoked Faultline, the tattered remnants of the ABB, the warring factions of the E88,

even gone ahead with his original plan to release their identities to the public. Anything he could think of that would flush her out.

Nothing.

There'd been no sign of her. It was like she had just *disappeared*.

By the time the sun had set on Saturday afternoon, he'd exhausted every avenue he could imagine short of unleashing *Noelle* on the city, and he'd discovered neither hide nor hair of his Tattletale, and he found himself at a loss.

Somehow, someway, could she have left the city?

No, he dismissed the idea. No, she wouldn't have. She was too vindictive. Too obsessed with intellectual power plays and trying to prove she was the smartest person in the room. She *wouldn't* leave the city, she'd come for *him*. How she'd do it, who she'd rope in to help her, he didn't know, although it was entirely possible she'd team up with Apocrypha, somehow, but he *knew* she needed to feel like she'd gotten one over on him. She needed to feel like she'd *won*.

Coil smiled. How childish and petty his Tattletale was. How predictable.

Saturday night, he slept in one timeline and stayed up in the other, waiting for her to attack, waiting for her to raid his base and come up against his army, but it never came, so he closed the one where he stayed up and kept the one where he slept. A fully rested Thomas Calvert made his way to his home and settled in to get some work done, an insurance policy for the off chance he needed an escape, and meanwhile, in another timeline over, the supervillain Coil reinforced the base he'd chosen for this showdown — the one where Noelle was hidden, just in case.

The rest of the Travelers were split up between his other bases, lying in wait in case his Tattletale chose wrongly. Only Trickster, predictably, stayed behind with Noelle.

And so, the hours ticked by. Waiting. Every hour on the hour, his other bases called to check in, reporting, no, there was no sign of Tattletale. Nothing had changed from the hour before. There was nothing new to report.

From his office, Thomas Calvert watched through his window as the sun rose, peaked, then started to fall. He ate breakfast, lunch, and then dinner, and for Coil, nothing had changed. The clocked ticked ever onward, and even in the outside world, nothing of note occurred. Even the Empire was quiet and docile, as though they, too, were waiting for his Tattletale to make her move.

But Coil was not surprised when the sun set and night fell and still there was only silence and routine. His Tattletale would not attack in broad daylight, where and when he could see her coming. It was not in her nature to be so direct. No, she'd come in the night, like a thief, when it was hard to see in the dark.

So, he kept waiting. Thomas Calvert went about his life, and as eleven o'clock rolled around, he went about his evening ablutions and climbed into bed, because there was no sense in *both* of them losing sleep, tonight.

It was around midnight, just as Thomas was starting to fall asleep, that he heard it: a soft, almost inaudible *click*.

Instantly, he was wide awake, frozen in bed as his heart shuddered to a halt. Every muscle tightened and clenched, and he stared into the dark, wide-eyed and breathless.

It *couldn't* be. He'd been so *careful*. No clues, no hints, nothing to give him away, so there should be absolutely no *way* his Tattletale could have figured it out.

His hand reached up and carefully grasped the pistol he kept on his nightstand, and slowly, quietly, he slid out of bed like a snake.

No, it couldn't be Tattletale, so it must be an ordinary burglar. A petty thief who had managed to choose his home completely by accident, nothing more. Nothing to be worried about. In fact, his alarm should be going off right about...

Now...?

Nothing.

Thomas swallowed and took in a slow, deep breath as his heart thumped away in his chest, then flicked the safety off of his gun. Cautiously, measuring each step so that he made no sound as he walked, he made his way across his bedroom, slowly opened the door so that it didn't creak, and started towards the living room.

His eyes had long since adjusted, but there was little light in his house, made worse by the lack of a moon, so he could only see a few feet in front of his face. Unknown shapes loomed out of the dark, but stationary — his furniture. He trained his gun on each for a few seconds, just to be sure, and only moved on when none of them jumped out at him.

He turned the corner and carefully walked up to the security panel, but it showed no signs of tampering. Everything was all green.

Maybe he'd simply imagined it, then. The stress of everything going to his head —

“You know, you probably should've doubled up, if you wanted to be absolutely *sure*.”

Thomas *whipped* around, training his pistol in the direction of the voice — his *Tattletale's* voice — but a hand reached out of the dark and snatched it away so fast it felt like his finger broke.

“What —”

The devil's eyes.

Thomas gasped and stumbled back against the wall, heart thundering as a pair of big, golden eyes stared out at him from the dark. It was only as his brain caught up with what he was seeing that he realized that they weren't eyes, but lenses, set in a dark mask that covered the top half of a pale face.

The lights suddenly flicked on, and Coil lost his footing as he tried to take a reflexive step backwards and slid to the floor.

“Gah!” someone groaned.

“Fuck!” hissed another.

“My bad, my bad,” his Tattletale said.

It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust, and when they did, he was looking up at the forms of three teenage girls. Two were in street clothes, one of which was his Tattletale with a black bandana tied around her eyes in lieu of a proper mask, and the third was in full costume. It took him another moment to remember that the girl in the costume matched the description of the new heroine, Apocrypha, and the other girl with the mousy hair and freckles was the New Wave cape, Panacea.

What? She’d even managed to pull in one of *New Wave’s* group?

Apocrypha handed a gun — *his* gun, which she’d obviously wrenched out of his hand — over to his Tattletale, who released the clip and pulled back on the slide to eject the round in the chamber like she’d been handling guns all her life. Then, she tossed it carelessly over her shoulder and grinned at him.

“Hello, Coil.”

Shit. How the *hell*...

Thomas put on his best frightened expression and shrank in on himself. “Wh-who are you people? W-what do you want? J-just...t-take whatever and g-go, please don’t h-hurt —”

His Tattletale only laughed. “Yeah, that shit ain’t gonna work, here. We know it’s you, *Coil*.”

Damn it. This stupid bitch just *had* to catch him off guard.

Thomas Calvert sat straight, took a deep breath, folded his legs beneath him, and clasped his hands in his lap, then coolly, impassively, he looked up at his three assailants.

“Tattletale,” he said evenly, calmly, like he was discussing the weather. “I must say, this is a surprise. I wasn’t expecting to see you.”

“Alive, you mean?” she asked snidely. “That sure was a nasty one, trying to put a fifty caliber shot through my chest. I’ve heard that termination packages suck it big, but not *that* big. Usually, they just try to take away your *pension*. Not your breathing rights.”

“For fuck’s sake, are you gonna *monologue* at him?” muttered Panacea.

“This guy is responsible for basically *everything* that went wrong with my life in the past year, *give me this*,” said his Tattletale, before turning back to him. “Where was I? Oh yeah. Now, bad enough you tried to do it to *me*, then I heard you tried to do it to a friend of mine, too.”

She gestured to Apocrypha, who grimaced.

“I wish I could say it was unexpected, but it’s exactly the sort of thing a sociopath like you would do if you decided you needed to.”

“It was never anything *personal*, Tattletale,” he told her. “It was simply a matter of business, and the two of you interfering in mine. There was an obstacle — in this case, a pair of them — and I needed them removed. It was never about anything more than that.”

It was a bald-faced lie. The hits had been ordered in frustration and desperation, and he’d relished hearing that they were successful, even if that, too, had turned out to be skewed by whatever it was that made Apocrypha throw off his timelines.

“That said,” he went on, “I’m always open to new possibilities. I’d be delighted to find room for you in my organization, Apocrypha. Perhaps I should think about contracting the Dockworkers Union for all of my labor? Maybe convince the Mayor to reopen the ferry? I could even sponsor the project myself.”

Apocrypha stiffened, but the mask made it nearly impossible to read any part of her expression except her mouth.

“And Tattletale. Perhaps we can renegotiate the terms of our arrangement? If you’re finding work with the Undersiders dissatisfying, I’d be perfectly happy to find you another, more *comfortable* position to fill. Why, you needn’t necessarily go out in the field ever again.”

Because there was never any rule that said he couldn’t have *two* pets. To be sure, there would be some loss of potency — her powers worked better with firsthand experience, he’d found — but if the option remained to regain use of her, if there was a way to rein her in and stop the discrepancies without disposing of her utterly, then that was a more desirable outcome.

His Tattletale chuckled. “Yeah, you would, wouldn’t you? But see, there’s a reason why you’re not supposed to trust what the snake says. It’s because it speaks with a forked tongue.”

Quick as a whip, she drew her own pistol, and Thomas had only a moment to be surprised — as the other two girls gasped and called out “Lisa!” — before the bullet slammed into his chest and *pain* erupted inside of him.

“Guh!”

He clutched at the wound, gasping as he fell to one side and slumped onto the floor.

“Let him die!” said his Tattletale, holding back Panacea.

“What the fuck, Lisa!” shouted Apocrypha. “You just fucking *shot* him!”

“What do you *mean*, ‘let him die,’ you crazy bitch?!” demanded Panacea.

“We just declared ‘Check,’” said his Tattletale grimly.

“What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?”

“It means that we’re not even really *here*,” she explained. “After all, this is his *safe* timeline, isn’t it? The one you planned on retreating to, just in case something went wrong at your base?”

Thomas could only let out a wet, bloody gurgle.

“Yeah, definitely. So, if something happens *here* that forces him to close *this* timeline, then that means the other one was chosen by default, so the *real* us will have him cornered with his back to the wall and no way out. We just put him in Check.”

Damn her. Damn her and her fucking Thinker powers.

“What if you’re wrong?” asked Apocrypha. “What if we already got there and this *is* the real timeline?”

His Tattletale just looked down at him with cold eyes, mouth set into a viciously satisfied line.

“Then nothing of value will have been lost.”

Thomas died.

And Coil sat in his base, stock still, as he considered the events of that closed timeline and what they meant.

His Tattletale was coming *here*, to *this* base. Somehow, somehow, they knew where he lived, where he was. His Tattletale’s Thinker power? Probably. Maybe. There was no way to be sure, because there was so little known about Apocrypha’s powers and he hadn’t the slightest idea whether she had some Thinker ability of her own or if she could boost others.

Not important. The important thing was, he had to prepare for them.

Immediately, he split the timelines, and in each, he gave different orders. Coil A spoke:

“Alpha Team, extract Priority Package Delta through emergency exit Beta, take her to Castle Base, make *sure* she remains unharmed. Bravo Team and Charlie Team, prepare to engage hostiles from the main entrance, *take no prisoners*. Lethal measures are authorized. Delta Team, station yourselves outside my office. Inform me immediately the moment you engage the enemy.”

In the other timeline, Coil One told his men, “All teams, prepare for enemy contact. Alpha Team, take point at the entrance hall, start shooting the moment you have any sort of confirmation of enemy presence. Bravo, Charlie, and Delta Team, I want you guarding the door to my office.”

In both timelines, he was answered with calls of “Roger!” and “Yes, sir!”

“Good. Coil out.”

The moment he was done, Coil A set about preparing everything necessary, transferring command of the self-destruct sequence to his phone for remote detonation and wiping everything he absolutely didn't want discovered from his hard drive.

Meanwhile, Coil One made preparations of a different sort, making sure his sidearm was loaded, steeling himself mentally for the confrontation to come. Then, he sat down to wait.

Once he'd finished prepping his base to blow, Coil A waited only to get confirmation from Alpha Team that his pet, Dinah Alcott, had been extracted safely and was en route to Castle Base before he opened the emergency exit hidden in his office and started out the passageway that would lead him to safety.

He took the stairs up slowly and carefully, because here and now, with the base set to blow and him so close to it, the last thing he needed was to trip and sprain his ankle or break his leg.

It was as he neared the end of the tunnel, with the secret door that led to freedom in sight, that he received the call from Bravo Team.

"Contact! Contact! Enemy has breached the main door! Engaging!"

"I see." Coil A breathed. "Thank you. When you're done, I want to see their bodies."

"Rog —"

Coil A thumbed to the self-destruct and activated it.

A muted *BOOM* sounded in the distance, and the shuddering tremors knocked dust from the ceiling above him. Then came the rumble of collapsing stone as all of the supports were simultaneously destroyed and his concrete bunker fell in on itself, crushing everyone inside.

Coil A didn't stop to enjoy his victory, not yet. Instead, he kept going and opened the secret door to the bottom floor of a parking garage, almost entirely empty. It was only once he'd closed the door behind him, watched it disappear into the surrounding floor, and waited, breath held, for the distant peels of thunder to fade, it was only once it had all settled and was done that he allowed himself this victory.

He turned around and started walking.

Then, after he'd made it about a hundred feet, he started chuckling. Another ten and he allowed himself to laugh.

"Nothing of value was lost, huh?" he asked the empty air. "You're declaring Check? Well, what do you think of *that*, bitch! Huh? What do you think of *that*? You thought it was going to be that easy, did you? You thought you were going to get one over on me, did you? Try it with a hundred thousand tons of concrete on your head!"

He reined himself in and took a deep breath, trying to stop the chuckles. It took him a couple of minutes to regain control, to force them all down, but when he did, he straightened, and under the full face mask, his smiled cruelly at a joke only he could appreciate, now.

“Checkmate. I win.”

And he started towards the car he’d stashed here to finish his clean getaway.

“And where do you think *you’re* going?”

Coil A spun around —

“Gurk!”

— and something *scythed* through his gut like fire, lifted him up off of his feet, carried him backwards, and *slammed* him like a missile into one of the concrete support beams. His head cracked off of it, and as a new pain bloomed across the back of his skull, for a few timeless seconds, he saw stars.

“Gu-huh!”

He gasped in a breath, tried to focus, but his lungs had trouble filling and the flames burning his belly made concentrating all but impossible. Uncountable moments passed, stretching out into infinity such that there was no way to separate seconds from minutes from hours, but eventually, somehow, he managed to claw his way back to coherence.

When he looked down to see what had hit him, however —

“No. No, no, no!”

— it was to find an enormous greatsword jutting out from under his diaphragm, the hilt offered out in some ludicrous mockery of the Sword in the Stone.

He was already reaching for it before he could even consider whether or not he *should*.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you.”

Coil A looked up to find a face carved from stone step out of the dark.

“Right now, the thing that’s killing you is also the only thing keeping you alive.”

He blinked, realized, yes, if he were somehow able to remove the sword in his belly, he’d bleed out in under a minute, and began to observe the person across from him (the owner of the sword, some part of him knew distantly). A lean, narrow face, framed by long locks of silver. Silvery steel armor, a black bodysuit trimmed in muted red, a luminescent green pattern on the chest — there was no cape in Brockton Bay who met that description.

Wait. No, there was. Recorded only once, locked away in one of the secret files that Piggot would never have thought he had access to, a cape that had met Armsmaster on her first night out after she had beaten Lung single-handedly. A cape who had transformed from this knightly figure into a teenage girl in purple and gold.

“Apocrypha!” he rasped.

“Hello, Coil.”

“How,” he tried breathlessly. “How did you...”

“Survive?” she asked. “By the skin of my teeth.” A cold, mirthless smile pulled at her lips, entirely devoid of any semblance of warmth or humor. “Lisa and Amy were not so lucky.”

“But... My base...”

“Is gone, along with all of your hired goons.” Her eyes were like chips of ice. “As well as my two best friends.”

Belatedly, it all clicked. “You’re... here to kill me.”

She didn’t flinch. She didn’t hesitate. There wasn’t the slightest sign of indecision. “Yes.”

If he hadn’t had a sword sticking through his gut, a shiver might have gone down his spine.

“Y-you can’t,” he said, projecting a confidence and a surety of his assertion that he most definitely didn’t feel. “You w-won’t. You’re... a hero.”

“Won’t I?” Her smile gained edges. “Do you know the *one* thing *every* hero in my repertoire has in common, Coil? The *one* thing that ties them all together? They’ve all *killed*. And they were *celebrated* for it.”

“Y-you... had ample chance... to kill *Lung*. To kill...*Bakuda*. You *didn’t*.”

“But I almost did,” she confessed casually, almost conversationally. “Lung, on accident. Bakuda... do you know the only reason I *didn’t*? The *one* thing she did that held me back from actually doing it?”

He didn’t answer, although he’d had a few suspicions ever since the incident. Now, she was only confirming what he’d thought before.

“She spared my father,” Apocrypha said. “For everything else she did, for all her bluster and threats, she *didn’t* actually hurt him. If she *bad*... If she *bad*...”

The statement hung there, an implied threat, an implication of her limits and how they could break. Of how *he* could break them. Of what buttons needed to be pushed to nudge her over the edge, of what levers could drive her to the darkest depths.

He was beginning to believe he understood what was happening, now.

“Y-you wouldn’t,” he told her, although even he couldn’t fake belief in it, now. “Y-you’re not... that kind of person.”

“You’re right, I’m not,” she said, surprising him. “I’ve been fighting that inevitability since my Trigger, since I *understood*... I’ve tried *so very hard* not to step over the lines I set for myself, so that I didn’t become *that* person. I’ve tried *so hard* not to let myself compromise, not to let myself become

someone hard enough to make the decision to *end* another person. You're right, I'm not that kind of person. I wasn't...until five minutes ago."

He froze. Every thought process ground to a halt.

Until five minutes ago.

When Tattletale and Panacea were crushed and killed as his base self-destructed, she meant.

"Y-you're going t-to kill me."

He'd miscalculated. Somewhere, somehow, he'd miscalculated, *badly*.

"Not yet, but we'll get there," said Apocrypha.

He startled. "What?"

"Have you forgotten already? I'm — I *was* friends with *Lisa*, Coil. *Tattletale*. She's told me *all* about how your power works, what its limitations are."

Alarm rang distantly in the back of his head. "What?"

"You simulate possible futures in real time, living through them simultaneously and gaining the experiences of each, even though you only choose one, in the end. Since we're still here and you haven't closed down this possibility... I'm guessing only two, right? One where you self-destructed your base and left — this one — another where you didn't and stayed behind, probably to see what information you could gather, right?"

He startled again. "H-how?"

"Because we're still here," she repeated. "Which means, somewhere in there, you still consider it possible that you might want *this* timeline. If you *did* have more, if you had one where you were sitting at home, safe and sound, *then we wouldn't be here, anymore.*"

Coil A froze again, stunned. He swallowed thickly.

"Wh-what... are you going to do? Why not...just kill me?"

She regarded him coldly. "Because if you die in both timelines, I don't put it past you to keep this one just to fuck me over. You've already proven you're willing to do something like that, after all. So..."

She reached out and took hold of the hilt of the massive greatsword, then started to push it deeper. Coil A groaned, and then screamed, as the edges of the blade cut further into his body and sank further into the pillar he'd been pinned to with a sound like nails on a chalkboard.

After an eternity of pain, the blade was as deep as it was going to go, and the ornamentation at the base of it dug lightly into his wound. He panted, out of breath, every nerve fried and still throbbing as he tried desperately not to pass out.

“I’m going to give you *incentive* to choose the other,” she said grimly.

“Y-you’re not... Yo-ou’re not... that kind of...p-person!”

The fierce expression on her face could have frightened the most hardened of criminals, such was its intensity. Kaiser himself would have hesitated to see it. Even someone like *Hookwolf* would have flinched if it was turned in his direction.

“I’m *exactly* that kind of person, right now. If I have to stop running from it in order to give my other self and her two best friends a chance to survive, to *escape* this, then I’ll harden my heart and do *whatever it takes* to see that *their* timeline is the one you choose.”

“What...” he tried between breaths. “What if...I already *chose*...this timeline? What...if there...*isn’t*...another?”

For a single instant, her face contorted into a rictus of fury and grief so stark and so horrible that he thought she might try to tear him apart with her *teeth*. But after an abortive jerk towards him, moving barely a few inches forward, her expression closed down and became, if possible, even colder than before, and she regarded him with eyes that could have frozen Hell itself.

“Then I’ll just have to stop turning away and live with who I am,” she told him with a voice like the Arctic. “Unlike you. *You* won’t be alive to see what you made me into.”

She let go of her sword and reached out, taking one of his hands in hers with an utterly incongruent gentleness. Then, as her grip tightened, her right hand took hold of his index finger, and Coil realized what it was she intended to do.

It only took two fingers before he decided to drop that timeline.

Coil One, now the *only* Coil, sat, frozen, in his office, trying to wrap his head around what had happened in his other timeline.

He’d been tortured. That had...*never* happened before. Not once, in all the myriad failures and aborted tragedies his power had allowed him to see and avoid, had he *ever* been tortured. Injured, killed, even captured, sometimes, but never subjected to something so visceral, so bent entirely on inflicting pain, so determined to make him suffer as much as possible, so...

He realized belatedly that he was shaking, and his hands were glued to the armrests of his chair in white-knuckled grips. His heart was still beating a rapid rhythm against the inside of his chest, like he was still back there in that parking lot, dying slowly as that piercing gaze watched him squirm and scream with the grim satisfaction of an executioner.

There was a commotion outside, the rapid sound of gunfire that erupted suddenly and just as suddenly fell silent, and Coil knew immediately what it meant. His breath caught in his throat and his hands curled tighter around the armrests of his chair as the beating of his heart sped up, and he realized, then and there, with a wash of cold terror, that he *didn’t* have another timeline to escape to, he *didn’t* have a way out of this situation, and he was completely and utterly trapped.

The silence stretched for seconds that felt like hours, and then, the door to his office swung open dramatically, and through the door strode the three girls who had cornered him in his own home in the other timeline, with Apocrypha leading in the front. He should say something, he should have a witty line or a calm remark, a threat, a promise, a boast — *anything* that would let him regain control of the situation.

But his lips wouldn't move. His tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth.

“Heya, Bossman,” said his Tattletale, grinning at him broadly. “Surprised to see me? Alive?”

Still, his mouth refused to obey.

Apocrypha stepped forward, and the line of her mouth, the hard set to her shoulders, the tense posture that seemed to him to be holding back every ounce of the violence and aggression her alternate self had displayed, it was like a slap in the face. He jerked back and away, pushing deeper into his chair as though that would help him escape the inevitable.

His gut and his fingers burned with remembered agony, the phantom of another life. The promise of what was to come in this one.

“Wait,” he said, scrambling for anything that would convince her to stop, “wait, I can be of use to you! I have money, influence — an in with the PRT! I can... I can clean up the Boat Graveyard, hire the Dockworkers! You'll never want for anything ever again!”

“Coil,” she said slowly, clearly, in a tone heavy with meaning and purpose. “I've beaten your agents, I've beaten your defenses, I've beaten *you*.”

Behind her, he saw his Tattletale flinch, watched her face cycle rapidly between surprise, indignation, fury, and settle at last on grim resignation.

“By right of conquest, I demand these boons —”

He realized what was going to happen almost too late, as his Tattletale drew her pistol with practiced speed and leveled it in his direction. He split the timeline almost reflexively, and in one, he dodged right, while in the other, he dodged left.

BANG

The timelines collapsed back into one, and the Coil who dodged left jerked as the bullet hit home, blood spurting out of his chest, then slumped over onto the surface of his desk.