**Expansion 20.X (Accord)**

There was nothing quite as satisfying as a well-executed plan.

Accord wanted to smile as Vejovis fully understood just how wrong he had been, to underestimate the Thinker. He would not be the first, and he wouldn’t be the last, but Accord would deal with them as he’d dealt with *this* self-important fool.

To think, that the Hero would come to *him*, demand that *he* comply, and then was stupid enough to think he would be bound. As if there could be *any* agreements with an agent of chaos like Vejovis. The man played at ‘order’, but one only had to look at the man’s actions to see the truth. He was unbalanced, wild, and it was only when he was out of the picture that things in ‘New’ Brockton Bay finally calmed down.

The second the man had walked in the door to Accord’s office, rudely ignoring the requirements of the meeting, the Thinker had started to draw up plans as to how best remove him, a complicated enough problem that his power leapt to the task, outlining *exactly* how to bring about this fool’s demise.

Until it hadn’t.

Suddenly, his power was rendered incapable of planning Vejovis’ removal, every outcome only ending with the man’s *capture*. No matter what he wanted, his power refused to budge, only allowing him to *hold* Vejovis, but never harm the man in the slightest.

Which told Accord that Vejovis was an agent of chaos so pernicious he *must* be removed at all costs.

But there were more ways to destroy someone than by physically damaging them.

So he had turned his power towards the man’s *companions*, a task his power was more than willing to assist him with. But removing one or two to make a point would not be enough, he had needed to make his victory complete.

And he had.

Managing the fallout would take an effort, but would be worth it to remove so many disruptive influences, and the bounties he would collect would more than make up for it. Especially the one from Cauldron for Vejovis’ capture, and for Break’s death. Even now, he received the notification from The Number Man, informing him of the reward delivered to his accounts.

Accord’s expression didn’t move, as he watched the feed displaying Vejovis, waiting to see how the man would react. When pressed like this, some raged against fate, some begged for mercy, some sobbed in misery, and some just *broke*. From the man’s expression of abject despair, it was likely the third.

After which, it would be easy enough to fill the chamber with poison gas, and eliminate this agent of chaos. Without his ability to control air, he would not be able to survive it, and being killed by the very thing his hidden power let him affect held a satisfying symmetry.

Vejovis’ gaze unfocused, before his entire body went limp for a moment, still held in place by the bonds integrated into the chair he was sitting in. The change was so sudden that Accord was inclined to shift his assessment of the hero’s response.

Then, as quickly as his disposition changed, it shifted again, the look of horror gone. With a mild smile he sat up, glanced around, shook his head as if in disapproval. *Broken,* Accord decided. It wouldn’t be the first time. “Well?” he prompted Vejovis, seeking to determine the issue. If the man was rendered mute, there was no more enjoyment to be had here.

When Vejovis replied, his voice was different. Deeper, and smoother, and with a different way of enunciating that indicated a psychotic break, or a Master effect. “Little Planner,” the hero said with a scornful sigh. “All this talent, and *this* is how you use it? For *shame.*” However, the man didn’t look at the screen in front of him. No, he looked up and to the side, and Accord felt a slight chill as the Thinker realized the hero was looking directly at *him*.

Hitting a button to freeze the feed, he looked over to Citrine, reminding her, “You said his powers were suppressed.”

“They are, Sir,” the woman replied promptly. “All four of them!”

On screen there was a flash of purple and the chair holding Vejovis came apart around him, its component parts falling to the floor, perfectly disassembled in a way that *was* aesthetically pleasing, but also worrying, and sent Accord pressing the button to fill the chamber with gas, *none* of what was happening foreseen in his plans.

Standing, the other man’s costume rippled and shifted, like a living thing, turning pitch black and shifting to threads that interwove into the fabric of a suit, but in the gaps prismatic eyes could be seen, as well as shifting mouths full of sharp teeth, ringed like a lamprey’s, that quivered before they shut. His mask retracted, exposing his face, and his prismatic eyes, which burned with what appeared to be equally colorful fire, before they banked themselves into burning rainbow embers.

The man’s clothing was now a suit so black it drank in the light, a white undershirt, and a constantly shifting prismatic tie. Pure white gloves covered his hands as he straightened the already *perfectly* straight tie, setting it *ever* so crooked as the man smiled, and took a deep breath of the poisoned air.

“Cyanide? How *trite,*” Vejovis taunted, even as the flesh of his face shifted slightly, tendrils seeming to wriggle under his skin, before shifting into a sharper, thinner visage, features now almost aristocratic. “You really *haven’t* done your homework, have you, Little Planner?”

Toggling the comms, Accord snarled, “Greyware, you said you fried his Tinkertech!”

“I did, sir!” the Ambassador quickly replied. “But all he had was an earpiece, and I made sure it was broken, sir!”

“Then how is he *doing* this?” the Thinker demanded, mind spinning into possibilities, but each was more ludicrous than the last.

“*How am I doing this?*” Vejovis seemingly echoed, and Accord froze, as he realized the man could *hear him*. “It’s quite simple, Little Planner,” the man smiled, amused. “I don’t have *four* powers, I have *forty-seven.*”

“That’s impossible!” Accord yelled, while the man laughed, long and loud. The Thinker shut off the feed, but while the video stopped, the sound *didn’t,* and standing up, backing away from his desk, led Accord to realize the noise wasn’t coming from the speakers, it was *everywhere.*

More than that, was a sound of. . . drums? No, bongos, and. . . maracas? Why did that sound so *familiar?* Hitting another button, the chamber Vejovis was in was flooded with fire, and the laughing stopped, but the instruments kept going. Accord opened his mouth to tell Citrine to shift her power and *kill* everything in her range, the woman needing to be careful to *only* stop a parahuman’s power, but he didn’t make a sound, the only noise the music that ran through *everything*.

And then the singing started.

“*Please allow me to introduce myself,”* Accord could hear Vejovis say, as if he was standing right behind the man.

“*I’m a man of Wealth and Taste,”* the singing continued, and Vejovis appeared in a plume of black flame. A single hand flicked out, a dark blade extending from his sleeve, and Citrine was beheaded in an instant.

Accord stumbled backwards, grabbing a pistol and pointing it at the man, only for it to be yanked from his hand as it glowed black, almost breaking his fingers in the process.

*“I’ll be around for a long, long time,”* Vejvois continued, and flicked his other arm out towards Accord who fell backward, the long, thin blade that emerged from the man’s sleeve nicking his cheek instead of slicing his throat.

“*Claim many a man’s Shard and fate,*” the parahuman smiled, as Accord ran, out the door and into the hallway, reflexively hitting the button for his comms, and found it made sound as it clicked on.

The Thinker didn’t hesitate, yelling, *“Vejovis has escaped. He’s after me! Help!”*

Breaking into a larger room, the people there already grabbing weapons, *everyone* in this location trained to fight if need be. As they did so, there was another plume of black flame, and Vejvois appeared, blades sheathed.

With a snap of his fingers, one that reverberated unnaturally, *every* piece of glass in the room shattered and flew into the air, even as his employees opened fire, a shadowy bubble appearing around the enemy parahuman and blocking the shots.

And the singing continued.

*“I’ll be round when The Warrior, has his moment, of doubt and pain,”* he called out, the Thinker remembering that name from Cauldron’s briefings, and Accord, panicking, started seizing on plans of escape, ducking under cubicles as the flying glass cut his left arm, but not deeply.

His employees weren’t so lucky.

They *tried* to fight, but the attack was devastating, eviscerating his personnel, but giving the Thinker time to run out another door, giving his security team a coded message on where to meet up with him.

Turning a corner, he saw an armored squad getting into position, Tinkertech weapons at the ready, waving him over for safety, but behind them, in another plume of black flame, Vejovis appeared. With a gesture, a dark glow appeared under the feet of his men, and they were slammed into the walls on either side of the hallway with such force that the cracking of their bones was easily audible, blood splattering as fractured bones punched through the fabric of their uniforms, and another dark glow appeared underneath Accord’s feet.

“*I’ll make sure that Cauldron,*” Vejovis announced, still singing, “*Gets their due, they’ve sealed their fate.”*

Knowing it was coming, he went with the first plan he had, and, when he was launched forward, the other man re-extending the thin blade from his sleeve, the Thinker rolled, taking a thin cut to his left leg instead of being sliced in half, entering the next room too fast and stumbling to his feet. Breathing hard, he slammed open the door to the stairs, and started to climb, out of options, the few people behind him pulling weapons, but the sound of gunfire only lasted a moment.

And the music *kept going.*

Rising up to the next floor, he was no longer surprised to find Vejovis waiting for him with a blade, and smile.

*“Pleased to meet you,”* he said, lashing out, but Accord planned for the attack, barely dodging out of the way, receiving a cut to his other chief as he stumbled through the door, heart thudding in his ears as he fled the man’s taunting, “*hope you guess my name.”*

Clicking the comms, the Thinker gave his location, and demanded, *“****Send everyone!****”*

One of his Ambassadors *finally* arrived, Codex, the white clad woman already charging up her power, which damaged the target’s brain, eroding memories, to boost her own mental abilities.

Instead of teleporting in, Vejovis casually strode after Accord, who glanced backwards to see the man grinning, every one of his teeth pointed, as he sang, *“But what’s puzzling you, is the nature of my game.”*

*I think I understand what you want,* the Thinker remarked to himself, hurrying past his Ambassador, who threw her hand out, power invisibly heading towards the enemy parahuman.

Who *didn’t* teleport, but instead turned into black lightning, that passed through the floor like it wasn’t there, the song continuing unabated.

“Keep going, Sir,” Codex told him, pointing towards a door. “The others are wa*-aaaah!”* she screamed, as the same black lightning pierced the floor underneath her, electrocuting the woman, and reforming into Vejovis.

His Ambassador crumpled to the floor, flesh smoking, but the man extended a blade from a sleeve and cut her in half, twisting around and swinging for Accord, who stumbled back, the blade only nicking his other cheek, before the Thinker ran out the door.

“*I stuck around New Brockton Bay, when I saw it really needed a change,”* Vejovis continued, and two daggers of ice flew by the Thinker’s head, both cutting into his shoulders a little in the process, before burying themselves in the drywall, and something about them seemed familiar, but he didn’t have time to look them over, he had to *run*.

Going for the other set of stairs, he neared the elevator, which opened, and he stumbled as the heat washed over him, Vejvois inside it, standing in an inferno.

“*Killed the gangs, and their minions,”* the man announced with a grin, making no move to attack the Thinker as he fled, “*Director Tagg, screamed in vain.”*

Breaking into another room, Accord looked around, spotting a single black ember floating in the air, and pointed at it, screaming, “*Fire!”*

His people unloaded, but he could practically *see* the bullets curving around it, as the flame bloomed and Vejovis strode out of it, announcing, “*I held the line, tried to protect what’s mine, When Leviathan raged, and blood mixed with brine.*”

The man pulled a hand back, to make a casting gesture, and Accord ducked down as a line of *something* passed overhead, and most of those around him fell to the ground, flesh, armor, even guns cut in half, as what Accord realized was *water* fell all around him.

Looking back, Vejvois, no, the thing that *pretended* to be Vejovis gave Accord a mocking bow, *nothing* about the man standing before him matching the intel the Thinker had gathered. “*Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name,”* he sang mockingly. “*But what’s puzzling you, is the nature of my game.”*

Accord ran, the music still going, and his comm buzzed in his ear, telling him where his people were gathering. Running into the door to go up to the next floor, he made it up without incident, and then glanced up the next set, to see the Thing waiting for him, casually leaning against the railing, an eyebrow raised.

The Thinker *knew* he was being herded, but he didn’t see *why*, and he barely had time to think of any plans as to what to do, every defense he had broken, and every contingency failing. Making it to the next room, he saw more forces arranged, along with the Fenway Players, a gate already open and ready for him to escape through as they stood, ready to defend him as he ran.

*“I watch with woe, while your cops and capes, fight the true villains, and the world they’ve made,”* the Thing announced, what sounded like *owl calls* added to the song, and, beside Touchdown on the other side of the gate, miles away, a black flame started to burn.

*‘Get away!’* Accord wanted to shout, but, once more, he was rendered silent, as the Thing stepped out of the fire next to the gate-creator, and, with a flick of the wrist, beheaded him, the gate snapping shut a moment later, but the music *kept going.*

Unable to make a sound, Accord tried to yell *‘Run!’*, pointing towards the door he’d came from, and the stairs, before it exploded outwards in black flames, sending him sprawling. Standing, he pointed instead for a different door, and the others followed him, the singing continuing.

*“I shouted out, ‘can’t we work together?’ But, it turns out, no one really cares,”* the Thing mused, reappearing behind them, the Parahumans moving to try and defend them. It looked upon them, shook his head, and opened its hands, a stream of black particles flowing out, and picking up speed.

Curler threw her hands out in response, her friction negating field doing *nothing* except maybe speeding up the flow of what almost looked like sand. Backstop was next, throwing up her shields, which collected the particles into a dark, shiny mass, but it flowed up and around them, even as Linebacker charged the Thing.

The Brute slammed into the black-suited figure, who didn’t budge an inch, slashing out with a blade that the football-pad clad man threw a hand out and caught. However, the blade then *curved,* wrapping around the man’s arm, slicing through his costume, and a dozen black spikes shot out of the man’s back, then *twisted*, blades that ran him through cutting the Brute to pieces in a second.

Meanwhile, the flowing black sand made it around Backstop’s barriers, and the two women started to scream. Before he ran through the door, Accord gave one last look back, and saw the black substance was flaying the two women alive, ripping apart small chunks of flesh in a constant stream as their powers flickered and died, half-hidden by the dark substances, muscle and bone clearly visible.

*At least you bought me time,* Accord thought, rushing down another hallway, helped along and half-carried by his men. With his main evacuation plan gone, the others on-site would be gathering above, Touchdown’s power too slow to allow for rapid redeployment. Seeing another black ember in the air, Accord directed his men to the *wrong* door, ducking out of sight as it bloomed into another teleporting fire, the Thing stepping out as it continued to sing.

*“Let me please introduce myself, I’m a man of Wealth and Taste,****”*** he announced, the reflected flashes of light across the ceiling showing his men were silently firing, but *these* ones didn’t have Tinkertech rifles, and would be useless. A ribbon of pressurized water later, and most of the flashes stopped, but some continued, the Thinker hurrying for the door as the Thing kept going.

*“And I deal with the Endbringers, then kill all those who get in my way,”* it added, and Accord made it to the door, before the metal paneling around the edge exploded outwards into a cluster of steel spikes that he barely dodged, cutting a line down his right leg.

*Dryad?* the man thought, the one member of the Thing’s group he hadn’t been able to find still a factor, but it wasn’t humanoid, just a cluster of spikes, and the Thinker rushed for the door, narrowly ducking under another set of spikes, these made of painted plaster, that exploded out from the wall. *No, another power,* he realized, breathing hard, pushing himself to try and escape, or at least get to someone else that could slow that *Thing* down. He was only a single floor below ground level, where everyone else would be gathering to more efficiently be deployed with communications down. He only had one set of stairs left to go.

Running through the now-empty halls, there was no sign of the Thing, until he saw the door to the stairs, and it was waiting for him, smiling, shadows streaming from its body and slowly enveloping the room. “*Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name,*” it taunted, but even when Accord tried to say something, *anything,* he couldn’t make a sound. A black glow once more enveloped the Thinker’s feet, who followed his last plan and dove, even as he was yanked forward, the Thing’s blade flashing out as it sang, *“But what’s puzzling you is the nature of my game.”*

Again, Accord dodged getting cut in half, receiving a slash down his right arm instead, and hit the stairs, *hard*, but scrabbled up them, desperate to get to safety. Trying to stop the Thing one at a time wasn’t working, but even the most confident of parahumans couldn’t fight off *massed* opposition. It was why Cauldron, after they were no longer able to hide the frailty of Parahumans, made sure to keep clashes roughly even where they could.

*He'd* be fine because his actions would be hidden, but it didn’t change the fact that one versus many, the one lost, which is how they’d killed Vejovis’ teammates.

Which, Accord was now realizing, had been a *mistake.*

The song continued, playing a *guitar solo* of all things, but the Thing wasn’t waiting for him in the stairwell, for once, and Accord started to plan a route that would take him higher, to try and hide, but spotted a single black ember hanging in the air on the next level of stairs, and understood the warning for what it was.

Running out the door into the lobby, the guards turned their guns on him, before quickly pointing them away, Othello moving forward towards the Thinker, asking, “Sir, where are the others?”

Surprised he could make noise again, Accord took a moment before he responded, “Dead. Vejovis, isn’t what we thought.”

Even though his face was hidden, the Thinker could hear the frown in his Ambassador’s voice. “Who is he?”

“I said *what*,” Accord corrected, having a moment to think, even with that *stupid* guitar solo still playing, accompanied by constant ‘hoo hoo’s, and was finally able to correlate the bits of data he’d been gathering, removing the fact that it was Vejovis he was thinking of, his power finally starting to come up with a plan to deal with the Thing, and he paled, as it consisted of two steps.

1. Thirty seconds to call Cauldron.
2. The rest of his life to hope he was allowed to live.

Because, in the face of the *only* thing that had *that* many powers, at that *level* of power, with those uses, there was only *one* thing it could be. And with the powers on display, mixed together, Vejovis, Nephilim, and the golden angel who’d broadcast its song *just* like this one was being played *everywhere*?

They were the *same person*.

If you could call that Thing a *person*.

Which meant he had to run, and had to run *now*.

But it was too late.

Shadows covered every wall of the atrium, blocking out the rest of the world, only the lights from above casting any illumination, and Lizardtail II moved next to him, the man’s regeneration and durability aura washing over him, starting to heal his wounds.

His *perfectly symmetrical wounds*.

Face, shoulders, arms, legs, they were *exactly* mirrored, despite all but two coming at different times, through different means, and Accord realized the Thing had been playing with him this entire time. “I surrender!” the Thinker called out, looking around. “I give up! Just let me live!” Accord almost begged, but the shadows thickened, and, he heard the Thing start to Sing again, so like the Simurgh in its own way.

*“Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name,”* it taunted, as, around them, a dozen pairs of prismatic eyes opened in the darkness, floating outwards, forms covered in shadows, crimson wings of flame, like Nephilim’s, but of a different color, carrying them forward, flapping in a mockery of flight. “*But what’s confusin’ you, is just the nature of my game.”*

But Accord did understand.

The Thing didn’t want Justice, like Vejovis would.

It wanted *revenge.*

“Cauld-” Accord tried to yell, to get them to do *something.* It was *them* that put him up to this, *they* could help him survive it, but the sound was snuffed out in his throat, as every single one of the Thing shook their heads in unison.

Unable to speak, the Thinker gestured, his Ambassadors knowing this contingency, Othello yelling, *“Fire!”* for him as everyone attacked, Tinkertech guns and normal ones firing, explosives thrown, powers unleashed in every direction, but through all of it, the song continued.

“*Just as every ‘Hero’ is a Villain.”*

Black rivers of sand descended, tearing people to shred, layer by layer, two brushing against Accord’s forearms and stripping off flesh.

*“And all of mine are dead,”*

Spikes of stone erupted from the ground, impaling others, two slashing into his calves.

*“As heads is tails, just call me. . .* ***Leecifer****,”*

More were lifted into the air, ripped apart as their limbs glowed darkly and were encrusted with Ice, and he only had a moment of cold before his thumbs were ripped off his hands.

*“Because I’m* ***done*** *with my restraint.”*

Thin darts of crimson shot into more, burning holes into them as they screamed in agony, two burning more fingers off, and cauterizing the wounds.

“So *when you met me, you needed courtesy.”*

Beams of black light arrowed down, piercing through armor like paper, striking through his stomach as he tried to run.

*“You needed sympathy, and some taste.”*

Three of his people took to the air, and were cut apart with streams of water, another two streams whipping by him to carve divots out of his shoulders.

*“But you had nothing but contempt.”*

Shards of glass flew through the atrium, two striking his temples, sliding across them instead of breaking, cutting him more.

*“Now I’ll lay your realm to waste.”*

There was an enormous explosion that picked him up and threw him into the darkness, but instead of striking a wall and dying instantly, Accord broke through the glass front doors of the building, hitting the ground and rolling.

Barely conscious, the Thinker tried to struggle to his feet, tried to call for Cauldron, blood running into his eyes, and he was picked up, the air around him freezing cold and burning hot, and a wash of black flame cleared his vision long enough to see that he was being held, by his head, by the Thing, as Accord’s compound burned with black flames behind the floating figure, who sang.

“*Pleased to meet you, hope you guessed my name.”*

His throat was raw, his body weak, but Accord choked out a single word:

“**E-Entity**.”

The Thing smiled, nodding slightly, remarking, “*But what’s puzzling you, is the nature of my game.”*

And the Thinker had to admit, the Thing was *right*. The way it had acted, it wasn’t like Scion. It’d hid, to the point that *he’d* thought it was human. A chaotic parahuman, who was somehow succeeding, when he should have failed. An upstart who needed to be brought down, before the plan could continue.

He also knew what the Vials truly were, and why the Thing *hated* Cauldron so much.

The song slowly faded, and the Thing regarded him. “You know what, I’ll tell you, Little Planner” it mused, bringing the man close, to whisper into his ear.

*“****I’m going to save your pitiful world. Because it’s what* he *would have wanted. But I’m not going to be gentle about it.****”* Moving Accord back a little, the Thing smirked. “After all, I’ve *seen* how well you Hosts get along without someone like me, and it’s-”

It paused, and turned to look past Accord, where there was the sound of displaced air, and digging, and more, the music finally fading out. The Thing turned Accord, so the Thinker could see a large group of people in costume had arrived, over two dozen, armed and armored, along with Break and Enter, who Accord *knew* were dead, but they were clearly standing right there. To the side of them, an enormous flower bloomed, clearly the work of some kind of power, inside of which stood the Morrigan, and The Lady, Bug, the latter of whom was staring at them.

No, she was staring at the *Thing*.

He opened his mouth, to tell her what it was that *pretended* to be their leader, but the words would not come, blocked by his captor.

“Well, this is awkward,” the hidden Entity remarked blandly, its grip on Accord’s head tightening in an instant.

The Thinker heard bones cracking, felt a sharp pain, and knew no more.