**Investments 14.X**

*This was a great idea,* Herb thought, lounging on the beach, the soothing sounds of the waves washing away the stress that’d been building up for the last month.

He wished Lee could’ve joined them; if anyone needed a vacation, it was his best friend. But that wasn’t his way. He’d spend the entire thing stressing about what was going on back home, so maybe the girls would finally go ahead and do something. His friend would say no, so wrapped up in his own head and his morals, but even having them try would help him understand he wasn’t so alone.

Fighting a wince back, Herb knew that he’d messed up there. He glanced over to the water, where Dinah was playing in the water with Theo, who was being a good sport about the entire thing. He had his reasons, with Dinah grabbed, and not able to use her power on Lee, Coil’d slip up when he relied on her, letting Lee do his thing without that asshole’s interference. They’d save her, and they did, and with Amelia they’d be able to heal everything that happened to her.

That was an excuse though, and seeing that little girl recovering after Lee’d brought her back, he knew he’d fucked up, but could you blame him? He was *literally* in a story, a book he’d skimmed, these weren’t people, they were just *characters,* or at least that’d been what he’d told himself.

Then Bakuda happened.

Seeing people walking around, like NPC’s, was one thing. Seeing them scared, and hurt, and dying. . . that was something else entirely, and it was too late to undo what he’d done. He wanted to say that he’d only let it happen because Lee was letting it happen too, but that was just an excuse. The guy tended to focus, *really* focus, like, too a point that it wasn’t good. The man lost time when he started to work on things, though the things he’d get done were fucking impressive. But that meant it fell to him to cover what Lee didn’t, and he hadn’t.

Hell, he’d even turned the conversation away from it, whenever he got too close. Lee cared, even when he shouldn’t, and he’d’ve tanked their chances to save Dinah, maybe giving away the entire game to save someone he didn’t even know. That meant that it’d fallen on him to make the hard call, though that call got a lot harder when it wasn’t just picking the renegade option.

Either way, it didn’t matter. Dinah was safe, and with how Brockton Bay was most of the shit they knew didn’t matter anyways. That meant that Herb would go with the flow, like he always did, and Lee’d start planning, like he always did. If he needed Herb’s help, he’d call, and in the meantime Herb was getting back to his own plans.

“You need some more sunscreen?” he asked Kayden, who was stretched out next to him on her own blanket. With her power, she didn’t burn as easily as her pale skin said she would, more like one of his family, but she would burn eventually.

The woman thought about his offer, before nodded, turning over so she was no longer facing the sun. "You can do my back, if you want," she offered, her own pride not allowing her to do more.

Herb smiled, getting up. Any time It was slow progress, but it was progress, and she'd eventually understood why he'd 'married' Hedera, even if she didn't agree with it. That argument had been an odd mix of terrifying and kind of hot, and still brought a smile to his face.

"Me too," the plant controller to his other side called out, and Herb's smile got a bit more fixed.

Marrying her had been a spur of the moment decision, which, if he had to admit, was what most of his decisions were. He'd had good reasons, and he was kinda glad that Lee'd talked to him about talking *to her,* as she didn't know what he'd *thought* was obvious, but she'd taken it well, which had only proved he was right about getting her out of Maine. He'd known people like her father, and there was no way that Brix was gonna give the girl the space she needed to spread her wings and grow. That said, her comment that she understood and didn't need to do anything *yet* had been a little worrying.

Herb didn't really want a mistress. Okay, *he did*, there just being something about being hung upside down that just. . . *yeah*. But he didn't want a mistress in *that* way, and he was making progress with Kayden and didn't have any interest in hurting the woman who'd been hurt and twisted by Kaiser, especially since she was getting better! It really made the entire thing *much* more complicated than it needed to be.

And it wouldn't be fair to Hedera. He had really known that much about her when he'd 'married' her, but she was nice. The quiet sort, but not exactly a shrinking violet, just kind of there, helping out a little, just being part of the group. Lee had mentioned that he was thinking about getting her combat trained, but Herb had said he'd handle it.

And he would.

Later.

But there wasn't any need for it right now, and she'd kinda taken over their hydroponics, keeping herself busy with that, so she was using her powers, so there shouldn't be a problem, so it could wait until later. With he and Lee as their heavy hitters, and with the others backing them up, there wasn't anything they couldn't take.

Except Scion.

And the Endbringers.

And *maybe* the Triumvirate.

But other than that they were *fine.*

And what were the chances that something would happen that'd get one of them involved? Scion was out in the middle of the ocean, he'd checked; the Endbrigners attacked every few months, they attacked *two weeks ago*, and it wasn't like Lee was so stupid he'd go pick a fight with one; and Lee'd been dodging Cauldron's calls like he owed them money, so no issue there. And even then they had Lee's dad, who was apparently an Indian dude now, go figure, giving them heads up on shit like that Nazi trap.

Speaking of which, he'd been happy to find the head hitler-ite had bit it during the Leviathan attack. He'd broken it to Kayden carefully, still not sure how she'd take it, but she'd just sighed, like a weight had been taken off her shoulders, and smiled at him. That bright, carefree smile that he hadn't seen since he'd come back with Hedera in tow.

Straddling her, he lubed up his hands with the lotion, and got to work, applying it to her back, sneaking in a bit of a massage in the process. He wasn't so dumb as to say it out loud, but he was of the mind that 'Any time he could touch and not get knocked was a good time.'

Also, *Sunscreen was awesome*.

She tried to keep quiet, being all nordic stoicism and shit, but he was  *good* at this, and soon enough he got her making those cute little breaths and moans, gently working away the knots she'd formed from worrying and getting worked up over things that didn't matter. They'd come back, he'd done this almost every day, but every time they did they weren't nearly as tight, and he’d work them back down, like the waves washing away the steps on the beach behind him.

He let his mind wander as he went at it. Not *everything* had been good on this vacation, though it'd mostly been one thing that'd caused the problems.

Boojack.

His clone had arrived, like they all did, a couple of days in, the same day he should've gotten his next one. That hadn't been the problem. The problem had been how. . . handsy he'd been getting with the girl who barely qualified as a teenager. He wasn't blind, he knew that kind of shit happened sometimes, and no one really talked about it, but it wasn't going to be a clone of himself that did it, even if it didn't look like himself anymore and acted more like one of his brothers, and not to someone he was supposed to be protecting.

He'd taken his clone aside and told him, "I've been seein' what you've been doin'!"

Boojack had just shrugged, not even responding.

"Don't act like you haven't been!" Herb had pressed getting a snort from the replicant.

"Haven't been actin'," the copy had commented, "Why do you care?"

Herb had just stared at this version of him, wondering what part of *him* had turned into *that.* "It's messed up! It's messed up, and I don't want to see any Pedo-DA!"

At this Boojack had glowered at Herb, just like his brother used to. "Well, that's my woman, man."

"She don't look like a woman," the original had shot back, "and if you want to stay with her, I wouldn't touch her, 'cause I  *will* kill you!"

The other man had stared at Herb, unblinkingly, and Herb had stared right back. Finally, with another animal snort, the replicant had turned and walked away.

Herb had gotten him a room in another hotel, several miles away from their own, and hadn’t seen the Replicant since. However, the next day Ester had said she’d gotten all she wanted of the beach, and had asked if she could go see some movies instead. She’d asked Kayden, however, who’d given the young girl permission before Herb could say anything.

Kayden had pointed out that, with her powers, she’d be fine, and Herb had just hoped that would be true.

Finishing with Purity, he moved over to Hedera, who naturally had a darker complexion, more Mediterranean than anything else. Not putting in half the effort, he still did try, as there was no reason to give her a limp message just because he didn’t like her that way.

The girl underneath him moaned, and he froze, having barely started.

Looking over to Kayden she looked back, incredulously. To show he wasn’t doing anything he just took two fingers and lightly spread out some more sunscreen, prompting another sound, and shrugged.

Thankfully, Kayden just rolled her eyes and laid back down, and when Herb started again Hedera, while still more vocal than the other woman had been, at least toned it down a little.

It was a few hours later when something happened to break his peaceful relaxation. When he’d gotten everyone to go get lunch, he’d had a moment where it felt like someone was calling him, though he didn’t hear anything. He’d ignored it, gone back to his burger, and then everyone had gone right back to the beach.

Now, though, the sounds of screams pierced the air. Not the happy screams of a girl getting dumped into the water by her boyfriend, or oven children chasing each other, but someone that was actually scared.

He sat up, along with the others, to see people running away from a shark. A shark man. A ten foot tall shark man. In speedos. With a backpack.

“Huh, that’s odd,” he commented, getting an incredulous look from Kayden. “You saying this is normal?” he asked. “Might be, never been to Virginia before.”

“It’s not,” said shaking her head, smiling a little. *Yes!* “Should we, you know, do something?” she asked, holding up a hand that glimmered faintly with her power.

 “He might be friendly,” Herb argued, trying not to ruin his vacation with fighting. “Maybe he wants some fish sticks.”

The shark man held out a hand, a stream of water blasting out and into the snack shack nearby, blowing off a wall.

“Maybe he’s *really* hungry?” he suggested.

“Open the safe, or I’ll kill you!” the shark man roared, striding over and grabbing the guy who’d been behind the counter.

Kayden gave him a look, and Herb sighed. “Yeah, dude’s a dick. It’s fine, I got this. Just sit back and relax.”

“Are you sure?” Hedera asked, and he glanced over at her, eyebrow raised, until he realized that she might not know what he could do.

“I thrashed Leviathan, until he ran. This guy’s hakuna matata,” Herb smiled, calling his Stand to him, shrunk down as small as it would go. Tapping it for powers, he turned himself into a gnat and used his jump power to accelerate himself towards the fishy felon.

The power moved him the same amount, no matter what he was, and he was *so* happy he’d figured out he could toggle it, even if it’d been by accident. When he lost access to powers, shit still kept moving, so jumping then dropping it made him still move like he’d jumped. Picking it up again, he could use the second jump the second triggered power gave him, where he jumped on the air itself. Using that, he accelerated again, enough to move him another hundred and fifty feet more than he would’ve gone without it. Dropping it and picking up again, he sped up even more, pushing the point where his jump would ‘end’ another fifty meters.

He just had to make sure it was still up when he landed, because it hurt like a bitch otherwise.

That meant when he slammed into the side of the destroyed shack, going. . . he wasn’t sure how fast, but *fast*, and not just ‘cause he was a gnat, he was perfectly fine, the power counting that as ‘landing’. Focusing on the shark dude, he looked a *lot* bigger up close, and when you were a tenth of an inch tall, he got a sense of the powers he could copy.

It wasn’t the detailed list that he got whenever he was around his best friend, but tapping them for himself he could fire jets of water from his hands, a tiny little stream coming from one leg. The other tried to turn him into a shark-person, but he dropped it, but he got the flavor of it. It felt like how he remembered his other custom animal forms, like the Therewolf, or Smaug 2: Burn Harder.

That. . . gave him an idea. Keeping the taste of it in mind, he rocketed away as the villain started to empty the contents of the safe into his backpack, which looked waterproof. Hitting the water at the speed he got to would’ve hurt, but, again, Jump took the blow for him.

Shifting to a fish, he got a good distance away before going for the shark-man form, having his Stand do it too so he could see what it looked like. He grew almost explosively, filling out until he was way bigger than he normally was. Looking at his stand, he got close, but it wasn’t really the same.

He and his stand weren’t identical, but they were both shark-people. Break still looked scaley, like his grandpa was a sea serpent, while Herb had the same smooth skin and coloration of the jerk on the shore, though the patterns where the grey turned to white was different.

It didn’t matter, he could work with this. Bringing his stand back to carry size, and having it hanging onto him, Herb got to work. He slimmed his own muscles a bit, widened his hips slightly, shrank slightly, grew a ring of bone around the fourth finger of his left hand, raised the pitch of his voice, and then he gave himself boobs.

Not *real* boobs, of course. No nipples. This *was* a public beach, and they had laws against that kind of thing.

Before he surfaced he paused, having forgotten about his junk. As much as it pained him to do so, he got rid of his block and tackle, making it smooth, coloring the area like he was wearing shorts. Ready, he Jumped forward, naturally moving flat to go faster. He couldn’t blast water to move like the other guy could, but he didn’t need to.

In a spray of water he burst up out of the shore, more screams came as he landed, looking around as if he was searching for something, ignoring the people around him as they scurried backwards. Stopping as he saw the Shark-Dick, Herb shouted in a feminine, but still growly voice, “There you are!”

SD stopped, looking up from his backpack as he was stuffing wallets inside, and stared, confused. “What?”

“Don’t you what me!” Herb replied striding forward. “You said you were just going out for a few hours with your friends, and where do I find you? Surrounded by hairy hussies!”

“I, I, *what?”* the villain repeated, thoroughly confused. Herb hid his smile as he got close enough to copy the SD’s power.

Grabbing the water blast power, Herb ignored the other one, using a scowl to hide his smile, and demanded shrilly, “What? What? Is all you can say what? Say what again! I’m home with our kids, being a good mate, and you’re here with all of these puny landwalkers!”

Turning to the woman cowering nearby Herb scowled, holding up his left hand, showing off the bone-ring, “Sorry dear, I know he’s cute, but he’s taken. Now scurry on away and go eat grass or whatever you people do.” Making shooing motions, the woman blinked rapidly before turning and bolting, along with the others nearby.

“I don’t know who you are!” SD replied, black eyes wide.

Herb gasped in outrage, trying not to laugh, “How could you say that? After what you said when we became mates! My mother was *right* about you!”

The villain, rather than talk, shot a blast of water at Herb, but Herb matched it with one of his own.

“Oh, big man, trying to wash away all your problems. Well you can’t wash away *me*!” Herb declared, following the suggestions of his copied power. Blasting off with both hands, he closed in on the asshole, dodging another blast and slapping him right across the face, hard enough to send the ten-foot-tall fishman sprawling.

He struggled to his feet, only for Herb to kick him in the gut, sending him flying five feet away. The villain turned, blasting Herb with water, but he was already turning, and it was a glancing blow.

“You call that a Jet! You call *that* a Jet! I gave up *racing* for you, and *this* is how you treat me!” Herb yelled, blasting the villain right back. *Shit*, he thought as the Villain started to fly backwards, having bit hit dead on. Before the power cut off, out of range, Herb blasted himself forward, getting some speed up before it stopped.

The Shark-guy hit the ground, rolling over and over in the sand as he slowed, and Herb re-entered the power’s range right before he hit the ground, using a blast of water to stop himself.

Using a blast of water to get up, the Villain used the same jet-trick to close the distance with Herb, a clawed, finned hand swinging in a gouging strike.

Getting stronger and faster with every second, Herb didn’t know if he could meet the strike head on, so turned and twisted, grabbing the hand and turning with it, planting his feat as the shark-man hit his own smaller form with bruising force and bounced. However, Herb didn’t let go, twisting over and slamming the other man in a picture-perfect Judo throw, the ground shaking slightly under the force of the impact.

He hadn’t known how to fight before coming here, mostly just using his size and going berserk if someone tried to hurt him, but now he was a finely-tuned ass-kicking *machine!*

The SD laid on the ground, gasping like a beached seal, and Herb put a foot on his chest, blasting him in the face with a low-powered jet. The villain’s gills flared, trying to help him breathe, but he couldn’t. After a moment Herb let off, just enough for the villain that’d attacked his beach to gasp “You-”

Herb filled his mouth with water again, until the man’s struggles started to weaken, and he gasped “I-”.

He did it again,this time taking longer before the villain could talk, coughing out ‘Stop-”

Herb could feel more powers nearby. A touch-telekinesis that the person was using to let himself fly, and an Animal themed Enhancement package, with a lesser power that let him make short lived illusionary copies from his own plucked hairs.

 “Um, Ma’am?” A man’s voice called, and Herb pretended to be surprised, cutting off the flow of water as he looked behind. There were two capes, a guy in heavy armor floating a few inches above the ground, and an asian girl in a martial arts outfit with a staff, a long, thin, furred tail waving behind her.

“Yes?” Herb asked, smiling, showing off his impressive teeth. The girl cringed backwards slightly, leaning back on her staff, but the man in armor just floated there. It was him that responded.

“We had a report of a shark-person robbing people?” he asked.

Herb sighed, as the villain tried to get up, only to be held down by Herb’s foot as he casually started to drown the other man. “That would be my husband,” Herb sighed theatrically. “He said he was just going out to get a puffer with his friends, and then I find him up here? I’ve just about had it with that man.”

“Puffer?” the girl asked, still unnerved but trying to not show it.

“Puffer fish. You know dear, the ones that get big if you scare them. I’m told they’re tasty, but their poison makes you *useless* for anything else for *hours.*” Herb stopped drowning the villain, letting him breathe. Leaned forward conspiratorially, he added, “*Especially in bed.* I’m just glad that little Gilligan hasn’t picked up his father’s *filthy* habits.”

 “Oh,” the girl said, looking between Herb and the Shark-man, eyes widening. *“Ooooooh.”*

“Did you damage those buildings?” the other hero asked, trying to stay on task.

The villain tried to claw Herb’s leg, and the *superior* villain knocked the prone man’s hand away, starting to drown him again. If he had enough strength, and not enough smarts, to keep fighting, he obviously hadn’t had enough. “No, that was all him. I’ve told him going up with those air-breathers was bad news but *no,* he’s not going to listen to his *wife,* his *mate*, no he knows better because he’s the big strong man of the house! I-”

“Ma’am,” the armored hero interrupted. “I think he’s had enough.”

Glancing down, Herb saw the villain below him had stopped breathing. *Whups.* Rolling his eyes as he cut the flow, Herb pressed his foot down harder used the hero’s touch telekinesis on the shark guy’s lung, forcing the water out and to make him start breathing.

As the villain rolled over, coughing and gasping, Herb folded his hands and chided the villain. “And this is why air-breathing is bad for you!”

“But you’re breathing air,” the monkey-girl pointed out.

“Only because I have to,” Herb shot back primly. “I can breathe air, but I prefer water, just like you can breathe water, but prefer air!”

“Um, I can’t breathe water,” the girl argued, confused that she had to say something so obvious.

Herb gasped, looking at her in horror. “Oh, you can’t! Oh you poor dear! No wonder you’re so small!”

Ignoring the girl’s “What?” Herb reached over to pick up the Villain, who weakly resisted. “And we’re going *right back home* mister!”

“Ma’am, we need to arrest him,” the armored hero stated. “He did destroy a shop, and robbed several people.”

“Pfshaw,” Herb waved away, “You can rebuild you always do, and he hasn’t actually taken anything, other than my respect, but he lost that *years* ago.”

“*Ma’am*,” Mr. Floaty insisted, “We *do* need to arrest him. Please hand him over.”

The two heroes got ready to fight, but Herb had been waiting for this. “So you’re saying he’s going to prison?” he asked, being overly casual about it.

“Um, yeah,” Monkey-girl told her.

Herb appeared to think about it. “And are these prisons. . . *dry?”*

“Does being away from the water hurt you?” the other hero asked.

“No, it’s just uncomfortable,” Herb explained, making it up on the spot.

“Then yes, it’ll be dry,” The floating man told her.

“And for how long?”

Looking around, the armored hero, who was obviously the leader of the pair, said, “If no one was hurt, a year or two.”

Herb looked down at the villain she was holding almost negligently, who swayed, still out of it from getting repeatedly drowned, and tossed him towards the heroes. “Fine, as long as he’s out in two years. Maybe that’ll teach him to stay closer to home! But you better come right back *mister,* or I’ll come to get you. With my *mother!”*

Looking up at the two heroes, she gave them a small nod, turned, and blasted off with water jets while jumping hard enough that he made it to the ocean, even with the power cutting out. Diving in, he accelerated with his Jump ability, turning into a fish when he was out of sight, swinging around, and making his way back to the beach. Dropping into one of the bathroom stalls as a fly, he turned back to normal and casually walked back to his towel.

He grinned at Kayden, who was staring at him, as he asked, “Sorry, had to take drop a dookie. What’d I miss?”

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The PRT closed the beach for a bit, while they picked up the pieces of destroyed building and made sure there wasn’t anything dangerous left after the fight. No one had been more than bruised, so it wasn’t that bad, and Herb had a great time not answering their questions on the walk back to their rooms.

After a nice hot shower he caught a light blinking on his bedside table. It was his phone, which he’d left behind, as he wasn’t going to need it just hanging out on the beach. Opening it up, he had several missed calls from Lee and Overwatch, and a couple voice-messages.

With a sinking feeling, he played the first one.

“Break, this is Vejovis. I need you and your brothers here at Eclipse *now!* I know you’re on vacation, and you can go back when you’re done, but I need your help!” Lee’s voice said, sounding strained and near panic. “Call me when you get this message. If you don’t, there might not *be* a city left in a few hours!”

Looking at the time of the message, that’d been three hours ago. Turning on the news, Herb saw that they were reporting a phenomenon where Thinkers across America, along with others across the world, were freaking out, but no one could figure out why, but the Triumvirate had been spotted going into the ruins of Brockton Bay.

*“Ooohhh,”* Herb said in a small voice, *“I am in soooo muuuch trouble.”*