Heaven and Hell by Thearia

by orphan_account

Summary

The Locker Scene plays out differently and Taylor comes out with the power to manipulate peoples emotions. Undeterred by the villainous nature of her power she decides to form a hero team, using her power to recruit woman.

Notes

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Your name is Taylor Hebert, and you are a parahuman.

Everyone knows your story by now. The school's administration might have tried to cover it up, but you can't stop students from gossiping. It'd be like trying to carry water in a sieve- you can cover up as many holes as you can with your hands, but it's never going to stop it from leaking.

So everyone knows already what happened to you. Everyone knows about the locker- about how the trio found you in the showers after gym class and shoved you in there; about how you were locked in there, utterly alone and barely able to move, for an entire night; about how, when the school's janitor finally freed you from the locker the next morning, you slid out in front of half the student body, completely nude.

The only consolation, you suppose, is that nobody was quick enough to snap any pictures of you with their phones before the janitor covered you with his jacket.

Convinced you were going to die of pneumonia, and utterly humiliated as the student body stood over you judging your body... It would be no surprise to anyone who knew about trigger events that you'd triggered. Not that anyone could tell.

Which is good- because if anyone knew what your power is, you are fairly sure that you would be either imprisoned or coerced into the Wards by the threat of such before you could say "I want to see my lawyer".

And that just wouldn't do. You can't afford to be thrown in prison just yet. You've made too many plans.

First things first; if your power is going to have any effect, you're going to have to give it time to work. And, as you well know, the effect is diminished when you try to spread it across more than one person at a time- and you need the power strong to twist them as far as you need them twisted. You're going to have to pick just one of them to start off with.

So who is it going to be?

[X] Madison Clements. The most popular of the three, and also the one who has hurt you the least. You're not sure why she helps the other two bully you, although you have your suspicions. Regardless, while she hasn't hurt you as much as the other two have, she's still hurt you, and you want her to pay you back in full for that. Plus, she's the cutest of the three.

- 90% chance of success.
- On a success, if Madison was chosen first, the chances to recruit Sophia and Emma will increase by 10%, and Madison will be recruited with double the levels of submission. In addition, Taylor's reputation amongst the general student body will go up somewhat. These bonuses will change if Madison is not recruited first.
- On a failure, Madison will still be brought beneath your influence, but the general state of alarm will be raised by 1 out of 10, as Sophia and Emma will find Madison's change of heart suspicious. In addition, Madison's increased levels of submission and the increase to Taylor's reputation amongst the student body will not be granted, and the bonus to recruitment will be halved.
But then, you know, your plan extends well past these three. You don't intend to be imprisoned, after all - it's a risk you're willing to take, but one you plan to avoid if at all possible.

You've always wanted to be a hero, and now you're a parahuman. A fairly powerful one, at that. This is your chance to finally be a hero. You'll even have underlings, three willing and eager underlings to help you in your goal.

But there are a lot of different ways to be a hero, and they're going to bring you in very different directions, into contact with a lot of different people. People who, if all goes right, might be brought- willingly or unwillingly- into your fold, alongside the three you're already planning for.

Luckily, your powers aren't just Master-rated. You have secondary abilities, too. And those abilities are going to help you in your path to becoming a hero.

Your hero path is going to be...

[X] Running a new hero team. Your powers aren't suited to combat at all- in fact, you're pretty sure that if you got into a fight, even an unequipped Tinker would be able to beat you to a pulp. They are, however, suited to directing other people around. And you yourself are suited to bossing other people around... on the job and off the job. It's win-win, really.
- This path comes with Thinker powers. You are able to subtly feel and track the emotions of people all around the city, especially those who adore you or are engaged in acts of severe violence. With Emma and Madison- and their respective expertise learned from their families- beneath your thumbs, you'll be able to run a legitimate hero team.
- This path will unlock Tattletale, Laserdream, Vista, Sundancer, Parian, and several other hidden characters for recruitment.
It's a lot more difficult than people might expect to manipulate someone into being servile to you, even if you have superpowers to help you along in the process.

It's easy to underestimate the challenges involved. Everyone is always too busy being abhorred at the thought of manipulating someone like this to really think through the logistical challenges involved.

And there are a lot of them.

It's difficult to twist someone who loathes you into feeling attracted to you. You can only affect some emotions people feel, but it's hard to coax them out sometimes. When someone is looking at you and feeling not much besides sadism and boredom, it's hard to try and bring up their buried feelings of lust. You're working against someone's strongest impulses, after all.

That's one of the reasons you choose Madison as your first target. She doesn't feel as sadistic as Emma and Sophia often do when they see you, and there's a lot of suppressed lust in there - although, disappointingly, not very much of it is aimed at you.

She's also not as close to the other two as they are to each other. Emma follows Sophia around like a loyal little puppy, yipping at her heels and never letting her out of her sight for more than a moment. Their schedules synch up oddly well, or maybe not so oddly. It wouldn't surprise you if Emma had slipped the school's admin staff some cash to make sure their schedules aligned as much as possible.

Madison, on the other hand, spends more of her time drifting between the various upper-class circles of the school ("Upper class", you think to yourself with a snort- like there were more than five or six people in the school who could be described as more than lower middle class).

That's good and bad for you. Bad, because that means that Madison isn't always around for you to slowly shape. Good, because it means that she isn't always around Emma and Sophia when they turn up to push you around- and that means you can afford to go a bit further than you can when they're around.

Take right now, for instance. Emma and Sophia have had their fill of you for now, after stealing your pencil and notebook during English class earlier. Ordinarily, you would probably be more upset about this than you are, but the wound is balmed when you notice that when they left together after class, Madison didn't follow them.

Madison typically doesn't bother to pick on you when the other two aren't around, preferring to ignore your existence entirely instead. Once, that used to sting, but now it's just the perfect opportunity. She's too busy focusing on one of the upperclassmen to pay any attention to you or what you're doing.

It's surprisingly easy to pick out her lust from here. Or not so surprising, really- objectively, the man she's talking to does look fairly attractive, for a guy. Maybe that's why she's wearing such a low-cut shirt, despite it being the middle of winter. Madison's good at showing just enough to keep you interested.

One of the best things about being both a Thinker and a Master is that you don't need to concentrate on your power once you've managed to get inside your target's head. A part of your consciousness
remains focused on controlling it, but by and large, your power handles the bulk of the work for you. Which is good, because if you had to remain focused on it, you wouldn't be able to not-so-covertly watch Madison as she shifts restlessly beside the guy, a faint flush beginning to spread across her cheeks.

She's growing increasingly bored as the guy rambles on about- something. Football, maybe- tries are a football term, aren't they? Whatever, it's something much duller than the upcoming show anyway. Madison clearly agrees, as her attention wanders away from him, glancing casually over the quad until her attention falls on you. Her lips curve into a small smile as she catches you looking at her. Good. It's already taking root in her mind, then.

You don't look away. For a few moments, you force your view to remain steady on her face as you slowly pull on her loyalty. The effect isn't strong, and it normally wouldn't hold for long, but you don't need it to do much- you're not looking to buy her eternal loyalty just yet. You just want her to feel enough to stop her from remembering that she actually dislikes you for a few minutes, and allow her to enjoy the pleasant warmth you're sending coursing through her.

You send over one last strong blast of loyalty, and her smile shifts up into a teasing smirk. You try not to let your satisfaction show on your face as you mentally shift tracks again, going back to the slow and subtle manipulation of her lust as you finally allow your eyes to drift down from her eyes to her sharp jaw, then down to her pale and slender neck, and lower still.

Her shirt is surprisingly low-cut, you find when your eyes drift that low. Her breasts are bigger than you'd noticed before- maybe not quite big enough to make a full handful yet, but big enough to give you plenty to play with. You can just make out a hint of the lacy powder-blue bra peeking from the very bottom of the V of her shirt, a bra unfortunately thick enough that you can't see her nipples straining through it.

Her shirt is, in addition to being so low-cut, cut short enough that she bares her midriff whenever she bends slightly back. You wait a moment, and when she notices where your gaze is, she darts her eyes towards the boy next to her. Seeing that he's still paying more attention to his own conversation than her, she acquiesces, arching her back subtly to allow her shirt to slide up, up, over her bellybutton- high enough to reveal her toned stomach to you. You spend a few moments enjoying the view, watching as her muscles tremble in a barely-noticeable effort to keep herself in that position for you.

A quick glance back up at her face shows you that she's clearly enjoying this, not that you'd let her feel otherwise. Her breathing isn't coming ragged, but she's flushing deeply, and she's still staring at your face with hooded eyes. You smile again at her, and she smiles shakily back, trying not to let out any signs that might alert the boy next to her to your little game. Acknowledging it with another short pull on her loyalty, you allow your view to slip back to the valley of her breasts again.

Now that you're not staring at her stomach, she attempts to shift back into a more comfortable position. You snap your eyes back up to her face, feeling a small shift in her emotional state as her... submission? tries to subside.

You glance back down at her midriff, pouting slightly as you tease out with your power, pulling on the gentle feeling of the submission within her. Madison stifles a shaky sigh as she once again submits to you, leaning back uncomfortably on her arms to present her body for your inspection. It's hard to prevent yourself from trembling in arousal at the discovery, but you manage. The boy beside her is still blabbering on, oblivious.
You spend a few moments rewarding her commitment by gently pulling at her lust, causing her to bite imperceptibly at her lip, before you allow your gaze to fall back to her stomach- and then again lower, past her hips and down to her legs.

She's wearing a short denim skirt today. Not as short as some you've seen her wear, but you're pretty sure that if she wasn't the school's darling, she's have been pulled up short and sent home until she put a more decent skirt on. It comes up inches above her knees, revealing far more of her thigh than any decent girl should.

You can sense indecision warring in her for a few moments, before she slowly and carefully twists her body slightly. Through your power, you can almost feel her slight surrender to you.

Up until now, she's been angled some away from you; now, she's facing you almost directly. The nervousness flowing through her is strong enough that you can feel it even begin to flow through you; and for almost the first time since your encounter begins, her gaze breaks away from your face as she looks nervously around the quad, checking to see if anyone else is paying attention to her. At the same time as she does that, though, she leans back again, resting uncomfortably on one arm so she is still displaying her stomach for you.

Your hands tremble at your sides as you reassure her, alternating between playing on her loyalty and her submission. Her lust is strong enough now that you don't need to play on it- you're surprised the boy beside her can't feel it emanating from her, but he's still so absorbed in his sports chat that he hasn't even looked at her in more than five minutes.

Even with you slowly manipulating her mind, it takes Madison a few minutes to gather up the courage to act. When she does, though, you're riveted.

She hesitantly grabs at the side of her skirt with her one free arm. Her face is flaming red at this point- if anyone else had noticed your little game, you're pretty sure you'd be feeling waves of suspicion emanating from them. But nobody has, and all you can feel is Madison's nervousness and desire as she slowly begins to inch her skirt up her legs.

Now that she's been assured that nobody else in the quad is paying attention to her, her attention is solely focused on you. You're not sure if you're pleased about that or not- it might be nice if she displayed a bit of an exhibitionist kink, but the servile pleasure she's experiencing in displaying herself exclusively for you is leaving your mouth watering.

There should be other people whose exhibitionist kinks you can revel in encouraging, anyway. You rather fancy the thought of having this girl be exclusively yours to play with.

She pulls her skirt up her legs half an inch at a time, pausing at intervals to search your face and assure herself that your attention is still focused solely on her. You squeeze your hands into fists hard enough to draw blood just to prevent yourself from ruining everything now by breaking her with a single blast of loyalty, choosing instead to send soft, reassuring waves of it at her.

Then, overcoming a final wave of nervousness, she chooses to yank her skirt up over an inch in one move, finally revealing her panties to you.

The first thing you notice is how wet they are. The front of her panties, almost all that you can see of them, are dark blue from the arousal flowing from her. The few times you've been that aroused, you walked around uncomfortable for the rest of the day with soaked panties. Madison, however, is
reveling in the feeling.

The second thing you notice is that she's making no move to try and cover herself up from your inspection, even after you've been staring at her panties for more than two minutes. You glance up at her face, pleased to notice that she's still staring directly at you, then glance back down.

Madison remains in that position, one hand holding her skirt near up to her waist and one hand trembling from the effort of supporting her arched back, until the bell rings, a full twelve minutes later. You spend most of that time subtly reinforcing the submission she's feeling, occasionally alternating between the lust and submission. Always better to draw the link there in her mind, after all.

By the time the bell rings, Madison can't disguise her red face and her panting breaths. And somehow, ridiculously, neither the boy sitting beside her nor the rest of the squad noticed her little show. Some people are so self-absorbed.

As people begin to stand, she finally glances around and hurriedly pulls her skirt back down. Hurriedly picking up her bag, she clutches it tightly to her chest, eyes darting fearfully around the quad.

The feelings you evoked in her are fading away already, but they won't disappear that easily- not after you built them up that strong, and not after Madison accepted them, even reveled in them. She won't be red-faced and panting whenever she sees you, but you should be able to build her up to that point again, easier next time, and maybe even push her further.

Of course, you can't let it go that easily.

As you pick up your uneaten lunch and move to throw it out, you pass by a bewildered Madison, who's looking up at you with confused and fearful eyes. You don't say anything- you just shift your lunch over to one of your hands and half-hug her with the others, giving her a thankful smile. One small mental tug on her loyalty later, and she's smiling demurely back at you, the confusion once again clearing up- hopefully for good, this time.

Hours later, when you've finished your afternoon classes and are finally at home, you're still flushed with victory. Dad's still out, so you take some time out to go and relieve yourself- twice. It was a really good show, in your opinion.

Now that it's over, though, you find yourself feeling nervous. You didn't go into this blind; when you concocted this entire plan, you spent some time performing mild experiments on your father and your neighbours, testing your limits and how far you could push them before they realized something was wrong.

The answer is surprisingly far. It is certainly possible to push someone too far, too fast- you'd tried that with the old lady who lived across the street, and she still glares at you whenever you see her- but if you take it slow and steady over the course of an hour or so, people's minds are surprisingly malleable.

The key factor in it all is that you're not imposing any outside feelings- you're just encouraging things they're already feeling, and directing those feelings towards yourself. When the mind has already recognized that they're feeling something, if subconsciously, it's surprising how far it will go to justify it. It will even go so far as to edit previous memories, justifying today's actions by assuring
itself that it had felt this way previously.

You let a long sigh out as you pull a shirt on, not bothering with a bra (there's nothing there to put a bra on, anyway, you conclude with a glum look).

This self-reflection is all well and good, but you have plans to finalize. Madison has fallen under your sway, but you still have a ways to go before she's completely yours. And while today was fun-extraordinarily fun- you can't risk doing that again, not where Emma and Sophia might find out about it.

No- if you're going to make Madison completely yours, which you are, you're going to have to do it outside of school.

The question, as it were, was where.
For the next few days, you try not to push Madison too hard. Your manipulation of her is still fragile, and if you try to push her too far, too fast, you'll either set your progress back as she begins fighting back and trying to suppress it, or... well, you're not entirely sure what will happen if you push her past that point, but you're pretty sure that it won't involve Madison retaining much of her original personality. And that would be a shame, because you're enjoying this newfound submission of hers.

Which isn't to say that you don't push her at all. You can't afford to push her lust high enough that she will willingly lift her skirt for you again, but you work on subtly reinforcing her loyalty towards you, and it pays dividends. She doesn't do anything overtly sexual, but you notice that she's wearing shorter shirts despite the colder weather. She also makes a habit of leaning back slightly when she notices you watching her, giving you a better view of her body.

It takes a little over a week before you're confident enough in your progress that you're willing to push things a bit further.

And, entirely coincidentally, that's also when fate shifts in your favour.

Chemistry is one of your favourite classes right now, and not just because it provides you with the opportunity to make dirty puns in your head every five minutes. It's taught by one of your favourite teachers, Mrs. Knopf, an old woman who still talks with a slight German accent despite having lived in the Bay since Dad was a child.

Unlike most of the teachers in the school, she doesn't turn a blind eye to the activities of the trio. Or, rather, she doesn't give the trio the time or space to do anything. Her class is a demanding mix of schoolwork, homework and practical demonstrations, and it's all some students- particularly, Sophia and Madison- can do to keep up in class. By the time the bell rings, you're usually packed up and gone before Sophia has even finished closing her textbook.

When you arrive to class today, you spot the three of them giving you bored looks- although you don't actually sense any boredom from Madison, just little frissons of nervousness and excitement.

That boredom lasts up until Mrs. Knopf arrives, and announces that today, you're going to be working on a practical experiment... in pairs.

A month ago, if Mrs. Knopf had announced in front of the class that she was pairing you with Madison for a double period, you would have spent half the lesson cursing the old bag in your head and the other half waiting in a constant state of anticipation for whatever cruelties Madison deigned to visit upon you.

Now, however, it's just a perfect opportunity.

Madison settles in beside you, peering around the room for a moment before giving you a small smile. You don't say anything, but you return the smile, sending with it a small wave of loyalty.

Risking a glance around the classroom, you find Sophia and Emma sitting three tables across and
behind from you. You're not hidden from their view, exactly, but it's going to be difficult for them to see what the two of you are doing from there. In fact, given how low-slung the desks are, even the people directly behind you are going to have trouble seeing beneath the table so long as you're not too obvious about it.

A plan unfolds in your head, and you turn back to look at the materials in front of you. It's just a follow-on from the lessons on polymers you've been doing over the past week. You don't even have to do the experiment- you've read ahead on the materials, you could do this in your sleep.

You spend a few minutes setting up the experiment and covertly writing your answers, idly toying with Madison's emotions as you do. You're deliberately underplaying them, for now- you need her wet, but you don't need her ragged and gasping. You focus more on her loyalty and submission, gently playing on them for a while as she stares with a creased brow at the experiment.

Frustration builds in her. It takes a long time, maybe fifteen minutes, before she finally lowers her pencil with a frustrated sigh and turns to you. "I don't get it," she says plaintively. "What are we supposed to be looking for?"

You lean over to glance at her sheet, casually placing your hand on her knee to help you keep your balance. She's filled out the first two answers, which asked about setting up the experiment, but there are eight others. They're pretty simple, in your opinion- you've already gotten all ten answers written, and you haven't even started playing around with the polymer yet.

Judging by the light blush dusting her cheeks, she clearly notices that you don't remove your hand when you lean back, but she makes no move to brush it off.

"Well," you begin, "it's pretty simple. Look at this."

You spend a few minutes demonstrating the polymer's properties with your left hand, while you begin to rub small circles on her knees with your right hand. For the first time since the class started, you focus on pulling her lust up- careful not to do it too fast, or raise it too high.

She occasionally makes a small noise of understanding and writes the answer down on her sheet of paper. You wait for her to have her fifth answer written- Mrs. Knopf won't assign her detention if she has at least half her work done- before you smoothly slide your hand from her knee up to her thigh, swapping quickly to focus on pulling on her loyalty again. You're cautious not to move your hand too far or too fast- you could still reach over with your middle and index fingers and rub circles on her knee, if you wanted to- but it's an obvious move, and there's no way she can mistake it for anything but you gently rubbing her thigh now.

Madison freezes for a moment, but her only response is to spread her legs some, granting you easier access.

You continue describing the polymer's properties to her, but she's distracted now, her hands shaking slightly as she moves on to the sixth question. You don't let up; by now, you're swapping every few seconds between pulling at her lust and her loyalty. It's having a visible effect on her.

Her eyelids are fluttering slightly, and her pink tongue is darting out occasionally, wetting her lips. You're pretty sure by now that she's aroused enough that she's not going to make any attempts to stop you. Not that you let up- you just stop focusing on her lust, and start focusing on raising her loyalty again. She doesn't just need to be aroused- she needs to be aroused by you, and she needs to know that.
To that end, you begin sliding your hand up her thigh again. She freezes once more as your hand advances, until you reach the midway point. When your hand ventures high enough that it's brushing her spread skirt, she reaches down with her left hand and grabs your hand.

She doesn't do anything with it, doesn't make any attempts to push your hand away. She just rests her hand atop yours, occasionally rubbing it gently.

Taking the permission for what it is, you slide your hand further up her thigh, pushing her skirt up as you do so. Madison is faintly trembling now, but her nervousness is being drowned out by an increasing wave of arousal.

 Abruptly, you notice that she hasn't been writing anything since you started moving your hand again. You don't say anything, but a smirk makes its way across your face. She flushes in response when she sees what you're smirking out, but her only response is to defiantly drop her pencil and squeeze your hand.

Well; if she'd rather play around with you than do her schoolwork, who are you to say no?

You glide your hands up, up, up her thigh, skimming lightly over her skin. She's looking down now, afraid to let anyone see how strongly she's blushing. You send her an encouraging smile; she blushes heavier, but responds back with a smile of her own.

And then you reach it- the apex of her thighs. You can feel the soft lace of her panties on the edge of your pinkie, and judging by the muted groan she lets out, Madison can feel it, too.

You pause for a moment, then reign back your power. You can still feel her emotions, but as you slowly, teasingly slide your fingers up her thighs to rest on her panty-clad pussy, you refuse to influence them. You don't want this moment to be marred by forcing her into it- you want to feel her submit to your actions of her own volition.

And submit she does. Her hand tightens around your own, but rather than pull your hand away, she pushes your hand harder against her pussy.

For a moment, a wild, reckless idea appears in your head. You could push this further- stop this gentle teasing, pull her panties aside, and claim her as your own, right now, in front of everybody-

But you check yourself. You've pushed Madison far enough that she'd accept it, but that doesn't make it a good idea. You're in the middle of class. Even ignoring that there are people sitting right behind you, Emma and Sophia are still occasionally shooting you and Madison loaded glances. You can't afford to do anything that will jeopardize your chances with them, not this early in the game.

It's with a heavy heart that you abandon that idea. Maybe in future, in front of willing participants, but it's too risky to finger someone in front of people you haven't influenced yet.

You can't resist pushing it one little bit further, though. Leaning over to Madison, you whisper into her ear, "What colour panties are you wearing today?"

She chokes slightly, and doesn't answer for a few moments. When she does, she's staring at the desk, too red in the face to look at you. "Grey," she mumbles.

"Hmm," you hum. "That's a nice colour, but I prefer black."
She's unable to hide the tremble in her body at that, and even if you weren't paying attention to her, you'd be able to feel the lust that flows through her- and, oddly (or perhaps not so oddly), the submission.

You content yourself the rest of class alternating between skimming your fingers over her upper thigh and drawing light circles over her panties. Madison doesn't make a move as you do, choosing to sit still with her legs spread and allow you to play with her, occasionally shivering with pleasure as you rub a particularly sensitive part of her.

Only when Knopf finally calls out that lab time is over do you regretfully lift your hand away. Madison lets out a small whine as you do so, but luckily it's covered by the sounds of other students chatting and occasionally erupting into laughter.

The teacher moves around the classroom, collecting everyone's answer sheets. You gather yours and Madison's, presenting them up to her for inspection when she finally makes it to your table.

Knopf tsk's in disapproval. "Only five questions, miss Clements?" she asks. "I expected more from you after our discussion last week."

You glance around the classroom. Emma and Sophia have their heads tucked together, looking at something on Sophia's phone. Good enough.

"She's a bit distracted today," you offer up. Knopf turns to you with a raised eyebrow, as if wondering why you were defending her- which, well, fair enough. "It's okay, though. It was partly my fault, so I'll help Madison catch upon her work."

"Huh?" the girl in question replies intelligently.

You give her a patient smile, activating your power for the first time in half an hour. As you speak, you begin to gently press on her submission again. "I was probably one of the things distracting you, so I'll help you catch up on what you missed today," you repeat. You send through a strong burst of submission, and then; "I'll come visit you at your house after school today, around five. We'll work on our chemistry. How does that sound?"

"Okay," she squeaks. You're not sure if she caught the double entendre. "Um, hold on, I'll write down my address for you."

Knopf looks sternly down at you, but you just give her your most charming smile- and a general burst of your power. You don't need her to feel lustful or loyal to you, but your power does have additional effects, and increasing her sense of admiration and affection for you is useful.

"Good girl," Knopf says eventually, smiling at the both of you. "I'm glad to see you're both finally mending the bridges between you."

Madison just trembles as she tears a page out of her notebook and hands it to you. You're not sure she could respond even if she wanted to.

"Well, you know me," you say brightly, brushing your hand against Madison's thigh. "I'm all about meeting the needs of others."
You dress up nicely when you get home. You haven't grown very much since the last time Dad took you out to one of his work parties, celebrating a deal he'd secured with a local parahuman to aid Igneous's efforts in clearing the Graveyard of the dead ships beneath it. The clothes are some of Mom's old clothes- a simple pair of creased brown pants and a white blouse. They look respectable without making you seem ostentatious, you think.

Thankfully, Dad doesn't say a word when you descend the stairs in your finery, just giving you a considering look. In fact, he doesn't say a word as he makes his way out to the car; and even when he's on the road and driving, he only makes the usual small talk.

When he pulls up in front of Madison's house, he turns to you with a smile on his face. "I won't be home tonight," he says. "Work is asking me to stay late again. Have fun with your friend, and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

You smirk at him, and he manages to hold the expression for a moment before he chuckles. "Seriously, though," he continues, "Have fun, kiddo."

"I will."

You turn and head up the path towards the front door. Behind you, you hear Dad slowly pull away from the kerb and drive off.

The door swings open as you approach, before you can even reach close enough to ring the doorbell. Madison's expression brightens as she sees you, and she ducks forward out of the house, eagerly attaching herself to your arm. "Hello, Taylor!" she exclaims happily.

You can't help but grin back at her. "Hello, Madison," you reply. "Ready for some chemistry, then?"

You almost waggle your eyebrows at her, but you're pretty sure that would seem a lot dorkier with her than it would with Dad. You do begin slowly pulling on her lust. It hasn't completely settled after your little game in the chemistry lab this afternoon, so it's easy to coax out.

She snuggles into your side. "Sure am," she says, voice muffled by your arm. "Come on. I'll show you to my room."

Her room is almost exactly what you'd expect of the cutesy girl. The furniture is all carved from soft brown wood, and tucked neatly against sky-blue walls. The carpet, coloured a deeper blue than the walls, is soft and luxurious; you stop and take your shoes off as you cross into her room, reveling in the soft feel of the carpet against your feet. Even her bedspread is cutesy, with a stuffed bear resting against a curved pillow and what you recognize as a Peter Rabbit blanket cover.

Madison blushes furiously as she steps into her room after you- having stopped snuggling against your arm when you crossed the threshold into her house- and ducks her head, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Sorry," she mumbles. "I know it looks childish."

You touch her arm, leading her to stand in front of you. "Hey," you say encouragingly, "it's fine, Madison. It's cute. It suits you."

She looks shyly up at you. "Yeah?"
You nod decisively. "Of course."

There’s only a small desk in here, littered in scraps of paper and magazines, with a single chair tucked in beside it. You step over to examine it. Most of the magazines are fashion magazines, although surprisingly, you can see a few cooking magazines in there- and a single edition of Playboy, although you can only see the name of it. The Playboy magazine has been casually tucked beneath the fashion magazines, and it's only because you have so much experience with staring at their covers that you can recognize the half-revealed 'PLA' left uncovered by the other magazines.

It's the scraps of paper you find more interesting. There are sketches of dresses and shirts on them. A lot of them aren't drawn to proportion, and you can see a worn eraser off to the side of the desk. It's obvious that Madison is still practicing her skills.

Fashion design, cooking, and a willingness to explore her own sexuality. It looks like there's more to Madison than just her cuteness and her popularity after all.

"Um, yeah," the girl in question speaks up behind you. "I keep asking Daddy for a bigger desk, but he says that one's fine. I was thinking we could just sit on the bed and go over it."

You turn to face her, taking note of the textbook in her hands. "No," you say. Her face falls, but before she can begin to look too disappointed, you continue, "I think the desk will do just fine."

"Huh?" she asks inelegantly.

Rather than answer her verbally, you step back around her to close her door so nobody can look in, then step back over and take her hand, pulling her with you. She doesn't resist, moving willingly with you. You take a few steps backwards- still holding her hand- and sit in the chair, adjusting your position to make yourself comfortable. Then, you pull Madison forwards, and seat her on your lap. She lets out a soft sigh as she tucks herself comfortably against you, placing the chemistry textbook on the desk in front of you so her hands are free to rest on her lap.

You're taller than Madison. Only by two or three inches, it's not usually very noticeable, but you're tall enough that you're able to rest your chin on her shoulder. She lets out another soft sigh as you do so, tilting her head so her cheek rests against your own. You swap, finally, from the constant low-level adjustment of her lust you've been doing until now over to a stronger touch to her submission. From here, you can see straight down her shirt.

"Nice bra," you murmur. And indeed, it is a nice bra. You suspect that if you weren't peering down her shirt like this, you wouldn't be able to see it. It's a little silky slip of a thing, barely large enough to cover her nipples- you can see her aerola from here, and even a hint of the nipples contained within. The dark black of the material contrasts well with her milky skin.

"Thanks," she breathes. "Y-you mentioned you like black, earlier today..."

You reward her by turning your head and pressing a kiss to her cheek, on the corner of her mouth. "I do," you affirm. Another kiss, and she turns her head towards you, looking at you through lidded eyes. "It looks even better on you than I thought." You slowly slide one hand under her shirt, leaving it to rest against her stomach; your other hand comes up to cup the back of her head.

"Mm," she moans. "D- does that mean you w-want me to wear more like it...?"
You slide your hand further up her shirt, coming to rest just short of her breasts, and chuckle when she lets out a frustrated sigh. "Yes," you reply reassuringly. "I would very much like that." And you tilt your head to press a kiss fully on her lips.

She kisses you back, groaning softly as you finally reach up and begin caressing her bra-clad breasts. You tease your fingers around the edge of the bra for a moment, but- enjoying her frustrated groans entirely too much- you don't slip your fingers beneath it, instead cupping them and gently rubbing her hard nipples through the material. She opens her mouth to groan again, and you take the opportunity to slip your tongue in, circling Madison's tongue with your own.

You barely remember to turn off your power before Madison eagerly sucks on your tongue, and your mind goes blank.

"Madison!" The call comes from downstairs. You jerk away from each other, each of you panting hard. Madison's face is beet-red, and her hair is mussed where you tangled your hand in it. Even that could be hidden, but you suspect it's going to be harder to hide her swollen lips- and your own.

"In a minute!" she calls loudly, trying to disguise her laboured breathing from her parents. "Shit, Taylor, I got too- I should have kept better track of the time, and now-"

"It's fine," you interrupt her gently. You gently squeeze her nipple through her bra one last time, then regretfully slip your hand out from under her shirt. She makes no move to climb off your lap, though, or even twist back into a more comfortable position; and you have no desire to encourage her to get off you any time soon.

She shakes her head. "No, I should have kept a better track of time. I just got... caught up. Um, how are you getting home..." Her hands begin to shake slightly, and you can feel nervousness and anticipation coming off her. "... Or would you like to stay for dinner? I don't know if your Dad is okay with that, but, um, if you want you could stay. We probably won't be able to, um, but I'd like it if you... yeah." She flushes again, a deeper red this time.

Hm.
You press another kiss against Madison's lips, although regretfully, you don't slip your tongue in this time- her parents are waiting down below, and there are already enough signs of your make-out session, you don't need to make them even more suspicious.

Still, you linger for more than a few seconds, and can't help but run your tongue against her lower lip again, enjoying the delicious way she shivered against your body.

She mewls when you pull back, looking up at you with an adorable pout. A rush of affection flows through you, and you press a swift kiss to her nose before you reply to her invitation.

"Dad said he was going to be home late," you murmur. "I'd love to stay for dinner." You conspicuously refuse to add "if your parents are okay with it". Honestly, you don't care if Madison's parents approve of it, or you, except in how their approval or disapproval might make it harder for you to continue your relationship with your girl.

Luckily, Madison either doesn't notice or doesn't care. A bright grin steals over her face, and she presses a quick, wet kiss to your lips before clambering off your lap and straightening her clothes. You begin to miss having her there immediately; you instinctively start to generate plans on how to get her back there, wrapped securely in your presence and unable to resist your advances again.

"I'll go down and tell Daddy," she giggles, now attempting to run her hands through her hair and give it some semblance of neatness again. "Uh, you're not allergic to anything, are you?"

"Nope," you reply with satisfaction. When you were younger, you'd had a scare when the doctor told you you were allergic to some foods (although you hadn't minded too much when he'd told you you weren't allowed to eat shellfish any more, blech), but the allergies had grown much less severe as you grew older. Nowadays, you could eat pretty much anything you wanted. The only thing you had to watch was your figure, not that you have much of a figure to watch.

She coos happily. "We're having pasta for dinner tonight," she informs you. "Come on, I'll show you the way."

The Clements' dining room is much fancier than your own. That's what happens when a family has more money, you suppose; your father accepted a heavy pay cut when the mayor was negotiating with Igneous to bring her to Brockton Bay, and it'd left the two of you strapped for money for a while. A sharp contrast against the two Clements parents, who Madison casually informed you are in the property management business (her mother) and as a restauranteur manager (her father) as she led you down to the dining room.

Your own furniture at home was an eclectic mix of IKEA furniture, furniture bought from a cheap second-hand store with an oddly friendly clerk, and a coffee table the two of you had built by hand that the two of you jokingly referred to as Frankenstein's Monster. You quite enjoyed it; it had its own rustic charm to it. Your own dining table had been rescued from thrift store workers who had been going to throw it out, since the paint on it had been cracking and it had been missing a leg. Kurt and Lacey, two of your father's friends, had come over on the weekend and helped you fix it up.
The Clements, on the other hand—although the girl sitting beside you hasn't made any mention of it, you wouldn't be surprised if they'd hired an interior designer to come in and design their house for them. The furniture, a sleek mix of curved grey metal and black-tinted glass, definitely didn't look like it came IKEA.

Your mouth is suddenly dry, and you take a small sip from the glass of water Madison's younger brother had put in front of you before he took a seat. You hadn't felt this inadequate about your family's financial situation since the last time you visited Emma's house. Suddenly, you wish you'd asked Madison to stay with you, instead of letting her go help her father in the kitchen.

It doesn't take long for Madison's father, a tall and muscle-bound man wearing a pair of thick glasses and a frilly pink apron, to sweep out of the kitchen bearing a large pot. He wanders around the table with the pot in one hand, and Madison follows him around with a large slotted spoon, doling out servings of carbonara to everyone. She takes extra care with yours, making sure to leave just the right amount of sauce on your plate and casually checking to ensure the bowl of chopped parsley is near to hand.

Still, nobody begins eating until the two have gone back to the kitchen and put the dirty dishes in the sink. Madison subtly edges her chair closer to yours when she returns, and beneath the table, grabs your left hand with her own right as she inexpertly begins twirling pasta onto her fork with her left hand.

After she finishes the mouthful of food, she looks at her father speculatively. "Pancetta this time?" she asks, surprise colouring her tone. "I thought you decided on prosciutto."

He chuckles, a deep, rich sound. "I had," he admits. "It was difficult to balance the flavours, so I decided to try pancetta instead. Mark tried to get me to take some weaker prosciutto instead, but I wanted to try sautéing the pancetta to complement the sauce. Do you think it worked?"

In lieu of answering, she takes another mouthful of food, this time chewing it slowly and somehow thoughtfully. Even after she swallows it, she takes a few moments to consider.

"It works, but the pancetta's flavour is a little weak," she decides. "The sauce overpowers it. If you used a little less stock in the sauce, it might balance out."

He chuckles again. "Exactly my thoughts," he says proudly. "Although I think I'll try flavouring the pancetta with thyme rather than basil instead. The pasta itself doesn't have much taste, so I don't want to reduce the flavours if I can help it."


While their conversation is going on, you slowly eat your meal, occasionally gently squeezing her hand beneath the table. She doesn't verbally acknowledge you, but she returns the squeeze each time.

The conversation slowly shifts away from the food, and towards how everybody's day has been. You politely listen in, but only rarely offer up a comment—somehow, you don't much think her parents want to hear about how you've been fondling their little girl all day.

Inevitably, or so you think, the conversation eventually comes around to focus on Madison.

"So, Madison." Madison's mother—Jasmine, she politely informed you earlier—turns to your girl, looking at her with a critical eye. "How are you going with your schoolwork after our talk last
Monday?"

Madison looks up guiltily. Beneath the table, you can feel her palms getting sweaty. You squeeze her hand, a gentle reminder that you're there, and give her an encouraging smile; she gives you a small, relieved smile, but doesn't take her attention off her mother.

"I'm doing better than I was," she replies. "I spoke to my teachers, and some of them even gave me some extra booklets to look through to help me catch up. And Taylor here has been helping me study." Her grip is tight on her hands. She doesn't quite give you a pleading look, but you can literally feel the nervousness and anxiety rolling off her.

"Yeah," you cut in. "We've been meeting up at lunch to study. She's making a lot of progress." The anxiety turns to relief, but the nervousness is still there, causing your stomach to roil. You politely push your mostly-empty plate away. You'd eaten your fill anyway.

Her mother eyes the two of you speculatively, eyes lingering on Madison's mussed hair and still-swollen lips. You slide your other hand beneath the table and curl it into a fist, trying not to sneer at the woman. You will not brook any interference in your plan.

You're lucky that Madison's father doesn't seem to be suspicious of the two of you, focused more on the food in front of him and the heavy workload he's going to have when he goes into work tomorrow. If you had to extend your power over both of them, trying to nudge them both into feeling better about you, you probably wouldn't be able to calm their suspicions faster than they could rise.

But he isn't, and you can manage one person.

You'd really hoped to be able to pull tonight off without using your powers, though. At least you hadn't had to use them on Madison- you'd wormed your way into her mind enough that she was willingly accepting you.

You don't bother being subtle. Honestly, you wouldn't care overly much if you turned the woman into a drooling wreck; you're careful not to push her that far, since you're fairly sure that it would be difficult to visit Madison if she was going to the hospital daily, and you're pretty sure it would sit around in your mind unsettling you for months to come. You don't care if everyone at the table notices the way her eyes widen and dart to you, or the way she suddenly sits up straighter, as if to be respectful in your presence.

"Well," Jasmine says. "Don't let up now, Madison. You still have a long way to go."

You rub small circles on the back of Madison's hand. You don't even need to feel the sadness and frustration rolling off her to know how she feels- if Dad disapproved of your academic prowess, you can't imagine how bad you'd feel.

It's all you can do to fight down a scowl at the woman.

"I know," Madison says, voice unexpectedly loud. "You already yelled at me about this, Mom! I know I have to get my grades up if I want to get into university, I'm trying."

Oddly, instead of growing angry with Madison for nearly yelling at her, Jasmine's mouth lifts up into a pleased smile. That just makes the frustration rolling off Madison grow even worse. You're pretty sure that if you weren't holding her hand, she'd have stormed off away from the table already.
"Jasmine," her father says unexpectedly, "we've been over this. She's making an effort, and I know you've been checking in with Mrs. Blackwell, so you know that too. You agreed you'd stop haranguing her if she makes an effort, and she has. Don't teach our daughter to go back on her word."

That cuts the scowl from her face, even as you feel Madison's frustration ebbing away, replaced by pleased acceptance.

"I remember the deal, Rick," she says grudgingly. "I'll stop, but don't let me hear about your grades slipping again, Madison."

"I know," the teen pouts.

That discussion puts a damper on the dinner. The conversation is subdued, and Madison takes the earliest opportunity she can to follow you back upstairs to her room, ignoring her brother's plaintive cries for her to "Come play Playstation with me, Madison!" and her mother's call of "Don't forget, it's family movie night tonight, be down by seven!".

When you get back up there, she lets out a tired sigh. "Sorry about that," she says tiredly. "I didn't think Mom would start harassing me tonight, or I wouldn't have asked you to stay."

"Hey." You step forwards, lifting her chin so you can look her in the eyes. "I don't mind, Madison. I'm glad I was here, actually. You seemed pretty uncomfortable."

"Yeah." She sounds vulnerable now. "Mom does that to me. Can--um--could you--hold me?" By the end of her sentence, her teeth are chattering. Whatever confidence held her together when talking back to her mother has completely faded, now that she's alone in your presence.

You slowly lead her back to the bed. "Of course," you say simply as you sit back, pulling Madison over to sit on your lap again--this time facing you, rather than away from you. She buries her head in your neck, shuddering slightly—not crying, but obviously a bit upset.

She just sits there for a few minutes, the shudders slowly dying as you reach beneath her shirt and gently stroke up and down her spine. You are suddenly extremely glad that you chose Madison as your first target. Anger curls, deep in your stomach, as you picture Jasmine's face. How dare she upset your Madison.

Finally, Madison nuzzles your neck a little and places a light kiss on it before straightening somewhat. She snuggles her body against yours, and rests her forehead against your own, closing her eyes so she doesn't have to look you in them as she talks.

"It's just--" Her voice is halting, and the nervousness that had somewhat died down in her flares back up again, this time focused at you. "She- She um- She wants me to, um... I want to, I want to go into fashion design." Her eyes briefly flicker open as she tries to gauge your opinion of what she's saying.

You continue to stroke her back gently. "Yeah," you say gently. "I saw your designs on your desk. They looked pretty good."

Some of the tension in her body lifts, and she closes her eye again, this time letting out a little mewl. "Thanks," she says happily. Then she turns glum again. "But, um-- yeah. Mom says that, that if I want to do that, I need to get into university. And my grades aren't good enough for that, so she's been yelling at me about it. That's, um..." She glances up guiltily at you. "That's actually why I
stopped bullying you at school, which I'm so, so sorry about, by the way, I never-

You interrupt her with a soft kiss, cutting off her words before she can say anything more. "It's fine," you say softly. "Besides," and a perverted grin spreads over your face, "I'm sure you'll think of a way to make up for it."

She blushes and stammers incoherently for a moment. "I- You- I- Buh- I-"

You press another soft kiss against her lips. "It's fine," you tell her again, this time more insistently. "Seriously, Madison, you can make it up to me." You kiss her again, this time nipping her lower lip, drawing a mewl out of the girl.

You draw back after a long, drowsy kiss, allowing her to speak up. She does, after shaking her head some to clear it. "Yeah?" she asks softly. "I'll try, then. I can't do anything about Emma and Sophia, though."

"That's fine too," you shrug. "I have a plan."

She draws back, opening her eyes and searching your face. Whatever she finds there seems to satisfy you, because she leans in and presses a brief kiss to your lips.

"Okay," she murmurs, snuggling back into your neck. "Just, don't forget about me when you do it?"

You stroke your nails up her spine, causing her to shiver. "I would never forget about you, Madison," you murmur.

"Okay," she murmurs again, sleepily this time. By this time, the nervousness she was exuding has faded almost entirely, buoyed only slightly by the last question she had asked you. Mostly, she's radiating contentment. Contentment, arousal, and no small level of affection.

The two of you remain in that position for nearly an hour, slowly watching the clock tick down. Occasionally, one or the other of you will kiss the other's neck or tighten their embrace, but that's as far as you take it.

Sadly, the clock eventually does hit 6:50, and you have to shake Madison slightly from where she's nearly fallen asleep in your arms.

"Come on, Madison," you breathe into her ear. "You have to get ready for movie night."

"Don't wanna," she mumbles. "Can't I stay here?"

You laugh quietly in her ear, and her mouth reluctantly turns up into a grin. "I know, I know," she groans, and leans back, although she doesn't try to escape the confines of your arms. She leans in instead and presses a languid kiss beside your mouth. "Thank you." Her voice is soft and vulnerable.

"Hey," you murmur, and press a kiss to the corner of her mouth in turn. "You don't need to thank me, Madison."

Her grin grows softer. She stares at your eyes for a moment, then leans in and kisses you a final time— an affectionate kiss on the tip of your nose— before finally slipping out of your arms and staring at you. "At least let me follow you out," she mumbles.
"Of course," you reply. You're tempted to reach out and take her hand again, but- no. It's not a good idea, not yet. One day, you'll be in a position where you can hold her all the time, but that day isn't today.

She follows you out the door, outside. It's bitingly cold outside, cold enough that you're even distracted away from the sight of Madison's suddenly hard nipples straining through her shirt, over the bra you'd... actually accidentally pulled down during your play just before, probably when you'd accidentally skimmed your fingers over her bra strap a few times. Not even a happy accident- you hadn't even noticed until now.

"Wait," she says suddenly, "how are you getting home?"

You pull out your phone. "Dad gave me some money for a taxi," you reply, peeling back your phone case to reveal the fifty tucked in there. "He knew he'd be working late."

She shakes her head. "You don't need to do that," she replies. "Hold on, I'll go ask Daddy if he can drive you."

As it turns out, Rick Clements has an absolutely luxurious car. Something called a "Buick", you learn, although a secondhand one; it's an import from Earth Aleph, where they still had the factories to build luxury cars.

You're thirteen minutes into the drive, by the clock on the dashboard, only a few streets away from your house, when Rick begins speaking.

"I'm sorry you had to see that argument at dinner," he says, flicking on his blinkers before slowing down at a crossroads. "I'm trying to get Jasmine to stop harassing Madison, but it's slow progress. My wife is a very independent woman."

"Yeah." You try your best to mask your dislike of the woman in your response. "Madison is doing her best at school, sir. She's really trying."

"I bet she is." He drums his fingers against the steering wheel, seemingly lost in thought. "It can be a bit- difficult to deal with the two of them," he says carefully. "My wife comes from a very driven family. Our family owes a lot of our success to her passion for what she does, but I'm not blind to her flaws, and I know she's pushing our children to become like her."

You can see your house from here, but your attention is focused on Rick now. "I noticed a bit of that," you admit. "Madison doesn't seem to enjoy that very much."

He laughs roughly. "No, I doubt she does." He pulls smoothly in front of the curb in front of your house and shuts the engine, turning to you with a serious look on his face. "My wife may be blind to it, but I am not. I know that Madison struggles with being independent."

He pauses for a moment. You're taken aback. Rick Clements is a lot more clever than you had given him credit for.

"Don't get me wrong, Taylor," he says. "I have my kinks, too. I don't want to shame Madison, which is why I've never brought this up with her. But this is driving a wedge in between my wife and my daughter. It's driving a wedge in between my family."
"I-"

"No, don't worry." He shakes his head wryly. "Sorry, that came out more aggressive than I wanted it to. I'm glad that Madison asked me to drive you home, Taylor. I'm glad that we got a chance to speak alone, so that I could thank you for what you're doing for my daughter."

You are so confused. Does he know what you've been doing, or...?

This isn't where you thought this conversation would go at all.

He reaches over and clasps you on the shoulder. "My wife wants Madison to be independent, but that doesn't mean she wants her to be unhappy with her life." He shakes his head, but you can see he looks a little lost. "And I want nothing but the best for my little girl. If that means she wants to make herself submissive to you- and yes," he chuckles, seeing the shocked and scared look that flickers across your face, "I do know what you were up to this afternoon, Madison is not a very subtle girl- if that's what makes my daughter happy, then I want you to know that I'll support you in that."

Your mouth opens and closes a few times, but all that comes out is a choking noise. There is no possible response you can make to that.

He grins again, and pats you on the shoulder. "With that said, I would appreciate it if you actually did spend some of your time studying when you're over at our house. I'll keep my wife distracted, but she's right when she says that Madison needs to get her grades up if she wants to get into university."

"I- I see," you manage faintly. "Thank you, sir?"

He chuckles deeply. "I should be the one thanking you," he replies. "Your father seems to be home already. I'll see you another day, Taylor Hebert."

You climb out of the car without responding, feeling vaguely shell-shocked.

You make your way up to your bedroom, barely acknowledging your father's early return from work on the way. Once you get there, you collapse on your bed and stare up at the ceiling for a while.

Then a wide grin spreads across your face.

It's going to be so much easier to corrupt Madison with her father's unknowing approval of your plan!

The next day, you wake up fidgeting. It's a public holiday in Brockton Bay today; Salvation Day, or the anniversary of the day in which the Triumvirate and the PRT worked together to drive Leviathan away from the city with less than ten thousand casualties. This means you have a three-day weekend ahead of you.

You'll take it a day at a time, though. You never know what opportunities might spring up over the course of a day.

You're going to spend today...
It's only quarter to six, you notice as you quietly climb out of your bed. You're careful not to step on the loose floorboard in your room as you pad out to the hall, and you tread carefully on the wooden hall so they don't groan loudly enough to wake Dad up just yet.

Dad normally doesn't get up until six, but since it's a public holiday today, he might not get up until as late as six thirty. Normally he has to be at work by eight, in time to get some work done before his employees start trickling in at eight thirty, but that's pushed back to nine for members of the Union on public holidays.

You walk into the kitchen, absently rubbing your hands together against the chill permeating it, before heading over to the fridge and opening it. You haven't gone shopping in a while- you make a mental note to head to the grocery store later today and pick up some food- so there isn't much left in there, but you can see a foam container (probably the remnants of Dad's dinner last night), half a dozen eggs, and the remnants of the vegetables you've used for dinners over the week.

With a casual shrug, you begin pulling ingredients out of the fridge. It's going to take a while to cut up all the vegetables anyway.

Eventually, you've prepared all the vegetables, whisked the eggs, and have the omelette mixture sitting in a covered bowl. You're about to put the bowl back in the fridge when you hear the creak of the hallways' floorboards.

Dad trundles out, looking blearily at the mess you've made of the kitchen. Evidently, he dismisses it as unimportant, as he just shakes his head and moves to the cupboard to pull two mugs out.

"Morning, Taylor," he yawns. "Coffee?"

You place the bowl back on the bench and give him a quick hug from behind. "Yes please," you say cheerfully. "I turned the percolator on half an hour ago, it should be all ready."

"Good girl," he tells you drowsily, dropping the mugs on the bench in front of the percolator. "What's for breakfast?"

You hurriedly sweep the onion skins off the bench into your hands before he can knock the mess onto the floor. "Just omelettes," you reply. "I wanted to use the rest of the bell peppers and tomatoes, and there was some spinach and goat cheese left in the fridge."

"Sounds delicious," he yawns.

For the next fifteen minutes, the two of you fall into a companionable silence while you quickly cook the omelettes. They're really nothing fancy- for a moment, you consider the idea of calling Rick later today and asking him to teach you to cook, but you dismiss the thought when you realize that you can probably get Madison to cook for you- but they're filling enough.

Dad looks much more alert when you drop a cooked omelette in front of him. The coffee's clearly done its job.

You settle in at the table across for him, and quickly cut a section of your omelette off and eat it.
Yeah, it's really not the best. It's serviceable, but you won't be winning awards any time soon. At least the coffee isn't bad, sweetened by cream and three sugars, just the way you like it. Dad refuses to have sugar in his coffee- "I'm sweet enough," he always jokes when you bug him about it.

Dad finishes his omelette well before you do, fair shovelling it down his throat. In fact, before you've managed to get halfway through yours, he's already up and washing his plate at the sink, then turning on the percolator for a second cup of coffee.

He clears his throat. You look up at him with a questioning expression, a forkful of omelette halfway to your mouth, to see him holding up your mug as well. You send him a pleased smile and a nod, and he nods back.

"So, it's a public holiday," he says. "Have you got any plans for what you want to do today?"

You half-shrug. "I was thinking about going to the library," you tell him. "Maybe I could invite Madison to come with me, that'd be fun."

He nods, glancing down at the perculator for a second. "That sounds like fun." For a moment, neither of you speaks; you take another mouthful of your omelette. "Actually, I was going to invite you to come to work with me today."

You pause, then quickly chew and swallow the mouthful of omelette as you consider it. You have slowly been growing apart from Dad recently, first because he was working so often, and then because you needed space to experiment with your powers in, and you didn't want to risk messing up your relationship with your dad with them.

"Actually, that sounds like a better idea," you admit. "I can go to the library tomorrow or something."

Danny smiles at you over the bench. "Glad to hear it. We'll leave at eight, then. Make sure you're showered and ready to go by then, okay?"

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The Docks aren't exactly bustling when you arrive. Eight o'clock is the shift change, when the overnight workers have signed out and the people working the morning shift sign in, and you arrive a bit after that. Everyone is already hard at work.

Looking around, you can see that they're two separate shipments. One is being loaded on the eastern side of the docks, where you can vaguely see Kurt operating a crane, lifting large steel shipping containers onto several railway cars. The other is filled with much smaller boxes, which over a dozen dockworkers are manually lifting onto trucks.

Dad leads you over to a small grey building near the dock's fence. It's signposted 'ADMINISTRATION'; beneath it is a smaller sign, obviously added later, that says 'Dockworker's Union- Office Open 8-6 M-F, 11-3 Weekends'. A man in his mid-thirties greets the two of you with a bland smile and a monotone "Hello, Danny" as you step inside- the receptionist, since he's sitting behind a thick wooden desk with panes of what you suspect is bulletproof glass between him and whoever comes in the front door.

"Heya, Thom," Dad says with a smile. "Anything happen while I was gone?" Thom only shakes his head, so the two of you proceed down the hallway without further comment, until Dad leans over
and says quietly, "He always sounds like that. His wife told me a story about how she yelled at him for talking in a monotone during their wedding." You snort inelegantly in response.

He leads you to his office- you know because he's affixed a crooked wooden sign to it, reading "Office of Danny Hebert". And there's a brass plaque sitting on his desk reading 'Danny Hebert-Union Steward'. And there's a photograph of your family sitting on his desk, turned half-away so he could view it from in front of his computer.

Well, and he told you as you approached it. That was, admittedly, probably the biggest hint.

"Right," he says when he finally makes it in. "Pull up a seat and I'll show you some of what I do. Lunch break is at half past eleven, so I'll introduce you to everyone then."

You'd never really put much thought into what Dad actually does at work all day. You'd kind of assumed he was like a manager, directing people about and assigning them duties. As it turns out, that was entirely wrong. The role of a union leader- "Union Steward," he stresses to you- is apparently something entirely distinct from a manager.

He actually spends most of his time doing three things: catching up on news from the broader union and disseminating any new information to the workers in the union, checking to ensure the Docks complied with state and federal policies and regulations, and investigating incidents involving union members as reported to him by his workers.

"It used to be a lot worse than it is," he tells you at one point. "When I took the job, back when you were a kid, the Docks were headed downhill with the Graveyard and all. They'd cut almost half their staff by the time I stepped in. The manager was terrible at his job. They later found out that he'd joined the Empire and started embezzling funds, which is when they let him go and hired Rebecca to take over. But the standards for workers at the dock were terrible, and the guy obviously didn't care much about following state safety standards. It took me years to get enough of my people hired in that work was actually getting done according to schedule, and it wasn't until they hired Rebecca that the council considered the Docks worth investing in again."

There's a fascinating system in place. Dad responds to emails with crisp efficiency, clearing out a backlog of over four dozen emails in before the clock even hits half past ten. Some of them are from the Union, memos for him to read over later, but a lot of them are emails from workers in his care or members of the Dock's managerial staff. His fingers snap out over the keyboard, shooting out responses almost faster than you can read them.

From what you can tell, there's a struggle over pay rises. The council has agreed to an ongoing contract, including a small pay rise each year to match inflation rates. The Mayor has refused to allocate additional funds to hire new employees, however, and with the Docks becoming more active, workers are having to work longer hours to meet the new demand.

"Don't they get overtime pay for that?" you ask, staring at the computer screen. Dad stops typing for a minute, looking down at you.

"They do, but that's not what this is about," he replies. "The boys are feeling underappreciated. The Mayor is demanding longer hours from them, but a lot of them have families they want to be home for, and being a dockworker doesn't pay very much in the first place." He smiles humourlessly at that.

"The Bay is still in an economic downslump, though. Tourism is finally picking back up, but with
the two Empire factions in town and the foreign gangs forming a coalition against them, a few businesses have decided it would be better if they moved their businesses elsewhere. The Mayor is struggling to balance the budget, and the Docks are a low priority so long as the Graveyard isn't cleared out."

You consider that for a moment. You're vaguely aware, of course, that the presence of so many gangs in town has been hurting the town's economy. That's just inevitable- gang violence, drug problems and increased crime rates always result in the local economy getting worse. The Protectorate, and especially the PRT, do their best to combat that, but there's only so much even superheroes can do. Problems like these are systemic. New Wave tries to offer what help they can, you know; Brandish, also a high-profile lawyer, offers her services free to anyone trying to get out of the gangs, and Panacea dedicates Sundays to helping victims of gang violence get back on their feet. But it's not enough to fix the problems in Brockton Bay, not alone.

Idly, you wonder what else is being done around town. Something else to research when you get to investigating the cape scene, you suppose.

It's fascinating to watch Dad at work. You never really understood what a role like his was for, before. You'd always thought of managers and the like as spending most of their time bossing people around and the like. In reality, Dad's more like a middleman. The bosses, the higher-ups of the Union, tell Dad what's going on, and he relays it to his workers. His workers tell him what it's like on the ground, and he relays it to the bosses. He figures out what each group needs from the other, and how they can deliver on that, then he sets the process in motion.

Businesses are way more complicated than you'd thought. It's lucky you figured that out before you tried setting up your own cape team.

You're going to have to look more into that.

Eventually, lunchtime rolls around. Dad finished responding to his emails about an hour ago, and has spent the remaining hour writing memos and going over resumes his bosses sent him to look over.

There's a larger room- repurposed from a warehouse, probably- that acts as a general meeting room and break room for the employees. Dad leads you there, chatting animatedly with you about the trade agreements between America and Russia. You're not sure how the chat got there. Your head is spinning with too much information.

Inside, you can see everyone sitting down around the room. Most of them are sitting on plastic stools in front of cheap, foldable aluminium tables. Some of them have chosen instead to sit on a long wooden bench, where they're wrapped in an animated conversation about one of Uber and Leet's latest videos.

When the two of you step forward into the building, everyone shoots your father respectful nods and waves. It's obvious that they appreciate the work he's done for them, even if he isn't having much luck with this pay rise thing.

At the back of the warehouse is a large fridge. Dad swings it open, revealing- not very much, really. A few cartons of milk, a half-empty loaf of bread and three full ones, some cheese and tomatoes, a thick packet of sliced beef from a local butcher's, and a bunch of tins of tuna.
"I know it's not very much," he says with an apologetic look towards you, "but everyone pools their money together to buy this stuff, and we don't get paid until Monday." He lowers his voice and leans towards you, murmuring, "And some of the guys can barely afford to pay their rent with the Empire's tax. They're too prideful to accept charity, so Lacey and I came up with this idea. This way everyone is at least able to eat one little meal at work."


He smiles at you and proceeds to make you a sandwich, then leads you over to a large table, with several people already sitting around it, including a lady dressed in a shimmering suit and wearing a full-face mask. He gestures around, introducing you to everyone as the two of you take a seat.

"Taylor, you already know Kurt and Lacey." You greet the two of them with a shy nod. "This is Rob, one of the foremen. Henry- don't worry, he's shy too," he confides to you in a loud whisper, causing the man to blush and stammer out a denial. Dad guffaws and claps him on the shoulder, before pointing you at the lady you'd noticed earlier. "And this is Igneous, the cape who's been clearing up the Bay for us."

You give them all a small wave, then take a bite out of your sandwich. You can't help your nose wrinkling for a second. Dad cut those tomatoes awfully thick.

There's a jovial atmosphere around the table. Dad carries the conversation, his booming voice filling the silence when everybody else falls silent. None of the topics are very interesting to you, so you just stay silent at the table, nibbling slowly at your sandwich.

The conversation doesn't interest you, but you're glad to see that Dad is enjoying himself. It took a long time for him to get to this point. After Mom's death, he'd slid into a depression for over a year. You'd taken care of him as much as you could, but you were barely nine at the time, and didn't even understand how to work the percolator, let alone care for a grown man.

Eventually, Kurt and Lacey had stepped in and booked him an appointment with a therapist. It still wasn't a quick process, but a combination of fortnightly sessions with the therapist and antidepressants had slowly helped him to recover. He still had his bad times, but you can't blame him for that- you have your bad times, too. It helped that the two of you had had nearly a year to prepare yourselves after Mom was diagnosed, but grieving was only natural.

You don't really know what's happened at work to make him seem so much livelier here than he is at home, but looking around, you can see that nobody's uncomfortable with his presence any more, nobody is shooting him sour looks. Everyone looks genuinely happy with him around.

Looking at him now- his face almost splitting in a wide grin as he joked around with his employees- you feel a small piece of your heart settle.

After the lunch break, Dad leads you back to his office.

"They're good people," he comments idly as he opens his mail program again, beginning to sort through the replies he'd received from earlier. You give him a quizzical look, and he jerks his chin in the direction of the door. "The workers here, they're good people. A lot of people look down on them for being unskilled labourers, but all they're doing is the best they can to provide for their
families and make a living."


You'd never really paid much attention to the city itself. You knew it wasn’t in a good state—obviously, since if it was, the Empire wouldn't still be around. But you'd never really looked at what the city is like for the people who lived in it.

For the rest of the afternoon, you content yourself by stealing one of his pens and a pad of paper and trying to write out a simple lesson plan for your tutoring sessions with Madison. Chemistry is simple enough, since you're still going over the basics, but she mentioned she was having trouble with her grades in general. Maths and English will be harder.

Dad doesn't clock out until five, a solid four hours after the rest of the morning shift. Most of the workers you pass give him a nod and a "Hello" as he walks past, but he just acknowledges them with a smile and a wave before moving on.

The car drive home is silent. You fiddle with the radio some, but most of the radio channels in the Bay are filled with Empire propaganda, and you can't stand the music the Protectorate's channel blares through the day.

When you get home, Dad takes a deep breath. "Okay, I guess it's time," he breathes almost inaudibly to himself. You don't think you were meant to hear that. "Taylor," he says louder, "could we talk for a minute?"

You shoot back with a flippant "Sure", tucking the stolen notepad back into your pocket.

Dad leads you into the house, then through the hall into the dining room, where you both sit at the dining table. He looks seriously over at you.

"Taylor," he begins, then cuts himself off. "I'm-" He comes up short again, exhaling a frustrated sigh. He visibly gathers himself before saying anything. "I'm sorry if I'm away a lot," he says quietly. "I know I'm missing a lot with you, and I really am sorry about that. I'll try to do better in future."

You shake your head. "No, it's fine. I-"

He interrupts you, shaking his head angrily. "It's not fine, Taylor," he says. For the first time all day, you can feel his emotions leaking out heavily enough that your power picks up on them. Frustration, and disappointment. "I've... I'm not a perfect man, Taylor. I try my best, but I've made a lot of mistakes in the past, with you, with me, with my whole life. But I'm your father, and I should be doing a better job of that."

Anger flares to life within you, deep in your gut. "Hey, I said it's fine," you state firmly. "Dad, I'm fifteen years old. I can handle you not getting home until eight some days."

He closes his eyes, the frustration growing stronger. It's tempting to use your power on him, but- you did it once before, when you manipulated him into feeling like you could handle staying alone at home overnight in preparation for your plan, and you didn't feel good about it. He's your Dad, someone you actually care about, not just another one of your victims.

"That's not what I'm saying, Taylor." He sounds defeated. "I should have been there for you more. Not even physically," he says hastily when you open your mouth, "I mean emotionally. Annette's death was hard on me, but it was hard on you too, and I should have been there for you."
You clench your teeth angrily, grinding them together.

These don't sound like his words. They're too prepared, too rehearsed. His therapist, maybe.

"Dad," you say lowly, "it's fine."

The frustration just grows heavier.

You tilt your head back, and choke back a groan. "Look," you bite out, "I'm dealing with it. I'm doing really good at school, and I have some good friends. That's enough, isn't it?"

You risk a glance over at him, taking in the pained grimace on his face as he leans back in the chair, looking up at the ceiling as though for guidance.

You get the feeling that, no. Dad does not consider that to be nearly enough.

His expression doesn't change at all when you get up from the table and storm off to your room. Not that that helps you at all.

Even later that night, after you've hidden in your room for over five hours, you can still feel the shame rolling off him.

The next day, you wake up to find Dad already awake. Odd; he usually likes to sleep in until nine on a weekend.

Neither of you bring up last night's scene. There's an air of awkwardness between you two, but you're content to let that stand. The awkwardness is better than the disappointment he was feeling last night. Besides, you can feel his antidepressants at work, slowly smothering his disappointment and shame beneath a small thread of cheerfulness.

Breakfast is mostly a silent affair, until eventually, the phone rings. Dad rushes off to answer it, and you take the opportunity to steal his fried eggs while he's gone. Push you for answers, you grumble silently. Let's see how he likes his breakfast without a fried egg!

When he returns, it's with a smile, if a strained one. Internally, you let out a sigh of relief. It must be good news, if he's smiling so soon after a fight.

He raises an eyebrow at you when he looks at his plate and sees his fried eggs missing, but you don't say anything, just glare defiantly at him as you eat a huge forkful of eggs. Oddly, that seems to soften him somewhat.

Of course, as has to be the way, any traces of a good mood you'd developed are shattered when he speaks.

"Good news," he says, somewhat cheerfully. "I just got off the phone with Alan. Apparently he was speaking to the father of that girl you went to visit yesterday, and it reminded him that we haven't seen each other in a few months. He's invited us all over for dinner."

Your hands clench around the handle of your fork, and suddenly, you wish Alan Barnes was here so
you could steal his eggs, too. Then something he said catches your attention. "Us all?" you ask.

"Yeah," he replies. "Us and the Clammen... your friend and her family."

Well, you suppose. At least there's some good news here.

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You'd say that today started off so promisingly, but you'd be lying. A fight with your father, and an attempted discussion about your "feelings", as though that actually needs to be talked about. And now, you're going over for dinner with Emma and Madison.

You aren't prepared for this. You have a plan for how you're going to approach Emma, and it looks nothing like this. You need more time, more room to prepare. You haven't even started nudging her emotions yet. How were you going to get her to accept you in now, when she was going to be pre-warned and have her defences up?

The thought of not influencing her crosses your mind for a moment, but you dismiss it out of hand. Even if you didn't have to worry about Emma making nasty comments and causing your father to storm out in a huff, which would make it very difficult for you to seduce her later, you honestly want to get started sooner now that the opportunity has forced itself on you. A plan is already forming in your head, a very naughty plan.

The dinner won't be until six, if you still know Emma's family at all. Dad will drive you over at five, and you're going to need some time to prepare yourself before, so you're going to need to be home by at least two. It's seven now, so you still have a fair amount of time during the day if you want to get something done.

You're going to spend your time in the morning...
The air between you and your father is still awkward over an hour later. Your resentment faded somewhat in light of the new nervousness now fluttering in your stomach, and you even felt a little bad about stealing his eggs... at least until he just went and fried himself three more to replace the two you stole. That killed off the guilt fast, and you went back to glowering at him.

When you announce that you're going to visit the library today, Dad gives you a one-armed hug and the money for the bus fare, sending you on your way with a cheery wave. You shoot a suspicious look at his back as you leave, but sadly, you have the power to manipulate people's emotions, not the power to read people's minds. You can feel that he is feeling happier than he has for the past.. well, as long as you can remember reading his emotions, anyway.

The bus is late, as it always is. Not too late today, thankfully, it's only four minutes behind the times listed on the schedule sitting on the side of the bus stop. Once, you'd had to wait almost half an hour beyond the scheduled time for the bus to arrive. The bus scheduled to arrive half an hour later had arrived while the first one was still picking up passengers. That had been an embarassing incident for the first bus driver.

Soothing songs ring forth from the radio, tuned to the Protectorate-aligned channel of Brockton Bay. You're a little surprised- usually the music on this channel is a lot worse than this- but it's passable enough today that you sing along under your breath. "Mouse Protector, Mouse Protector, Defender of the Weak and Innocent, Mouse Protector~"

The man sitting beside you gives you an odd look. You glare up at him and continue singing defiantly. Those words are meant to be capitalized. You'd seen the subtitles once, and they said so, damn it! Subtitles are law!

The bus trundled down along the roads of Brockton Bay, slow and cautious, as mandated by the council. There had been one too many incidents of minor villains taking advantage of the buses, planting bombs on them or holding them up so they could get some funds far enough away that the heroes in the PRT couldn't respond in time to save anyone. Now, the public transit system was mandated to remain within a certain distance of patrolling heroes or subsidized rogues. It was inconvenient, but less so than not having buses at all, or inevitably ending up in a hostage situation when the heroes turned up.

It takes nearly forty minutes for the bus to arrive at the stop in front of the town hall. You climb off there, then head across the street to the public library- an old, dour building, with a sign out the front proudly proclaiming "Brockton Bay Public Library". Beneath that was written, in smaller letters, "Proudly standing since 1878".

You pass through the RFID trackers standing in front of the doors and head within. There are several ancient computers sitting on small tables within the rows of books, permanently open with their screens set to display the library's catalogue searching system.

With an eager grin, you take a seat in front of the closest catalogue computer and get to work.

Four and a half hours later, you finally fold the last newspaper back up, wiping some imaginary sweat from your brow. It turns out that trying to get a good idea of what Brockton Bay's cape scene is like is actually a lot harder than it sounds. That's a recurring theme, you're noticing.
There's aren't a lot of records online. You'd checked, but the only really serviceable source you'd found was ParaHumans Online- "the" premier source for cape news online, if only because it was where the Protectorate actually had a presence, and thus official Protectorate news and posts from PRT-aligned heroes flowed in. There were other sites on the internet that followed and tracked cape news, but few capes visited them, so they never built much steam.

You'd read over as much as you could, both on PHO and in the library's archived newspapers. PHO is actually a good source for news, but it's relatively new, having only been around for three or four years, and there are a lot of smaller incidents in the Bay that either go unreported on the website, or were only tracked in some of the "Incident Megathreads" you don't have the time to read through today.

Still, you've learned quite a bit today. Some of which you wish you hadn't learned.

From what you've read, there are three "major" gangs in Brockton Bay. The Protectorate only officially recognizes two of them, naming specifically the East-Asian Coalition (unofficially referred to as the "ABB", the Azn Bad Boys, by some of the gang members, but that name hadn't caught on enough to be added to official reports) and the Empire- or Empire 88- as gangs engaging in criminal activity.

The political reality is as such;

The Empire's presence in Brockton Bay isn't as shaky as the Protectorate claims, but they're still far from the lofty heights they had presented in the Bay prior to the strife with Marquis, and then Leviathan's attack. They're a faction divided by internal strife, a civil war that had been formed with the death of the former leader of the faction, a man named 'Allfather'. Each of Allfather's children has claimed they are fit to rule the Empire, and the gang split in two between them.

Now, two factions of the Empire vie for supremacy within Brockton Bay's shores.

Kaiser, the elder son of the family, leads the faction still referred to as 'The Empire' by most of the populace. The man is noted to be extraordinarily charismatic, and you're inclined to agree, as much as you dislike it. He's charismatic enough that he's plastered most of the city's media outlets with Empire propaganda- radio channels, newspapers, even public advertisements. None of it is technically illegal, as the propaganda never uses hate speech- just preaches the "values of good, working-class families within the Bay and its surrounding area" and "struggling against the filth accumulated over centuries of Great American Progress", capitalization typically not included. It's effective, too. Nobody wants to believe that they're racist, but there are plenty of disadvantaged people in the Bay, and Kaiser prays upon their hopes and fears, furthering his own ends.

Beneath the Empire are a sundry list of capes. Purity, Fenja and Menja, Night and Fog, Crusader and Alabaster are amongst the ones mentioned most often; their powers are terrifying enough to let them hold their own against New Wave and PRT-aligned capes when they show up, and charges against his followers the few times the city's heroes have managed to arrest them have consistently fallen through. Purity is officially listed as a rogue as of a year and a half ago, but she has been noted as still being Empire-sympathetic, so you're listing her with the Empire still.

There are also a host of minor villains, often mercenaries hired temporarily to perform a specific duty, listed in there too, and then estimates of up to six hundred Empire-affiliated gang members. Surveys of Brockton Bay's citizens have found that near 20% of people living in the Bay sympathize with the Empire's position, too.
Iron Rain, the younger daughter of Allfather, leads the other, decidedly more violent faction of the Empire. If Kaiser's faction reminds you as much of a business as a gang, then Iron Rain's faction reminds you as much of the stories you've heard of the Italian Mafia as it does a typical gang. Iron Rain doesn't bother with things like advertising. No, she goes out and deals with the problem "effectively"- typically, by beating a bunch of black or Asian people senseless, and-slash-or extorting their businesses into bankruptcy. They're the only gang in town with confirmed murders to their name.

The presence of Iron Rain's Brotherhood is the other reason why the Protectorate never cracks down as heavily on the Empire. The Empire has denounced the Brotherhood as misguided and foolish, although you can't help but note that they never denounce the Brotherhood's goals, only their methods.

Beneath the Brotherhood lies a more extensive list of capes. Hookwolf is most prominent amongst them, one of the deadliest capes in Brockton Bay besides Iron Rain, Kaiser, Lung and Dauntless (the latter not having any crimes on public record, but you've seen videos of the man in action). Other long-term or significant members include Krieg, Victor (you wonder briefly at the name, but decide he's probably referencing victory, rather than not bothering with a codename), Othala, Rune, Cricket, and Stormtiger. Eight capes within a single faction, and Iron Rain and Hookwolf amongst them- it doesn't surprise you terribly much that the PRT has only made a few arrests over the years, and only gotten one to stick recently.

Luckily, the Brotherhood doesn't have as much of a political presence as the Empire does. They don't bother to advertise, so there are a lot fewer people willing to work with them and publicly affiliate themselves with them. The money they make mostly comes from extortion and illegal habits like gambling and underground fight clubs... or so you assume, though you've never really looked into the whole illegal scene.

And then... You grimace down at your notebook.

The Empire factions are bad enough, but you also have the East-Asian Coalition, this "ABB". Originally a wide variety of separate factions, many of them were originally at each other's throats. It wasn't until the arrival of Lung that they began to unify, and became a threat capable of fighting off the Empire- and the PRT. Sure, many of those gangs had had minor capes of their own affiliated with them, but Lung is a far more capable combatant than any of them, having once held off Brockton Bay's entire Protectorate force off for long enough for Oni Lee to extract him.

The ABB is a loose and disparate force largely held together by Lung's sheer force of presence, and the assistance of his demonic associate, Oni Lee. From what you can tell, the minor gangs that make up the East-Asian Coalition often hate being part of it, but there's not much they can do when Lung threatens to tear them apart if they don't do what he says. And, besides, they hate the Empire more than they do each other.

That's the scary thing about the ABB. Even the name isn't correct; they were branded the East-Asian Coalition back when it was still forming and Lung was focusing on the gangs with a heavy Japanese or Chinese presence, but nowadays it was comprised of all kinds of minorities. Many of them joined up specifically to take a stand against the Empire and all they stood for. And that's hard to take action against, because how are you supposed to tell minorities that they shouldn't stand up for themselves and their rights without coming off worse?

The PRT is largely willing to let them stand, because of that. They are willing to arrest any members
of the ABB they come across actively in the process of committing crimes, but it's more important to dedicate their resources to taking down the two Empire factions. The ABB can always be dealt with afterwards, after all; and it will be much easier to do so then.

And then there are the heroes.

It kind of depresses you that this section is so much smaller.

The PRT, and with them the Protectorate, are strapped for assets. It's been that way since Leviathan attacked; a lot of the heroes that were previously assigned here were killed by the Endbringer, and it was deemed to not be worth it to send more heroes in on a permanent basis.

The Protectorate's forces in town consist of seven heroes, less even than the comprised forces of the Brotherhood. They're lead by Armsmaster, a notoriously skilled combatant noted on several of your searches for being one of the only Tinkers in the world to survive a close-range encounter with an Endbringer and emerge not only alive, but having wounded it. Beneath him is Miss Militia, who acts as his second-in-command and the public face of the PRT. And then there's Velocity, Assault, Battery, Triumph, and Dauntless.

The Protectorate spends most of their time publicly patrolling the downtown areas of the city- not advertising where their patrol routes are, but making people aware of their presence as they do patrol- and assisting the PRT in providing shelters, resources and protection for disadvantaged citizens. The second is probably the most effective thing they're doing in the city, both in your own opinion and according to the newspapers you'd read, although PHO begged to differ, and differ for pages.

That alone isn't very effective, but that is where their cooperation with the other hero group in town comes in- New Wave.

The PRT is limited in what they can do within the city. All their funding comes from the PRT headquarters in New York, which in turn is headed by a board of directors advised by the Triumvirate. As such, they only have a limited amount of money they can throw at the problems in Brockton Bay- and thus there are only limited results they can bring in.

New Wave doesn't have that restriction, and it shows. They work together with a lot of business owners in town, securing donations for their charities and finding placements for people who have trouble securing work for whatever reason. They've opened up several free clinics in town, and even have Panacea visit them on a weekly basis. They offer legal representation, the opportunity to find work, counselling to overcome drug addictions, help with recovering from debt, and a lot more. They work closely with the PRT, allowing the PRT to send the people who seek the assistance of their shelters to better their lives with New Wave.

It's not a perfect system, but it's helping. The Empire's influence is spreading, but the PRT and New Wave are doing what they can to counter it.

There had been a few threads dedicated to individual capes, but you hadn't had much time to browse through them, only making it through the first few and last couple pages of two of them. Which reminds you- glancing at your watch, you immediately begin packing up the newspapers. You only have five minutes before you need to leave.

The only threads you'd been able to spend any time reading were Battery and Glory Girl's, the two threads closest to the top of the pages. You hadn't learned much- there was a description of their
powers and a few photos, but nothing you didn't already know. There had been at least some interesting information in there, though.

Battery's page had been fairly boring, most of the information in there consisting of official reports and a lot of discussion of her relationship with Assault (blech). There had been a few images in there of her- including one you'd saved and e-mailed to yourself for later viewing, an image of Battery with her costume partially torn, revealing an expanse of stomach topped by the underside of a plain blue bra- but nothing exciting apart from that.

The only really interesting tidbit you'd learned was about Battery's patrolling habits. Officially, the Protectorate isn't supposed to favour any one organisation over another, preserving an unbiased image so everyone can believe that the Protectorate does their best to serve everyone's needs equally. Unofficially, it seems like Battery seems to spend a lot of her off-patrol times hanging around PRT-funded battered women's shelters. There was rampant speculation in her thread for half a page or so before the wrath of the mods descended and that line of discussion ended, but you tucked the information away for future use.

Glory Girl's page was a lot more exciting. It seems that her role as a local celebrity has attracted a lot of the more "enthusiastic" fans around, and Glory Girl, if anything, seems to encourage them. On the few pages you'd read, there were a lot of people drawing pictures of her and posting photographs they'd taken of her, or writing awestruck stories about how Glory Girl had single-handedly saved them from a group of Brotherhood members or helped rescue their families from burning buildings. Unfortunately, nothing dirty- you suppose that the mods clamped down much harder on sexual discussions of people under eighteen. Fair enough, for a public board.

There is actually a wealth of information on the girl and her family. New Wave did nothing to hide their identities, so there was a lot to discuss. A few shipping discussions, cut short when someone pointed out that she was already dating someone (one brave soul dared to suggest that maybe someone like Gregor could steal her away, but was promptly verbally torn to shreds both for suggesting that she would ever cheat on her boyfriend and for suggesting such a terrible ship). A long tangent about her favourite foods, ended when the girl herself interjected and noted that she has a fondness for cheesecake and tacos, sending the thread wild for more than a page. An eleven-post tangent about the merits of dropping a car on people, sparked by a video of Glory Girl doing just that to Alabaster (the discussion, which was growing increasingly heated, ended when Brandish popped into the thread and told everyone that it had been Shielder's car, not a bystander's, and that Shielder had already reamed her over it).

The thing that intrigues you the most, though, is the mention of a weekly book club headed by the girl that met on Sundays. You have written down the time and date, noting that they met on Sundays at the upper floor of a small bookstore on the Boardwalk.

You don't even have to build yourself an in, you think with a pleased smile. You were looking for a book club to join a few weeks back anyway.

Emma's house looks just like you remember it. A two-storey affair similar to Madison's house, with a pleasant soft-green exterior and a neatly trimmed lawn. They've replanted the roses, you note- the last time you'd been here they were purple, while now one side of the garden has red roses, and the other side has yellow.

Rick's car is parked in their driveway. Madison must already be here.
Alan greets the two of you at the door, evidently having heard your car. He looks genuinely happy to see the two of you, and you can see Dad's face light up in a smile at the happiness he's exhibiting. Honestly, it makes you feel like a bit of a jerk for not wanting to come earlier.

You peer around the house. It feels colder, a little more sterile than it did the last time you visited. You can't quite place why.

"Taylor," Alan says, his smile growing a little more. "It's nice to see you again. She's grown, hasn't she, Danny?"

"That she has," Dad replies. "Five foot, what, seven?"

"Eight," you reply, giving him a disgruntled look. He just smiles cheekily in response, jostling your shoulder. Alan chuckles at the interaction.

"Emma's up in her room with Madison," he tells you easily. You can't quite describe the feeling that sentence invokes in you. A mix of trepidation at the thought of seeing Emma, anticipation at the thought of seeing Madison again, and heady arousal at the image of Emma in her bedroom. Soon, you silently promise yourself. "Why don't you head on up there and say hello?"

"Okay." You try to give a nonchalant shrug at that, hoping he can't see your eagerness in the action, or the hesitation in your steps as you begin to climb the staircase and head to Emma's room. Honestly, all these stairs leading to your girls rooms' are going to kill you.

Once you're out of sight of Alan, you stop for a moment, reaching out with your power. You can feel Madison immediately- the arousal pooling in you grows stronger as you feel her lust, still strong enough after your last encounter that you can taste it from here, and her submission brimming beneath it. The sensation is exquisite.

Emma is much more muted- you have to actively search for her presence to feel it at all. There's a whole lot of boredom in there, some apathy, some disdain, some frustration, some anger- all the emotions you've come to expect from your former friend. Some cruelty, some loneliness, all directed at you. And- there, running beneath them all; a low, humming thread of lust, twined already around a weak band of loyalty stretching to you. Unexpected, although it's not strong enough to have led to anything in the past.

Before you even walk into the room, you begin tugging on her loyalty. You're not gentle about it, not at all. You need to make a good impression now, if you're going to make any progress tonight.

You wait in the hallway, stomach writhing with nerves, for nearly five minutes as you wait for your power to really take root. You can feel the loyalty in her growing, slower than you'd like, but- good enough.

Madison breaks into a smile the second she sees you step into the room, and you can see she's restraining herself from leaping up and giving you a hug. You have no such compunctions, being able to actually feel Emma's emotional state, and pull her into a hug the moment you sit beside her. Her face turns beet red and she buries her face in your neck, but she eagerly returns it. For a moment, you're tempted to pull her up into your lap again (she's wearing actual pants today, so you don't have to worry about revealing anything to Emma if you do so), but you refrain- Emma's cruelty just spiked up again, tempered only by you giving a sharp tug on her loyalty. You can't afford to push Emma quite that far just yet. Soon.
Emma narrows her eyes at the two of you. "So that's why," she says roughly.

Madison wrings her hands nervously behind your back for a moment, before lifting your shirt slightly and placing both her cool hands on your bare back, seeming to derive some comfort from the physical contact with you. "Obviously," she fires back, voice muffled through your shirt. She doesn't turn to look at the other girl.

"Well," Emma says. She probably intended the phrase to sound cruel, but her cruelty is already subsiding as you tug on her loyalty again and again, sharp pulls intended to bring it to the forefront as soon as you can. "I see."

You give her a dry, amused smile when she trails off after that, looking a little lost. You don't blame her, though. Her emotions are all a tangled ball of frustration and self-loathing, all rolled up with anger and cruelty. Making them subside as you are is probably leaving her feeling more than a little lost.

Honestly, you're probably doing her a favour by manipulating her like this. She's going to feel so much happier under your thrall.

You wait a few moments for the loyalty to grow a bit stronger- long enough for it to have buried the sharpest thorns of the cruelty- before you pull Madison completely up onto your lap, where she snuggles into you with a contented sigh. Lust pulses through her, and you almost lick and suck her neck before you remember Emma is still in the room with you.

"You two seem happy together," Emma says neutrally.

Emma's emotions are complicated. The words bring up a lot of emotions, and you have to sharply tug on her loyalty again to get them to subside. Anger, cruelty, pain, loss, regret. You're actually a little curious, now. Up until now, you've only been able to feel anger and cruelty from her. Was this buried beneath all that? What had caused all this? Had Emma always felt this way, or did something happen to her?

Madison finally lifts her face from your neck, turning to face Emma with a determined expression. "Yeah," she says defiantly. "What of it?"

"Nothing," Emma replies dully. "I was just- never mind." Another pang of loss, quickly buried with another pull on her loyalty.

Your girl glares defiantly at her for a moment longer before turning back to face you, eyes pleading. You give her a quick kiss, but aren't quite willing to go any further- there's enough faint lust in Emma that you're fairly sure she won't storm out of the room in disgust at the first kiss, but you're going to have to pull her lust up if you want her to watch anything serious.

With an exaggeratedly pained sigh, Madison falls limply back against you, laying one cheek on your collarbone and looking up at you. She still hasn't removed her hands from beneath your shirt, so-releasing Emma's loyalty for the first time since you stepped in the room, and giving a quick, sharp tug on her lust- you slip your hands beneath her own. Madison shivers deliciously against you, and you can't help but tilt your head down to press a kiss against her cheek.

For a moment, you pause and evaluate. Emma's emotions are still a tangled, complicated ball, and you're going to have to deal with that at some point, but for now... Well, you're not going to get the
opportunity to deal with that if you don't get her to open up enough to have some fun first, and her
darker emotions are getting blunted right now.

Madison's content enough snuggling in your lap that you feel safe in leaving her for a second,
focusing your attention (but not your eyesight) on Emma.

For the next few minutes, you concentrate on slowly teasing Emma's lust to the forefront. It's easier
to bring her lust up than it was her loyalty, since they were loosely tied together, but with it come a
host of messy issues. You have to keep dropping it and tugging on her loyalty to bury them again,
unless you want to her to associate being lusty with being cruel to her- and, yeah, there's absolutely
no way you want that to happen.

Finally, you've brought it up enough that Emma's feeling it- feeling enough that her face is faintly
flushed as her gaze darts between the two of you and the pictures hanging on her wall, at least. You
keep pressing on it, taking care to alternate between lust and loyalty, but the other emotions are being
dampened more and more, slipping down as you manipulate Emma's mind.

You're still careful as you slip one hand out from beneath Madison's shirt and use it to gently lift her
chin, though. You don't want to spook Emma- just associate her growing lust with your activities
with Madison.

Madison's lips are soft and compliant. She opens her mouth the second you brush your tongue
against her lips, meeting yours in a slow, lazy kiss. You can feel the arousal in her as she returns the
kiss-literally, in that you can feel her lust, and figuratively, in that you can feel her restraining herself
from grinding on your thigh- but she matches your pace, reigning in her own growing lust to match
the pace you set. You should reward her for being a good girl, later. Maybe tomorrow.

Across the room, you let your eyes flicker from Madison's closed eyelids to Emma as you take
Madison's tongue into your mouth and gently suck on it. Emma's pretending not to watch, but when
Madison shudders, she can't help but glance over, causing her already red cheeks to darken further.
She quickly looks away again, but you can see her glancing over on occasion out of the corner of her
eyes.

You're careful not to push it too far. You've pushed down her bitchy nature for now, and started
associating her lust with you, but there's only so far you can clamp down on her emotions. If you do
anything that could freak her out right now, her thorns will come back with a vengeance, and you'll
set your progress back for the rest of the night.

So you take care not to get Madison too worked up at first. It works, and you don't even need to use
your power on her- she responds willingly to your gentle touches and caresses, only occasionally
letting out a soft, breathy moan when you move from her mouth to briefly kiss her jawline or drag
your teeth lightly across her neck.

She's well aware of Emma's presence- you can see her occasionally opening her eyes and chancing a
glance at the other girl- but you aren't feeling any hesitance from your girl at all, so either she doesn't
care, or it's actually encouraging her. She spends most of her time either closing her eyes and
focusing on you, or staring into your gaze with lidded eyes as you break away for air.

Madison's hands creep slowly higher up your shirt as you continue the kiss. This time, it's you who
shivers; you go to stop her, but when your hands touch her arms, she pulls back from the kiss and
gives you an adorable pout.
When she looks at you like that, sitting on your lap with her lower lip jutting out and trembling—
you'd have to be heartless to deny her that, no matter how unsexy you think your tiny breasts are.

You take a moment to feel for Emma with your power anyway. You haven't been actively paying
attention, but you've been softly tugging away. Now, you can feel the powerful undercurrent of lust
rising through her. Her other emotions are still there— you're pretty sure the self-recrimination you can
feel in there is going to rise when you're not around to suppress it— but you suspect that if you were to
feel her panties right now, they would be damp. Not that you're stupid enough to try anything of the
sort... yet.

Soon, maybe.

Madison's breath hitches as she pulls your shirt up over your head and places it to the side, revealing
your bare chest to her. She stares at it for a moment, before looking up at you with a pleading look
on her face.

You almost cream your panties then and there when you realize what she's waiting for. You give her
a rough kiss before doing anything, catching her lip between your teeth and biting it hard enough to
cause her to whimper.

Then, when you pull back from the kiss and her gaze drops back down to your chest, you look over
at Emma. She's watching you, all traces of disgust washed from her face. Her knees are clenched
hard together, but she's watching your face, her brow knitted together. You attempt to memorize
everything about this scene— the sweet smell of Madison, the warm feeling of her in your arms, the
puff of her warm breath on your nipples, the way Emma catches her lower lip between her teeth as
she watches you.

Then, you stare Emma in the eyes as, for the first time in your life, you give Madison an order— "Lick
them." And she obeys without even thinking about it.

You've played with your breasts before, of course. They're sensitive— small breasts usually are— but
there's really not much to them. Most of the time, you don't even bother to wear a bra; you have
nothing to support, and your nipples are small enough that even when they're hard (which has been a
lot, lately), they're not very noticeable through a thin shirt, and are completely hidden behind the
jackets you like to wear.

If you'd known how fantastic it would feel to have Madison's tongue running over them, though, you
would never have complained.

Madison is clearly new at this, but she gives it her best. She seems to take a particular pleasure in
licking you in just the right places to cause your breath to hitch, and teases you by focusing on those
places— the undersides of your breasts, your aerola, the skin between your breasts— and occasionally
takes a moment to move over, instead sucking your nipples into her mouth, then releasing them and
blowing cool air on them. Your grip tightens on her shoulders whenever she does the last, causing
you to feel her mouth widen into a grin against your bare skin.

As Madison continues her work, you keep your gaze focused on Emma in a silent challenge. She
doesn't back down, continuing to stare at you, although occasionally her gaze trails down to look at
your devoted little sub suckling on your bare breasts before hurriedly snapping back up to your face.

Unfortunately, that's as far as you can push your little game tonight.
You regretfully push Madison's head away from her chest when you hear the creaking sounds of someone walking up the staircase, reaching over to pull your shirt back on. Madison lets out a little mewl as you hide her new favourite toys from her, a sound that makes Emma shiver a little even as she pretends not to watch.

"Sorry, Maddy," you say with a husky voice. Her eyes darken at the newly-bestowed nickname, but she reluctantly climbs off at you and smooths down her shirt as she hears the footsteps approaching. Even Emma turns around, still pretending at reluctance, although by this time, you're so deep in her emotions that you can feel the thread of disappointment when she sees you and Madison are once again sitting beside each other, no longer even hugging.

Alan rounds Emma's door, either not noticing or dismissing the red faces of Emma and Madison. You were careful not to muss up Madison's hair this time, as you did before your dinner with her family, so hopefully he'll dismiss her red face as being embarrassed. "Dinner's ready!" he exclaims excitedly. "Rick cooked for us tonight," he adds helpfully when he notices none of you look excited.

You can actually feel the excitement bubbling up in Emma at those words, but nonetheless she tries for indifference when she responds. "Oh, did he?" she asks, staring coolly up at the ceiling. "That was nice of him."

A smirk flits across Alan's face. Yeah, he's not buying it any more than you are.

"It's roast chicken tonight," he says, waving his hands as though wafting a smell towards her. "Chiiicken, Emma, you know you looove chicken."

She rockets to her feet so fast you're afraid she may have sprained an ankle hitting the floor. "Daddy!" she hisses, glancing momentarily towards you and Madison. "Stop it, you're embarassing me!"

"Well, soooo-rry," he drawls mock-sympathetically. "Danny's setting the table now, so come down in a minute or two." With his message delivered, he turns and walks away, shooting yourself and Madison a quick wink as he does so.

"Ugh," she groans. Seeing Madison open her mouth with a teasing smile, she holds up a finger. "Not a word!"

You just grin at her. Her expression doesn't even sour when she sees it.

The dinner goes well. Emma refuses to speak a word to you throughout it, but for once, not out of cruelty- her face just flushes red every time she looks at you, and whatever words she had on her lips dies. You can't even content yourself by playing with Madison- it feels cruel to toy with her so soon after she devoted herself so eagerly to you. Maybe tomorrow.

It's over far too soon. You pull Madison aside into the darkened sunroom on the other side of the hall as Dad stands in the kitchen, saying his goodbyes to everyone and making promises about holding dinner again soon.

You're no longer surprised when she melts immediately into your arms as you pull her into an embrace, finding her usual snuggling position against your neck.
She holds on to you for a long minute before pulling away slightly, looking up at you with a hesitant expression on her face.

"Did I do good today?" she asks quietly. "I wasn't sure if you wanted to do that in front of Emma, but you seemed... and she didn't say anything, so..."

You press an affectionate kiss to her nose, causing her to grin reluctantly. "Don't worry, Madison," you murmur. "You did perfect, and not just with Emma. You did a good job today. You're a good girl."

You probably shouldn't be surprised when you have to pry open her arms after that when Dad calls, leaving her pouting after you with a bright expression in her eyes.

Emma still hasn't said a word to you, but even when you leave, you can still feel the threads of lust and loyalty pounding strong through her. They're going to fade somewhat overnight, and she's going to be dealing with self-recrimination for some time to come, but those feelings aren't going to fade entirely, and she's going to remember how good she felt watching you and Madison together.

It's a good base to work from. It's going to take work for you to push her as far half as far as you have Madison, but at least now you know- it is possible for you to influence her the same way.

Still, though, that's a project for another day, not tonight. You sink down into your bed almost as soon as you arrive home at ten, hands falling between your legs almost as quickly as you can pull your covers over you. Images float through your head, images of Emma's enraptured face, of Madison's devoted smile, and it doesn't take you long to cum as you think about what tonight felt like, how good it felt to order Madison around as Emma watched, unable to speak or move as you nearly fucked Madison on her bed-

At least in your fantasy, you conclude in your head once the afterglow of your orgasm fades and you're left panting with a sticky wetness along your thighs.

You roll over, not bothering to slide your panties back on, and try to fall asleep as plans for tomorrow- the final day of your long weekend- whirl through your head.

Tomorrow, you think, you'll spend the day...
As sexy as it had felt to go to sleep last night in the throes of your orgasm, it just feels gross when you wake up the next morning. You stumble out of bed, tiredly pulling your pants back on (not even bothering to do the buttons up, just pulling the zipper up and and wishing you hadn't taken them off so you wouldn't be so freezing this morning.

Then you shuffle your way to the bathroom and turn the shower on, taking your pants straight back off along with the rest of your clothes. Ugh.

At least the hot spray of water wakes you up some. You stand beneath it, luxuriating in the warmth radiating from your body and the feeling of stickiness washing away from your legs for long minutes before you finally feel awake enough to begin cleaning yourself.

Even after you've finished washing yourself, turned the shower off and headed back to your room, the sky outside is still dark. Glancing at the clock, you're startled to see it says it's only five thirty. You'd arrived home a bit after ten, and had definitely stayed awake for a while after that. How much sleep did you miss out on, and why were you awake now?

You shake your head, trying to shake the cobwebs out. Letting out a long sigh, you wander downstairs (closing the hallway door as you do so you don't accidentally wake Dad up) and turn the percolator on. The rich smell of coffee begins to permeate through the kitchen.

As the percolator bubbles away, you head out to the living room and hit the power button on the computer Dad had installed there a few months ago, wincing as the machine makes a loud grating sound. You really hope that didn't wake Dad up. You've been enough of a hassle for him lately.

The dial-up modem attempts to make an even louder screech when you power it up, but you just rip your shirt off and throw it over the modem in a huff of sudden anger. Stupid machine. Why did you decide to turn it on? You should have just left it alone.

The anger passes quickly, and you have to make a regretful trudge back to your room, completely bare from the waist up, to retrieve another shirt. While you're there, you pull a thick towel out of the linens closet, and throw it over the modem instead when you return back to the living room.

While the computer loads up, you head back out to the kitchen and pour yourself a mug of coffee, adding four sugars today. You take a mouthful, then grimace; that's way too sweet. You pour it out and make yourself a new mug, this time only putting one sugar in. For a moment, you're in heaven—then, abruptly, you almost gag as the bitterness overwhelms you.

You tip it out, and this time very carefully measure in your sugar, taking tiny sips of it as you go to test if it's sweet enough.

After the fourth spoonful, it is. You glare spitefully at the mug, tempted briefly to throw it to the ground and shatter it. The urge passes in a moment, leaving you to stare into the dark liquid, looking at your bewildered expression like it could explain what's going on to you. What had Dad put in the percolator last night to mess with your head like this?
Shaking your head, you take another small sip of the coffee. It's alright, although you'd prefer a bit of cream. There's some in the fridge still (Dad must have gone shopping at some point, you note absently- you'd forgotten, but there's food in here again), so you add some to your coffee and wander back out to the computer. It's loaded up by now, and the internet browser has already loaded. The home page is set to Dad's email. Hopefully he won't mind if you use the computer this morning, although he might. You chew anxiously at your lip at the thought.

You slowly your way back to PHO, the message board for capes. Slowly, because PHO is clearly not a site built for your connection; it takes two minutes to load any given page, and you have to reload pages twice as your connection crashes. Maybe you can convince Dad to sign up to one of the new ISDN services. Probably not, they're a lot more expensive. You don't need to remind him of how little money he's making just to satisfy your fetishes.

Navigating your way to Glory Girl's thread, you settle in to read it.

There's a lot of discussion about her boyfriend in the thread. A queasy feeling settles in your stomach the more you read about their relationship- a curious mix of guilt and arousal. Are you really going to seduce her, knowing she already has a boyfriend? Encourage her to cheat on her boyfriend with you?

You already know the answer. Of course you are.

Trying your best to push the self-recriminations to the back of your head, you try your best to just focus on the thread.

The book club starts at twelve on the dot, so you make sure to be on the bus by eleven. Dad sends you off with another hug and a pocket full of change scraped from the bottom of the change jar, just enough for you to afford the subsidized bus fare.

The bookstore that Glory Girl is holding her book club at is a charming little place. Surprisingly, it's not packed to capacity- in fact, despite you arriving at barely five to twelve, there are only three other people in there besides you, and one of them is a store clerk. One of the other two is a civilian, and the fourth is the girl you've come here to see. You instinctively begin using your power, delving into her emotions to find the one you're looking for. You're pretty sure it works, because Glory Girl floats over to you as soon as you walk into the store, apparently hearing the little bell above the door ringing to announce your entrance, and gives you a wide smile. "Hello!" she says brightly, hovering half an inch above the ground. "Are you here for the book club?"

You nod your head, flushing. Glory Girl is, actually, as pretty as all her photos made her out to be. You're used to people being dolled up to make them look so fantastic, but no- she is just naturally incredibly attractive. Even in ill-fitting civilian clothes, with a long, heavy jacket on, she's prettier than anyone you've met.

"Excellent!" She seems enthused, not at all let down by your sudden shyness. Before you can react, she grabs your hand and starts pulling you towards the staircase at the back of the store. She's gentle enough that she doesn't hurt you, but her grip is firm around your wrist. You actually feel a little indignant. You don't like being led around like this.

You swallow down your instinctive dislike of her actions, though, and follow her through the bookstore, up the stairs and into a cozy room. In here, there are well over a dozen people crowded
around two large round tables, each holding a weathered copy of a book. *The Riddle of the Sands,*
you vaguely remember from the PHO thread.

You take a moment to gauge her emotions. There's a lot of cheeriness in there, and a hint of
naughtiness you'd like to investigate some, but you're more interested in pulling on her loyalty here.
And- ah. Yes, it's running quite strong now. You actually tone yourself down a little, afraid of
making what you're doing to anyone around you too obvious.

She looks consideringly around the room, searching for an empty spot. "Do you have a copy of the
book?" she asks quietly.

You shake your head in response, causing her to frown. "Well," she says after a moment, "that's
okay too. You can share mine." She glances at one of two empty seats on the end of the table.

Somewhere in the shop, a clock strikes twelve, a minute early by your watch. A grandfather clock,
you presume; it's not soft enough to be anything else.

And then your attention is dragged away from the rest of the room when Glory Girl shrugs her heavy
jacket off, revealing what she's wearing underneath, and places it on the back of her chair. Evidently,
you're the only person who notices, the rest of them too absorbed opening their books and pulling
notepads out from their bags to take in what she's wearing in the few seconds before she sits down.

It's like someone made a Glory Girl fetish costume, and then gave it to Glory Girl. You can definitely
see where the outfit's creator took inspiration from her regular costume; it's got the same colour
scheme, the same trimming, even the same style. But it's... tighter, and shorter. Instead of stretching
below her belt like her regular costume, this one shamelessly bares her midriff, cutting off a bare few
inches beneath her breasts and exposing her midriff to anyone who looked. The shirt's collar is cut
much lower than normal, revealing an indecent view of her breasts- you're pretty sure you could rest
your face within the hole of the material. And the whole shirt is just... tighter. It clings to her body,
hugging and highlighting every curve and swell of her chest.

You glance back up at her face, and jerk back slightly when you see her watching you look at her.
There's an amused expression on her face, but she doesn't say anything, or make any attempts to hide
her body- at least from you. She's holding a large paperback version of the book upright in front of
her, and her bag is sitting to her right leveled higher than her chest. Nobody but you can see what
she's wearing. Suddenly worried, you pull hard on her loyalty, and watch as her eyes lid for a
moment.

Without speaking, she slides her chair out a few inches and turns to the book, beginning to speak out
across the room. You swallow as your mouth becomes suddenly dry.

Glory Girl's shirt wasn't the only thing altered. You'd seen a lot of pictures of her in her uniform this
morning, including several that were less than decent, taken from roofs or after she'd been knocked
down in a fight. So you know that Glory Girl normally wears a skirt that drapes a bit past mid-thigh,
and a pair of athletic boyshorts beneath that, not giving anyone who looked a very interesting view.

The skirt she's wearing today isn't much shorter than normal, only an inch or two- you hadn't noticed
earlier because the jacket had distracted you, which you now suspect was the intention. But when
she'd sat down, her skirt had ridden up some, revealing not just an expanse of creamy flesh- oh, *god-*
but also the fact that in place of her usual boyshorts, she is wearing a modest white thong.

By the smirk on her face when you look back up, you think she catches the shiver that sends through
you. She does reach down and straighten her skirt, though, stopping you from getting a good glimpse of her thong again. Forbidden territory, then. Fair enough; she does still think that she's in an exclusive relationship with her boyfriend.

You try to pay attention to the discussion on the book, you honestly do. It's hard, though, when Glory Girl keeps shifting on her chair as she talks to the rest of the group, drawing your attention towards her bouncing breasts as she does so. Unlike when you looked at her panties earlier, she doesn't make any move to discourage you from looking down her shirt. In fact, you kind of suspect that she's subtly teasing you, although you can't tell why- she won't let you look at her panties, but is willing to let you look down her shirt? What kind of weird double standard is that?

She continues doing this through the entire two hour book club, and never once admonishes you for continuing to leer at her, although you know she catches you doing so at least four more times.

You're startled when the clock finally rings out twice, signalling two o'clock- the end of the book club. While everyone else is busy packing up their items and wrapping up their discussions, Glory Girl discreetly pulls her jacket off from the back of the chair she's sitting on and puts it back on, giving you a wink.

You sit beside Glory Girl, kind of afraid to get up and leave before her in case she's just waiting to do something horrible to you, until everyone else has left, a good twenty minutes. That's when she turns to you with a cheeky smirk on her face.

"Hi." She holds up her hand. "I'm Victoria Dallon. Who are you?"

Shit. You never did introduce yourself, either. You feel so much creepier than you intended, now. "Taylor Hebert," you squeak out in response. "Um, thank you for having me today?"

Victoria snickers, raising her eyebrow at you. You flush and look down at the floor. Okay, that had been a pretty bad attempt.

"You didn't seem to participate much," she continues, eyes dancing. "More of a watcher and listener then?"

You attempt a nonchalant shrug. She doesn't buy it. Yeah, you didn't think you were very good about hiding your shyness. "Sometimes. I'm usually better at taking a more active role in this kind of thing, though."

She snorts at that- actually snorts. You're a bit confused, but let it pass.

"Well, that's fine too." She nods to herself. "Just don't get too active, yeah? Other people were here first."

"Uh..." You let out a small, garbled noise. "That's okay," you eventually say with a pout. That's kind of unfair, you think- other people might have started attending before you, but they shouldn't get to have a more active role in discussions and stuff just because of that. You're pretty sure that's not how clubs are meant to work, otherwise they'd be pretty hostile to newcomers. Maybe it's because you didn't speak up very much today? "I'll probably be more active in future," you add. "Maybe I'll be first in line soon!"

A rough laugh bursts out of her. "Stranger things have happened," she concedes, "but I wouldn't count on it, Taylor."
Well, that was just rude. You were only shy for a little bit, and then she deliberately distracted you! Maybe. Or maybe you were just being rude. Still, a little miffed, you stare her directly in the eye and say, "Well, I will. Just wait, you'll see." Then, with an imperious look down your nose at her, you turn and walk away, ignoring the soft gasp and then the choked laughter from behind you.

You head into town and purchase some groceries Dad had missed when he went, since you're already here. He's usually pretty good, but he always forgets to buy new batteries for the TV remote and replacement filters for the percolator. You pay with a swipe of your card and head home, using the rest of the change Dad had given you for the bus fare.

By the time you get home, you're a bit less annoyed about how your encounter with Glory Girl had gone. Her shifting must have been an accident, then, if she didn't even bring it up with you afterwards. She didn't seem to mind you looking down her shirt, but she didn't encourage it, either-disappointing, but more than you'd expected from a girl with a boyfriend. And where did she get that costume, anyway? Why was she wearing it in public, yet took pains to avoid anyone besides you looking at it?

Still, that book club seems really snobbish. You'd want to go there again now even if Victoria wasn't there, just to prove to them that even someone they haven't met before can have interesting things to say.

That's a plan for next week, though. The book club only runs on Sundays, and you've got an entire week to go until your next one.

You put Victoria out of your mind for the moment.

You have three other girls you're planning for, anyway.

For the moment, you decide, you're not going to waste a whole week like you did last time. You've experimented with how far you can push your powers, now, and what you can convince people to do with them. And you've already got a start on some of them. Now, you're going to be able to have some real fun.

No- instead, you're going to take it a few days at a time, and see what developments you can push. If you stop to reevaluate midway through the school week, you think, you should be able to keep on top of things.

So, for the first half of this school week, you plan to...
Madison really is trying to make up for her previous behaviour towards you, you find when you get to school on Monday morning. You're not sure how she managed to get your locker open—presumably she pouted that adorable pout until someone opened it for her on the presumption she was planning a prank on you, but you can't be sure—but when you open it just before class, you're surprised to find a lunchbox waiting in there for you, a pink card with a floral pattern tied to it.

Taylor
I didn't know what you wanted for lunch, so I made you a ham roll and some fruit salad. I worked really hard so please enjoy it! Love, Madison~

She has drawn little smiley faces over her i's instead of dotting them. One of them has a little heart drawn fluttering away from it. You can't help the wide grin that steals its way across your face, or the way your heart flutters. Yes, you definitely didn't make a bad decision by taking Madison for yourself first. You're going to have to find a way to reward her for being a good girl soon.

You're distracted all the way through first period by the little flutters of your heart. A giddy feeling sits deep in your stomach, and you really wish you own a cellphone so you could text her, even if it'd distract you from your lessons. You'd rather focus on Mads than Maths, anyway.

If anyone notices you smirk at the wordplay, they don't care enough to comment.

You don't manage to find anything to distract yourself from Madison with until second period, when you walk into class to find Emma and Sophia watching you like a pair of hawks. Madison pouts at you from three rows behind them, where the seat beside her has already been taken by another girl—Charlotte?Something like that. You give her an encouraging smile and she perks up, but out of the corner of your eyes, you see Emma frown and Sophia scowl.

Well. That could go badly.

You're forced to sit at the front of class today, as most of the seats in the classroom have already been filled. That's okay, though, you think; it's only History again, and as always, you've read far on ahead of the rest of the class.

Your teacher drones on, but you allow your attention to drift away, reaching out with your powers. You're immediately drawn to Madison, who's feeling giddy and anticipatory about something (as well as a heady feeling of lust, although it's sitting at a simmer for the moment); you have to actually force yourself away from her to feel out Emma and Sophia, ignoring your own feelings of disappointment as you do.

Emma is still shining to your senses, the lust and loyalty you'd drawn out on Saturday seeming almost to lie coiled around the rest of her emotions. They're still there, you can feel the anger and cruelty and deep, deep self-loathing roiling beneath them, but she seems to be clamping down on them herself today.

Sophia, however, is a different story entirely.
If Madison is an open book, utterly unable to hide anything from you even should she want to, and Emma is a tight ball of misery bound together by thin threads of desperation and misguided anger, then Sophia reminds you of nothing more than a coiled snake. A cold, deep anger runs through her emotions, bleeding into every one of them. Cruelty, sharper and yet less thorny than Emma's, winds around her.

Surprisingly, though, it's not that difficult to find a shred of attraction to you buried in there. It's not as strong as Emma's was, and Emma's wasn't very strong, but you won't be trying to build up an attraction from nothing.

Once you've found it, you seize upon it. There's forty minutes left in class, so you get to work quickly, watching her out of the corner of her eye as you give her lust hard tugs.

Whenever it gets too bad, she shivers momentarily, or darts her eyes around the classroom. When she does that, you quickly swap your focus over to Emma for a moment, and begin tugging on her lust instead until Sophia settles down and it's safe to swap back.

By the time the bell rings and Sophia sweeps to her feet alongside Emma, you're pretty sure you've made some significant progress.

You can't keep it up the entire day, of course. You're pretty sure you'd get a headache trying to keep track of their emotions for a full six hours, for one, and they don't share all their classes with you, despite their best efforts.

Still, you do your best, focusing on first Sophia and then Emma. Sophia's harder to tease emotions up from, but Emma's too open at the moment. Every time you do more than caress at her loyalty to you, she shivers, and you're left waiting with bated breath as to whether Sophia noticed this time or not.

By the end of the day, Sophia is watching you with dark, calculating eyes. Emma is trying her level best not to look at you, but you don't need her to- you can feel the lust pooling in her, and you know it's directed at you.

You give Emma a small wave as she leaves the school after the bell for sixth period rings. She doesn't acknowledge you, but you can feel a small surge of happiness rising in her at the gesture. Sophia leaves alongside her, but you don't acknowledge her presence.

Then, once they've headed over and climbed into Alan's car, you turn and head back into the school towards the library.

Winslow's library is nothing special, much like the rest of the school. Most of the school's budget went to hiring staff and funding the school's sports teams, the only part of the school that received accolades on a regular basis. The library was one of the things hit hardest by the budget cuts over the years. Its materials are often ancient, outdated things from ten years ago or more, and even the newer books are rarely less than three years old.

But the library does have three things going for it. One, the librarians there are dedicated to their jobs, volunteering to stay in after school hours and monitor the children to encourage the school's peer tutoring program. Two, it's quiet- none of the louder teenagers bothered coming here, so you're generally assured of your peace and quiet while you're up here. And three, Madison is sitting in a chair waiting for you with a grin on her face.
Nobody else is around as you take a seat, so you're free to casually lean in and give her a quick kiss as you sit down. She returns it, her grin growing wider, and she snuggles in against your side, edging her chair closer to yours. You don't discourage her, and even slip your arm around her waist, encouraging her to lean against you.

Unfortunately, as tempting as the thought is, you can't afford to start wasting this time. You're enjoying the feel of Madison against your body enough that you don't try and shift her away, but you keep your hand settled decently on her shoulder instead of cupping her breasts as you're tempted to, and pull out your notebook from your bag.

"Okay," you murmur quietly, unable to stop yourself from giving her a quick kiss atop her head. "How are you, Madison?"

"Better now," she says quietly back. Then she lifts her head up at you, eyes searching yours vulnerably. "Did you like the lunch I made for you?"

It actually wasn't a very good lunch. She'd tried her best, but she either didn't have very much to work with or she was afraid to draw attention to herself by hanging around in the kitchen for too long. The bread roll was grainy and kind of stale, the ham was soft and bland, and the fruit salad she'd made alongside it had too many conflicting textures (banana alongside apple alongside orange, what a combination).

"It was perfect," you reply to her. She positively beams at you, then tucks her head against your shirt again.

"You didn't mind then?" she asks shyly. "I don't think Mom will be happy, but I like making your lunches."

"I didn't mind at all," you purr.

In the end, despite your best of intentions, you still only get an hour of tutoring done. Still, with a pupil this cute, can anyone really blame you?

The next day proceeds much as the first did. You wake up, tired but content, drink your coffee, eat your breakfast, and head over to school. Madison has left you another lunchbox in your locker, this time accompanied by a lovely yellow note- "I made you another lunch. It's a chicken wrap today. I hope you like it! Love, your little Maddie~".

You float through first and second periods, spending the time idly amusing yourself by manipulating Sophia's emotions. The dark anger and cruelty is still there, you suspect you will have to make a concerted effort to ever heal her of that, but you're a little surprised to find that her lust is running up near the surface today.

It's surprisingly fun to tease Sophia like this, bringing her emotions bubbling up and then brushing them lightly to keep them at the surface. She keeps trying to lash them back down, burying them down with dark anger and sadism, but you don't let her, giving soft tugs at her loyalty to keep her from lashing out at you. That's not her choice any more. When she'd had the choice, she'd chosen to
lash out at you, hurt you, *victimize* you.

After second period is over, you can feel a headache forming. You kick yourself internally- *idiot*, you know that overusing your power can lead to headaches.

Worth it, though.

You head over to the nearest available bathroom, where you look blearily at your reflection in the mirror. Your face stares back at you. There's nothing unexceptional about it, except maybe for faint traces of dark bruises beginning to form around your eyes, as though you haven't gotten enough sleep. Your features are still undelicate, ungrilly, but you've taken pains to keep your hair long and soft- your one particularly feminine feature.

Honestly, you're beginning to get a bit worn out. For nearly two weeks now, you've been using your powers near-daily, and even when you haven't been using them, you've been making concerted efforts to try and push your efforts forward. It's taking its toll on you, you can tell. You're a teenaged girl, not a robot. Maybe you should seduce Dragon, you think mirthfully for a second, before realizing how absurd the idea is.

You should take some time off and relax a bit before the stress starts to really affect you. It's not hampering you now, but if it grows too bad- well, you've seen what stress does, and you *like* not being bald.

The loud sound of the door swinging open draws your attention away from your self-reflection. You turn, and almost blanch when you see Sophia before you can steady yourself and realize that she's not feeling particularly hostile. Still, when you see her take a step towards you, you immediately reach for your power again, ignoring the twinge in your skull, and begin tugging on her loyalty again.

And then you do blanch when she stops behind you and steps forward, pinning you against the bathroom's benchtop. You twist, attempting to turn to face her; she allows it, but then pins you in place with her left hand, pushing you roughly against the varnished benchtop and keeping you pinned in place.

"Hebert," she purrs softly, a cruel grin on her face. It reminds you of a cat, giving a bird a very cruel expression before leaping upon it. You try to disguise your nervousness. It seems to work; at least, no anticipation or cruelty flashes through her.

"Sophia," you reply neutrally. You don't wiggle around or try to escape; every time you even look like you're going to try, that anticipation *does* try to rise, and you're forced to tug on her loyalty again to bury it back down.

She stares down at you, and you can feel confusion rising in her, although what it's directed at, she can't tell. You're forced to pull at her loyalty again when you feel anger begin to rise, and the puzzlement only becomes stronger.

You stand there, trapped between Sophia and the hard bench, for over a minute before you realize she's not going to let you go any time soon.

Curiously, though, her anger has faded again, and even her confusion has faded. You slowly ease down on her loyalty, and she still doesn't move, just continues searching your face.
You drag your eyes from her face, keeping a wary touch on her emotions so you can feel if her anger
suddenly surges again, and drag your eyes down her body. She's unfortunately not wearing
particularly provocative clothes, but unusually for the dark-skinned girl, she's wearing a skirt.
Normally, she wears long pants, or shorts cut similarly to her track uniform in summer. Something
must have happened, you presume.

She's still not making a move to let you go. Your headache is beginning to pound within your head
now.

Slowly, slowly, you stop touching on her loyalty entirely, and begin to gently pull on her lust,
watching her face carefully. Her expression doesn't change, but her eyes are darting all over your
face now, from your eyes to your lips to your ears and back.

For a moment, you stand there, gently tugging on her lust. Then, steeling yourself, you lean slightly
down, grab the hem of her skirt, and yank it up.

"What the fuck, Hebert?" Sophia reacts as you had expected, finally pulling her arms away from the
bench and grabbing your wrists, attempting to yank them back down. Anger flares within her, but
you quickly swap back to her loyalty, tugging on that. The anger subsides hatefully, flaring at the
edge of your senses. Her attempts to yank your hands away are weak, and you're easily able to keep
holding her skirt up. The anger subsides further, then further again, and you can feel that puzzlement
rising again.

"Well," you say, struggling to sound casual, "didn't you want this? After all-" You speak louder
when she opens her mouth to rebut you- "- you have been hugging me."

"Hugging you?" she splutters. "I wasn't hugging you, Hebert!"

You shrug, the movement lifting her skirt even higher. You glance curiously down, noting with
slight disappointment that she's wearing a pair of athletic boyshorts. "Then what were you doing?"
you ask. She splutters for a moment, attempting weakly to shove her skirt back down, but she seems
too shocked to give you a coherent answer. You know she is, which is why you reply with a smug
expression, "I thought so. You know, you're supposed to get over pulling pigtails in third grade,
Sophia. I'm flattered, though."

You have to tug on her loyalty again as your taunts make her anger struggle to rise. You regretfully
subside; no matter how fun it is to make fun of her, you really can't afford her anger to break free of
your control right now.

"Fuck you, Hebert," she hisses.

A nice idea, but she's not quite ready for that yet.

It's tempting to see exactly how far you can push your luck right now, but with a titanic effort, you
refrain. You're actually making progress now, and while you can push her anger down, you're pretty
sure that if you push her too far, you won't be able to stop her anger from rising without making your
headache so bad you'll have to go home for the day.

Instead, you step forward, still holding her skirt up. She takes a step back, a little frission of fear and-
anticipation? intrigue?- shooting through her, but all you do is lean towards her, giving her skirt a soft
tug so she can feel that you're still holding it up, and quickly press your lips against her mouth in
your first kiss with her, a half-second thing before you're stepping around and away from her.
Well, that's a lie. It's not quite all you do. As you leave, you do reach over to the side and grab her ass quickly. She's not expecting it, and can't quite hide the little tremor that goes through her as you do it. You get the idea the tremor wasn't born so much from the act, though, as it was your audacity. Interesting.

Lust is still at the forefront of her mind, and you can feel that that cold anger has subsided almost entirely, for the moment- you won't need to stick around and hold it down, which is good. You're pleasantly surprised at how warm she feels, actually. Lust, curiosity, intrigue, and even a little bit of respect are there.

Still, you decide, it's probably best if you stay away from Sophia for a few days. Give her a chance to become accustomed to the idea of what you did- and give her subconscious time to justify her rising attraction to you in her mind- before you push her further.

School ends that day, and your tutoring with Madison continues apace. She's an eager student; partly, you think, because she genuinely wants to get her grades up, but also partly because she gets off on you bossing her around and telling her what she needs to do. It's fascinating, really.

Dad's "working late" again today, you find out when you get home. He left you a note on the kitchen table. Idly, you wonder which woman he's staying out with tonight, but dismiss the thought almost as soon as it registers, leaving you sitting in the kitchen with a disgusted expression on your face. Ew.

You expect to be home until nine, maybe even ten1. Thus, you're surprised when the doorbell rings at six.

You're even more surprised when you cautiously swing the door partially open to find Alan and Emma standing on your doorstep.

For a moment, you're tempted to swing the door shut in Emma's face. You refrain, though. Maybe if it had just been Emma, you would have done it- you're not prepared to have Emma in your house again, in your space- but Alan hasn't done anything wrong here. He doesn't deserve you being mean to him just because his daughter bullied you.

Reluctantly, you swing the door wider open. "Come in," you say, trying your very best to introduce some happiness into your voice. It doesn't work. "Dad's not home yet, he's working late. Sorry."

Alan pauses. "Oh." He looks a little let down, but only a little. "That's alright, Taylor. I didn't come to talk to your dad, Emma here wanted to see you."

"Did she now." You peer over at Emma, scrutinizing her face. She looks blankly over at you, then rolls her eyes when you squint suspiciously at her. "Alright then. Um, I already ate dinner, though. Sorry." That's a lie. It's bad enough Emma's in your house. You can't handle the thought of being that domestic with her.

"That's fine." Emma shifts on her feet. You can feel nervousness rolling off her, and... lust. Unsurprising- you have been manipulating her for days now. Still, it does surprise you a little every time you feel it. "Um." Her eyes flick to her father, and she looks demurely down at the ground.
"Can we speak in your room?"

"Can't we speak out here?" you ask plaintively.

She flicks her eyes to her father again, and she grimaces. "It's about... private stuff," she temporizes. "It'd be better if we talked in your room."

You want to deny her, but she has too much over you. If Emma says anything about what you did in her room with Madison on Saturday out here, Alan is going to hear it, and from there Dad's going to know. And you can't have Dad knowing. Either he'd force you to keep your door open whenever you have a girl over from then on, or you'd be forced to use your power on him again. Both are intolerable ideas.

You hold out for a few seconds, though, trying to give yourself as long as possible to prepare yourself. Finally, you can't wait any longer. "Fine," you say reluctantly. Alan looks a little curious at your reluctance, but doesn't pry.

You lead Emma through to your room. She makes no comment about how obsessively clean it is now, nor about the smell of rose perfume that permeates your room to cover the smell of sex now, although she does look over at you with raised eyebrows at once. She sits down on the edge of your bed, smoothing out your Miss Militia bedspread.

Silence stretches out for long seconds before you let out a sigh. "What do you want, Emma?" you ask tiredly.

She doesn't respond for a long moment. Then she shakes her head and looks up at your ceiling, scoffing.

Behind your eyes, your headache pounds away.

You know you shouldn't use your power. You do anyway.

Emma's emotions are, as always, turbulent. It's almost enough to make you sick right now. Fear, nervousness, doubt, anger, self-hatred and crushing isolation almost overwhelm you, but they're bound tight, sealed, with bands of... something, directed at you. You can't quite place the emotion. It's similar to what Dad feels about his job when you head out to the kitchen each morning. Job satisfaction? No, that can't be right. Why would Emma be feeling job satisfaction around you?

Well, you can think of one reason why, at least.

Through it all is the thick band of lust you've been playing with all day. It's still there, as strong as ever.

Whatever cruelties Emma came to inflict on you today, you can't deal with it. Not here, not in your sanctuary. Not in the one place you have where you can still lie back and pretend like Emma hasn't done any of the things she's done.

You know it's a bad idea. You pull on her lust anyway.

She shifts restlessly on your bed as you move over to your bed and sit beside her, placing your hand gently on her knee. "Hey," you say encouragingly. "It's okay. You can tell me, whatever it is."
Her expression wavers. A flicker of something, is revealed, too quick for you to identify it, then hidden away, tucked deep down.

You draw your fingers up along her thigh, teasingly dancing them along as you pull gently at her lust over and over, each time drawing a little sigh from her. When you reach the V of her thighs, she lets out a soft, lustful sigh and spreads her legs, but you don't pull your fingers up- instead, you drag them back down, painfully slowly by the hitch of her breath. You repeat the action a few times, enjoying the way she tries to stifle her lusty moans.

Soon, you grow tired of stroking her thighs despite her heaving breaths, and move your fingers up, past the apex of her thighs and towards her stomach. Her eyes widen as you tease your fingers around the waistband of her pants, dipping your fingers in far enough to brush her panties before suddenly pulling them out and moving your hands back to your sides.

She looks at you with slightly wild eyes. You look back at her, gaze level and innocent. Too far, too fast. Or maybe it's just in time.

Neither of you speak another word as she clambers back to her feet and staggers out of your room, calling for Alan to take her back home.

Only once the front door has closed and you hear their car start do you allow yourself to fall back with a weary sigh.

You'd think being able to manipulate a girl's emotions would make her easier to understand, you think wryly to yourself.

It's Wednesday morning now, and the week is half over already.

You've made a surprising amount of progress this week so far, but your headache is also beginning to build. You're not sure why your power is inconsistent like this- sometimes you can manipulate a girl like Madison for hours at a time and only get a minor headache, while other times you can manipulate a girl like Sophia and have a headache after less than an hour. Something to investigate at another time, probably.

You're not sure what that was with Emma last night. You've tried to put it out of your mind, but you keep circling back to it. Why had she needed to come over to your house? Why couldn't she have made whatever barbed comment she wanted to at school? Maybe you should have let her speak, but- you suspect that whatever she'd wanted to say, it couldn't have been a good conversation. Nothing involving Emma pushing her way into your house can be pleasant. Better to just push her away now and deal with it later, when you don't feel like she's invading your house.

At least your manipulation of Sophia is going well. You can't afford to push her much further just yet, so you'll have to wait until next week, but if you'd kissed her and groped her on the arse just two weeks ago, you're pretty sure she would have legitimately murdered you.

Still, you can't put off heading to school much longer. You can't skip, not with Madison waiting for you. So what are you going to do, over the next few days?
Come Wednesday morning, you find yourself giving very serious consideration to the idea of just skipping school this morning. It won't be the first time you've skipped school, although you try not to make a habit of it- you've only done it twice before, when Emma's taunts got bad enough that they actually cut you, made you need to find a place where you could go and cry.

You don't, in the end. You're pretty sure you could get away with it, especially as Dad leaves this morning with a parting call telling you that he's going to be working late again, but... you don't much feel like staying at home, either. You're twitching after several minutes alone in the house. School might be bad, but your house isn't much better at the moment.

Besides, you don't want to leave Madison alone in the library this afternoon. The thought of her disappointed expression makes you feel vaguely ill.

At least your headache has mostly faded by now. It's still there, pounding away in the back of your head, but it's better now. Barely noticeable unless there's a sudden jolt or a bright light.

You arrive just before the bell, having barely enough time to run through the halls to your locker. A grin makes its way across your face when you see that Madison's left another lunch for you, adorned with a pink card again, this time cut into the shape of a messy love heart. You're pretty sure it was hand-cut, which makes you have to stifle a dopey giggle at the image of Madison sitting at her desk cutting it out for you. Your girl really is the cutest.

The card- and the lunch- lifts your mood enough that you don't even mind too much when you walk into first period and find Emma studiously avoiding looking at you. That's fine, you tell yourself. You need some time to yourself anyway.

Madison smiles warmly at you when you seek her gaze out. You can't help but be a little resentful of Charlotte or whatever her name is, for getting to sit beside her, as silly as the feeling is. It's not her fault that she's been assigned there, and it's not her fault that she doesn't feel like requesting to sit somewhere else. Still, you want to sit there.

For a moment, you briefly consider the idea of using your power on her, and bringing her under you so you could make her swap seats-

but then your head twinges, and you hurriedly discard the idea. No, as much as you want Madison to be around you all the time right now, you also want to be able to focus during your tutoring sessions with her. They're too important to Madison for you to mess them up for something so selfish.

No. Instead, you pull out your books and try to actually concentrate on your classes. You might have read ahead, but you can't rely on everything the teachers are teaching you now having been in there.

By the time of the final bell, your headache has finally almost completely abated. Without Madison around during the second half of the day, your good mood has faded somewhat, but it's manageable still.

And it rises again almost immediately when you see Madison waiting by the entrance to the library
for you. You pull her into a hug as soon as you walk up into hugging range, enjoying the way she immediately melts into you.

"Hi," she sighs happily. You tighten your arms around her in response, enjoying the warm gasp she can't quite hide, before you reluctantly let go. You still keep one arm around her waist, though, encouraging her to press herself against your side as you pull her into the library, where you locate a seat and pull her onto your lap. So far, the only other person who's come to the library during these hours was a single girl who headed off to the back of the library, and hadn't come out by the time you and Madison finished for the day.

She doesn't try to get off you, but she does twist around to give you a worried look. You just wrap your arms around her middle and give her a reassuring kiss. It doesn't make her look much less worried, but she doesn't say anything- just reaches down and twines one of your hands with hers, gently rubbing her thumb over your knuckles. It helps.

The study session itself goes well. Madison's not a stupid girl, no matter what certain whispered rumours around the school are saying; she's just not the kind of girl who learns well in class. With some individualized attention- and a much naughtier incentive scheme than any teacher could legally provide- she's proving herself a quick study. You doubt she'll ever attain your own grade level, but you're one of the top students at Winslow.

Still, despite Madison's presence in your lap, you're left feeling a little anxious when the clock ticks close to five. You try to put it out of your mind for a while, but it just builds up, and you're afraid that it's going to spill out if you don't do something about it soon.

"Hey, Madison," you whisper quietly against her neck. She shivers and lets out an inquisitive "Hm?", pencil pausing from where it's scratching against her notepad. "What are you doing after we're done here today?"

"Nothing," she says, twisting again to look at you. "Did you want me to do something for you?"

You grin and gently stroke her sides. "With me," you correct her gently, and she nods her head obediently at the correction. "Come to the park with me."

"Okay," she replies instantly. Then your words actually catch up to her; you can tell, because her face immediately flushes a furious red. "Like a date?" she squeaks.

"Exactly like a date," you purr.

Her face is a furious red, but there's a luminous smile on her face as she nods eagerly. "Yeah, of course," she says hurriedly. "Um, did you want me to do anything first? I can get Dad to take me home, I can change or cook some food or-"

You cut off the flood of words by nipping at her lower lip, causing her to squeak and blush even harder. "It's fine," you say. "I don't want you to do anything but come with me. Call your dad and let him know you'll be home later."

The park is nice and peaceful this late in the day. Most parents have taken their kids back into the safety of their houses, and the few that haven't are off in their own little groups, trying not to draw too much attention to themselves.
It's a bad idea to walk around in public with your arms around Madison, so you restrict yourself to just holding her hand as you stroll around the park. She pouts at you, but understands; in a city with such an Empire presence, it's not a good idea to make the fact that you're gay an open one. It's risky enough at school, and that's a place where you can use your power to crush someone's mind hard enough that they won't blab, if it comes down to it. You can't do that in public, where a cape might see.

Still, it's pleasant enough. You can feel the stress slowly fading from your system, helped along by Madison's soft humming.

You wander around the park for around fifteen minutes, just taking in the sights and enjoying the fluttering feeling of being on a proper date with Madison, before you finally spot a seat that's secluded enough for your liking. Hidden behind the dropping boughs of an old willow tree and a series of rosebushes that aren't trimmed nearly often enough to keep them from overgrowing their trellises, you sit down on the bench and pull Madison into your lap again.

At her questioning glance, you shrug. "I like it when you sit on my lap," you tell her. Then, "I like it when you're that close to me."

She giggles and settles in comfortably against you. You take the chance to peer down her shirt, drawing an amused and slightly naughty smile from the girl; you're pleased to find that she's still wearing lacy black lingerie beneath her shirt.

"You said you liked it," she says simply after a moment. "Do you want me to-"

"No, no," you interrupt her. "Trust me, Madison, this is absolutely fine." You finish your sentence with a lewd smile, causing her to burrow her face against your neck again with another embarrassed flush.

"Good," she mumbles. Then, she leans up and whispers into your ear, "It feels so good to wear this for you." This time, you're the one who can't hide the embarrassed flush that creeps up your neck, causing her to let out a naughty little giggle as she settles back against you.

The two of you stay snuggled together there for a long time, exchanging little naughty comments like that and talking about your school and home lives.

Madison tells you about her adventures with her little brother, who's currently obsessed with an Earth Aleph-designed video game about... she's not actually sure; digging up blocks of dirt and building hollow cubes dirt to protect yourself from exploding monsters, she thinks, and punching spiders to death. There could be more to it, but her brother keeps getting excited about the exploding green things and forgetting whatever his other goals were.

You tell her about your day out with your Dad over the weekend. You'd gone with him before you'd seen Madison at Emma's house, but you haven't actually told her about it before now. She doesn't understand most of what you describe to her- she doesn't actually know much about the economy, she admits with a shameful blush, which causes you to stop telling your story as you gently reassure her- but she hangs attentively on your words anyway, patiently asking questions as she tries to wrap whatever his other goals were.

In turn, she tells you about the time she's spent with her own parents. She doesn't tell you much about her mother- you get the feeling there's still some lingering resentment there- but she goes on
enthusiastically about her experiments with her dad cooking in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry that the food I've been cooking for you isn't the best," she mumbles shamefacedly at one point, "but Mom got really angry when I told her I was making lunch for you, and she and Dad got in a fight over it, so I can't spend too much time in the kitchen in the morning in case that happens again."

"Don't worry about it," you tell her, pressing a kiss against the tip of her nose, "I don't care about the food, I just love that you're making it for me." She blushes a beautiful red and stammers a bit, losing track of what she was talking about.

Seeing that she's lost for words, you take the lead in the conversation again. You're tempted to use your power for this, but you refrain, trying to ignore the queasy pit of nervousness in your stomach as you describe to Madison your activities with Sophia in the bathroom yesterday.

"... and then I kissed her and ran out," you admit. "Wait, no- I grabbed her ass, too. She didn't seem to mind that much, though."

Madison doesn't speak for a moment. You search her face, and are relieved when you don't see any of the usual signs of her anger or frustration.

When she does speak, it's with a measured, determined calm.

"Was she a better kisser than me?" she asks.

You don't know- it'd only been a half-second kiss- but that's not what Madison needs to hear.

"Of course not," you mutter. She grabs onto your collar as you guide her head up again, meeting her in a gentle kiss for a moment. "You're the best kisser, Maddie."

"And don't you forget it." She pouts, then fiddles nervously with your collar for a moment, before leaning in and seeking another kiss. After that, she speaks again, seeming a bit less nervous. "You promised you wouldn't forget about me, right?"

"Hey." You surprise her by sitting up suddenly, almost causing her to tip over backwards if your arms weren't around her, holding her strongly in place where she is. "Of course I won't," you say seriously. You don't tell her not to worry, there's no way she can't worry about this, but you do your best to reassure her anyway. "I will never forget about you, Madison, no matter how many women are in my life."

That seems to wash away her insecurity some, but she still looks a little vulnerable. You almost lean in to reassure her with another kiss, but something holds you back. Maybe that isn't the best path right now.

"I promise," you murmur instead, leaning your forehead delicately against hers so you can stare into her eyes up close. "I could never forget about my favourite girl."

This time, she doesn't pout. Whatever she's feeling, it's too serious for her to try to hide it behind trembling lips and doe eyes as she normally does. She does, however, lean in close before kissing you, still clutching your collar with trembling arms.

Well, okay. You're going to need to deal with that insecurity somehow.
You could leave it—she's willing enough to dedicate herself to you anyway—but somehow, the thought makes that same sick nervousness as before roll around in your stomach briefly before you brush the thought away. Maybe once, you might have been willing to just ignore her insecurities and rely on her loyalty to you to overcome any reluctance she has in being one of your lovers, but now—now you just want her to willingly accept every part of you. Even the sexiness of Madison enjoying the odd threesome or foursome isn't your biggest concern (although now you're thinking about it, it is pretty sexy).

There's nothing you can do about it right now, though— at least not without using your powers on the vulnerable girl. And that just seems wrong.

So instead, you just press a gentle kiss to her nose and hold her tightly against you, reassuring her with your presence, until it gets too cold and you have to reluctantly part from her as her father sweeps in to pick you both up for the night and drop you off at home.

It probably says something about you that you're kind of glad that you're having this kind of relationship drama.

Unfortunately, as it turns out, Madison isn't available after school on Thursday—"Piano lessons with one of Mom's friends," she explains glumly when you inquire the next day. You're a bit disappointed, although also a bit relieved— you're not sure how much privacy the park really affords, and you don't want to always take Madison to the same place.

Maybe you can get a job, you think suddenly—it'll eat up time either during the week or during the weekend, but it's guaranteed income, and you might even get a job somewhere you like.

But that's something to consider later (you don't even have a resume at the moment). You need something to distract you now.

So you take some time during computer class, the one class you have free from Emma's fretful gaze, to look up hobbies online. Unfortunately, most of them sound extremely boring. Knitting, scrapbooking—what's the point of that kind of hobby? And most of the other ones that you can find require way more money than you have. Model-building has potential, but then you look at the prices listed for beginner-level models, and a little piece of you dies on the inside as you close the tab.

There isn't very much at all you can do in Brockton Bay, you soon find out glumly. If you had some money, you might be able to find a camera and take up photography, but you don't, and even if you did, who's to say you'll be good enough at it to justify the price tag? Gardening sounds promising for a moment, but even it requires money, unless you're willing to go around stealing plants and cutting—which you are, but that's a bit visible for your liking.

In the end, there's really not a lot you can do. At least, until you stumble across a simple advertisement from a clinic downtown, asking for people interested in assisting a free clinic by donating their services on weekdays. You check, of course, to make sure that it's still current; it is.

From what you can tell from a quick skim over the site, they're asking for volunteers to come and assist with basic duties unrelated to health care. Their recruitment page advertises the fact that they "have close ties to the New Wave movement", and that they're willing to consider funding volunteers
for further education and training in health care matters if volunteers prove willing and capable to do their work.

Unfortunately, as you also find out, volunteering isn't an easy process. You can't just walk up to someone in a building, say "I want to volunteer here", and be told to get an immediate start—especially not as a minor. You download and email the forms to yourself, but you're going to have to fill them out when you get home, get your Dad to sign them, and ask him to ring up and make an appointment with them for the both of you to go see them. It's all complicated by you still being under sixteen—there are laws about what kind of volunteers they're allowed to take on and what minors are allowed to do, and they need to discuss them with you before you can sign anything.

Fortunately, he agrees to do that for you, and doesn't question you on your sudden interest in volunteering at a health care clinic. In fact, when you present the forms to him, he draws you into a sudden hug that almost causes you to drop the forms all over him.

"I'm proud of you, Taylor," he says when he finally pulls back.

And that makes the decision worth it all on its own.

By Friday afternoon, though, you're getting a bit antsy.

Dad had rung the clinic the next morning, inquiring about when you could come in and speak to them about volunteering. You hadn't heard the other end of the conversation, but from what he'd said, the earliest they could fit you in was after school next Monday. That didn't suit you, so he'd arranged for Wednesday morning instead. Then, hopefully, you'd be able to start volunteering in the afternoons from then on.

That still leaves you with the weekend, though, and half of next week before you can start. You're going to have to figure out a way to occupy yourself until then.

So, how are you going to occupy yourself over the weekend?
There’s a small part of you that’s constantly surprised when you see how happy Madison is to see you. Or maybe it’s not a small part of you- you just don’t expect people to actually be happy when you turn up on their doorstep.

But you can’t deny that she is, even if you wanted to, which you definitely don’t. Every time she sees you, her face lights up in a grin, and when you’re not in school, she’s constantly trying to get close to you. Hugging you, holding your hands, tucking herself against you, kissing you- you’re not sure you’ve spent any time with Madison over the past couple of weeks without one of the two of you touching the other. Not that you’re complaining. It’s definitely not an unpleasant feeling, having such a cute girl want to press up against you all the time.

It’s kind of awkward when Madison opens her door ahead of her younger brother on Saturday morning and immediately lets out a small shriek before leaping forward to hug you, though. You’re not complaining, but the kid gives you a weird look, and you have to refrain from poking your tongue out at him.

"Taylor!" Madison exclaims, finally releasing herself from you and slipping her hands up your arms to let you clasp her hands in your own. "Come in, come in. Um, I didn’t know you were coming over today."

You’re forced to release her left hand when she turns so she can lead you inside, but you maintain a tight grip on her right hand. "I wanted it to be a surprise," you say with a small smile. The grin she gives you in exchange is smaller than the one before, but more tender, too.

"It’s a nice surprise," she reassures you. "Um..." She hesitates, but before she can say anything, Rick pokes his head around the corner with an inquisitive look. He gives you a nod and a warm look before he turns to Madison.

"Nice to see you, Taylor," he says. "Come to see Madison? Do you need me to distract Jasmine for a while?"

"Um, no." You flush, both at the implication and because you’d seriously considered it last night. Multiple times. In succession. You flush harder. Madison gives the two of you an inquisitive look before her eyes widen and her own face turns scarlet. "I just wanted to hang out with Madison today," you say.

He smiles at that. "Good," he says. "Lunch will be at one today, girls."

"Okay," Madison says in a strangled squeak.

It’s cute that Madison won’t look at you for the next few minutes as she leads you up to her bedroom, but you grow tired of not being able to see her face pretty quickly. Once you’re up there and settled on her bed, you gently push her down and lie half on top of her, slipping your hand up her shirt to draw small circles on her stomach. With your other hand, you reach up and gently lift her chin, forcing her to look at you. It’s adorable how flustered she looks, but you only allow yourself to press a single kiss against her jaw before you speak.

"Hey," you murmur. She just whimpers, so you draw your hand beneath her shirt a little higher and
kiss her jaw again. "Come on, Madison," you say reassuringly. "It's not that embarrassing."

"Yes it is," she mumbles, but she does finally stop fidgeting, letting her hands fall to her side. You take the opportunity to actually pull her shirt up, revealing her bra-clad breasts, and press another kiss to her jaw.

"It's not," you say gently. "It's just sex, Madison. You didn't think we were going to just mess around forever, did you? Unless-" Oh, god, you'd never actually asked Madison whether she wanted to have sex with you, you'd just assumed. What if she didn't? What if this was as far as she was willing-

"No!" Madison's eyes widen, and she grabs your hands from where they were tightly clutching her shirt, gently rubbing them until your grip loosened and she can pull your hands down to rest on her breasts instead. "No," she says more delicately, "I definitely do want to- to have s- sex with you, Taylor." Her face reddens even more noticeably as she stammers over the words, probably not helped by the way you begin softly squeezing her breasts as she talks. "I just d- didn't think Dad would know," she finishes meekly.

Oh.

Well, that's more understandable.

You lean back in, pressing a kiss against her jawline. "He knows about us," you murmur. "I don't know what your Mom knows, but your Dad gave us permission. I didn't want to sneak around your parents' back. That would make it hard to have a relationship with you."

Her eyes darken, and she chews her lip briefly. You don't fail to notice her nipples hardening when she finally opens her mouth and admits, "I kind of thought you were going to steal me away from them. I had a whole fantasy about it. I imagined like you'd take me and- and have sex with me until I couldn't think of anything else, and then-"

You lean up and kiss her, cutting off the flow of words. You're not sure how much longer you can resist taking her here and now if she keeps talking like that.

"I considered it," you say lowly, "but I don't want to steal you away, Madison. I told you already, I want a relationship with you."

Her gaze softens, becoming less heated and more warm. She nibbles at her lips for a moment before leaning up to press a kiss against your neck.

"Good," she murmurs, then returns to lay down submissively beneath you.

"Good," you mimic her. "Now, Maddie, take off your bra and we'll go hang out with your family a bit."

She gives you a small, amused smile, but follows your orders without hesitation, removing first her shirt, then her black, silky bra. You try not to stare at her breasts, although you can't help but lean down and bite her nipples quickly, drawing a shivering gasp from her before she puts her shirt back on. You can see her hard nipples poking through it, but so long as she doesn't cross her arms or pull her shirt down, they're not prominent enough to draw attention.

You don't have any real plans with what you want to do with her today- you hadn't even planned on getting her to strip her bra, it was just an impulsive decision- so you leave it up to Madison to decide
what you're going to do this morning. She hems and haws for a moment, seeming to gravitate towards the small TV in her room for a moment before shaking her head, taking your hand and leading you out to her little brother's room.

You haven't really spoken to Madison's little brother- Terry- before. He'd been around the last time you'd been over, and Madison had told you about him, but you've only ever seen the kid from a distance. She seems to be close to him, though, at least from what she's said- she doesn't understand his hobbies or anything, but she's described him as having an infectiously cheerful attitude.

What your girl hadn't described was the way her brother doted on her. From the moment you stepped into his room, he was babbling away, describing what he was doing in this latest game and how he was doing in school and how he'd been making up this story with his best friend Fred and his other best friend Daniel and also his other best friend Julie and isn't it the best story in the wholest of the world, Madison, it's so cool!

Frankly, you're a little overwhelmed by the kid's enthusiasm and energy. You blink rapidly as you try to keep up with the stream of words coming out of his mouth for a moment. Madison just nods along, half-listening with the practiced ear of someone long used to taking in this kind of babble.

"Terry," she interrupts him when he finally pauses to take a breath. He stops crawling around on the floor, where he was looking for a picture he said he'd drawn of the characters of his story, and looks up at her with an expectant look. "I wanted you to meet Taylor. She's a... special friend of mine. Say hello to her, okay?"

All of his enthusiasm seems to drain out of him at once, and he retreats shyly into himself. For a moment, your heart pangs, although you're not sure why. He looks out from behind a curtain of curly brown hair and says shyly, "Hi, Taylor, I am Terry! I am six years old!" His mouth curls up in an awkward, toothy grin as he says it. It sounds like he's rehearsed that sentence several times before.

"Six years old?" You try to make yourself look exaggeratedly surprised, but you're not sure it works. "No way, you seem way older than that!" He giggles happily at that. Encouraged, you continue, kneeling down so you can extend the hand that isn't still holding tightly onto Madison's to him and look him in the eyes. "I'm only fifteen. Do you know how old that is?"

He nods seriously, holding up his hands and poking out his tongue in concentration. "Yeah, yeah! That's... five and plus ten!" He holds up first one hand with all five fingers out, then both hands with all ten fingers out, looking very pleased with himself.

Beside you, Madison coos and pats his forehead. "Very good, Terry," she praises him. His grin somehow grows wider. "Now weren't you going to show us your game?"

"Oh yeah!" He looks shocked that he'd forgotten. "Go sit down, Madison! And you can sit down too, Taylor," he adds, eyeing you and nodding with childlike approval. "You can watch me too, but you hafta be quiet, okay? The monsters can hear you when you talk." With a serious nod at both of you, he scurries over to the cabinet at the far end of his bedroom and begins rooting through a small collection of books and plastic covers sitting atop it.

Having gained Terry's approval, you feel confident enough to take the reigns again. Madison allows you to lead her over to her brother's head, where you sit and gesture for her to lay beside you. She does so, leaning her head on your lap.

For the next few hours, you and Madison watch Terry play various games on his consoles. For all
his warnings about the monsters hearing you when you talk, he shouts loudly whenever something happens or he gets a little scared. You suspect that if the game actually could recognize when people were speaking, Terry's cries would act like a beacon for everything on the screen.

Eventually, one o'clock rolls around. You're tempted to stay for lunch and continue spending some more time with your girl, but when you wander downstairs, it's to find her mother glaring at you from the table for a moment before she conceals it behind a strained smile.

Ah. Yes, you remember now. Her mother doesn't approve of your relationship with Madison. Well, that's really too bad- you're not interested in catering to anyone except Madison. Still, you already know that her mother's approval does matter to Madison, and you don't want to get in the way of her family- not when it means so much to her.

Madison follows you to the door, pouting at you. "You could stay," she protests. "Mom's just being a bitch right now." You're actually a little surprised to hear her using such strong language to refer to one of her own parents.

You shake your head, then lean down to kiss her on the mouth, and again on the nose. "No, no," you murmur, "I don't want to cause any issues between you and your mother. Go have your lunch. I'll see you on Monday."

Her pout doesn't fade until you kiss it away, though. In the end, it's actually difficult to drag yourself away from her. You know it's for the best, though.

Besides, you conclude, you can always just deal with Jasmine later. You're hesitant to use your powers on Madison any more, but her mother is a different issue. Madison may be tentatively willing to allow you to see other women while you're with her, but there's no way in hell you're going to cause her that level of pain by playing with her mother's emotions like that.

Instead, you spend the rest of the day wandering around the Boardwalk, casually poking around the storefronts for anyone looking for high school workers.

It's difficult going, unfortunately. You're only fifteen, so you're still covered under child labour laws. No more than four hours work on a weekday, and no working before seven in the morning or after seven at night; even your weekend hours are restricted. Most places that are willing to hire teenagers still prefer to wait until they're sixteen or seventeen, both so they can actually work passable hours and for the less stringent restrictions in the kinds of hazardous work they're allowed to do.

Downtown is a big place. There are still a lot of other places you could look.

Still, you're feeling kind of discouraged by the time you head home.

Your mood has buoyed back up a bit by the time Sunday rolls around and you're headed off to Victoria's book club again, but it doesn't climb back to the heights you'd experienced while spending time with Madison. That's a bit depressing in itself, honestly; you hadn't thought you'd pinned that many of your hopes on getting a job, but you honestly had kind of hoped it a little.

Even outside of being able to actually take your girls out on dates, having a job would mean you'd be able to contribute some money to your household. Dad wouldn't have to scrimp and save to afford the money for your bus trips, wouldn't have to dig into the change jar to be able to afford another loaf
of bread if the one you bought weekly goes stale or mouldy midway through the week. It would have helped a lot.

But it wasn't to be, you conclude as you step inside the bookstore again just before noon, this time clutching a small satchel containing an old copy of *The Riddle of the Sands* you'd dug up from your mother's collection.

For the first time in a few days, you stretch your power out properly.

You find Victoria almost immediately; she isn't making any attempts to hide her emotions. This time, you actually take a moment to pause and examine her emotions. There's the remnants of her lust and loyalty, of course- you begin almost immediately to tug on her loyalty, reinforcing it before she even sees you- but there are other emotions in there, too. Pride, contentment, naughtiness, wilfulness, an undercurrent of anger- and something you can't quite pin down, something you haven't felt before. It reminds you somewhat of the feeling you'd got from one of your neighbours when she'd walked around her front yard nude after you'd played with her lust for a while. Victoria isn't feeling lust at the concept of exhibitionism, not quite- but it's similar. More private, somehow.

She accosts you a few steps after you enter the store, affixing you with a naughty smile as she floats over to you. "Hey, Taylor," she drawls. "I'm glad to see you're back again." She's wearing a heavy jacket again, this one coloured a dark scarlet. Now that you know to pay attention to it, you can see that her skirt does rise indecently high, although it's hard to notice with the jacket's coattails hanging down.

"I wouldn't miss it," you reply.

Her smile just grows larger for a second. "Did you bring a copy of the book today?" she asks. You raise your satchel and go to answer in the affirmative, but she keeps talking over you. "Because if you didn't, you can sit next to me and 'share my book' again." She even makes quotation marks in the air and winks at you as she says it.

Well. Even you're capable of recognizing the innuendo when it's that in-your-face. You drop your satchel back to your side and give her an obviously fake frown. "Looks like I forgot it again," you lie glibly.

She smirks at you and reaches for your hand. You're prepared for it this time, though, and casually place your arms behind your back as you begin to walk forwards. Shes' caught a bit off-balance, and looks at you with a raised eyebrow as she floats casually in front of you towards the stairs. You poke her tongue out at her back when she turns back around. Pull you around, you grumble internally.

In a ritual familiar to you from last week, Victoria casually pushes you into a chair once you arrive in the book club's room, and waits for the store's clock to chime twelve so the attention of the other two dozen or so people in there is focused elsewhere before quickly taking her thick jacket off and sitting down, arranging her materials in front of her so nobody can see anything below her neck. She's wearing her lewd Glory Girl costume again, and it's exactly as revealing as it was last time.

You quickly touch her emotions again, getting a good feel for them. Her loyalty is tugging easily towards you- actually oddly easily. You brush around them some more for a moment, trying to understand what's going on. It doesn't take much; you quickly feel that same almost-exhibition rising up, strengthening her latent good feelings for you and making them much easier to manipulate. Her lust is rising similarly, although you haven't touched that one.
You should be safe to leave her loyalty as it is, you judge; it's not quite as strong as it was last week, but considering how easily she let you leer at her last week, you shouldn't need to worry about that. Instead, you begin gently tugging on her lust. It rises easily, too, but it'll take at least a few minutes to settle in.

In the meantime, you just casually lean over as if to peer at Victoria's copy of the book. You lower your head enough that the others in the room shouldn't be able to tell where your gaze is, and allow your hungry gaze to roam her body. The buzz of the others talking fades into the background as your attention narrows.

With your attention this focused, you barely need to focus your attention on your powers more than peripherally. You can feel Victoria's lust rising, but you can see the visible signs of it, too; little shivers rack her body every time you shift, and her hardened nubs are straining through her shirt. That answers that, you think, ignoring the thread of arousal that runs through your stomach; she's definitely not wearing a bra beneath that shirt.

It takes well over half an hour for Victoria's lust to rise gently enough that she lets you do anything more than just peer at her body.

One of the benefits of flying is that people who can fly don't need to shift the rest of their bodies in order to raise themselves off a seat. They can just float up a little, and to everyone else, it looks like they've just sat straighter for a moment. This allows them to do a lot of things- adjust seat cushions beneath them, straighten their skirts, and so on- without making a big deal of it. In Victoria's case, she's able to do rather the opposite; she bunches her skirt up, lifting it lewdly up and holding it to her stomach with one hand as she gesticulates with the other at someone else in the room, arguing about something or another.

She's wearing rather more immodest panties than she was last week. Or maybe she's just wetter than she was last week- you have been playing with her lust rather a lot. Either way, her panties are clinging to the outlines of her pussy lips, the faintly sheer material giving you just the slightest glimpse of the treasures laying within. You're pretty sure Victoria can hear the immediate change in your breathing, because she smirks triumphantly, leaving the guy she's talking to looking a bit lost.

You hesitate, fingers trembling. Last week, she stopped you from even looking at her panties for more than a moment. It could be a very bad idea for you to try to touch them this week.

On the other hand, it could be a very good idea, you conclude, and casually maneuver your hand such that you can press your index finger against her pussy through her panties.

Victoria stumbles over her sentence, but otherwise lets out no visible indicators of what you're doing to her.

Well, fine then.

You add your middle finger and press down harder, then begin stroking up and down. You can definitely feel how wet she is- she's not soaked, precisely, but your fingers are gliding easily up and down the material. She lets out a muted gasp when you drag your near-nonexistent fingernails down the front of her panties, sending a shiver down your own body.

It would be really easy to get used to drawing those kind of gasps from Victoria, you think to yourself.
You content yourself for the next hour or so by exploring Victoria's reactions as you play with her panty-clad pussy. She's pretty neutral on you gently stroking her normally, you soon find out; she doesn't mind it, but it doesn't draw much of a reaction from her. She has more of a reaction when you drag your fingernails around, or when you press down hard and rub within her entrance a little. What really drives her crazy, though, is when you spread your two fingers out to either side of her panties and squeeze them together, thereby rubbing her lips together, or when you move your fingers up higher and flick her nub slightly. The latter causes a whimper every time, so regretfully you can't do it very often; you're pretty sure that the quickest way to end this little game is to draw any attention to yourselves.

She stops really discussing the book after a few minutes of you playing with her, only saying anything when people directly address her, and even then only with a strained smile. The first time she does, you begin gently pulling on her loyalty again, drawing her attention away from the girl and back towards you; from there, you begin gently playing with both her lust and loyalty, teasing them up in tiny amounts, not really enough to affect anything significant, but enough to keep her attention focused on what you're doing to her.

By the time the clock downstairs chimes two, Victoria's panties are thoroughly soaked. You sneakily raise your finger to your mouth. She tastes pleasant—sweeter than you do.

As with last week, she just shrugs her jacket back on while everyone's attention is focused away, and waits until everyone else has left before she turns towards you.

Today, though, she doesn't make weird remarks about the club being elitist. She just draws you over into a tight, almost crushing hug, and whispers directly into your ear, "You're playing a very dangerous game, Taylor Hebert." When you look at her after she releases you, though, she's giving you a smouldering look, not an angry one. You can live with that.


She shakes her head, giving you a half-amused, half-frustrated shake of her head. "You don't even know what you're doing, do you?" she asks, softly enough that you're pretty sure you're not meant to have heard. Well, that's rude. You know exactly what you were doing. Louder, she says, "I'll see you next week." It's not even a question. You're momentarily tempted to avoid going next week now, just to spite her for trying to order you again. Then you feel the wetness still on your fingers, and that desire evaporates.

"Planning on it," you say with a cheeky smile.

She huffs out a laugh, then smooths down her skirt and leads you downstairs and out. Then, with a smooch to your cheek, she waves goodbye and floats straight up and away.

Well; that went well, you think.

In fact, it went well enough that you're not feeling down until the moment it's time to actually head off to school the next morning. That does, unfortunately, have the tendency to kill your good moods.

Your headache has returned, but only slightly. You're pretty sure you can still use your power some over the next couple of days without splitting your head in half; you're just going to have to make sure you give yourself a break somehow, or else be prepared not to use it for the rest of the week to
give yourself a chance to recover. Or power on through the headache, but that sounds... unpleasant.

So; the question now is, exactly what are you going to do over Monday and Tuesday?
Your head is twinging slightly as you make your way to first period, having stashed your bag in your locker and retrieved the card Madison had left for you atop a lunchbox today (a hot pink card emblazoned with a concise 'Hope you enjoy it today! Love, Madison~' written in the middle of the card and 'HI TALOR IT IS TERRY' written in large block letters beneath that).

You give her a small smile when you head in to class, getting a bright grin and a little wave in return. You're still trying not to look at Emma, so you miss whatever expression she makes, but Sophia in front of her doesn't look disgusted- just a little curious. Spreading your power out some, you confirm you're correct- there's no disgust in there, just some curiosity and a strong undercurrent of boredom.

The lesson begins, but it's just a rehash of material you've covered over the past few days- helpful for students like Madison who are struggling to understand it, and in fact you make a mental note that you probably won't need to go over this again, but less helpful for students like you, who study well ahead in their... admittedly copious free time.

Growing quickly bored, you glance around the classroom, examining everyone. Sophia and Emma have their heads bent down, although Sophia glances up once to look at you; when she catches you looking, she sneers at you and looks away, although you can feel a faint thread of embarrassment in there. Madison, meanwhile, is just looking around, lost. She catches your gaze at one point and pouts miserably. Frustration and longing mix wildly within her for a moment before they settle, the frustration winning out as she turns back to her schoolbooks and scowls down.

Okay, you correct your previous mental note; you probably will need to go over this again.

Then again, you do have an awful lot of spare time in class, since you read ahead so often...

You glance over again. Madison is still looking lost, and the frustration threading its way around her is growing stronger. Beside her, Charlotte glances over occasionally, but offers her no help, preferring to focus on her own schoolwork. You wish, almost, that you could sit beside Madison, coach her through this, have her at your side even more- but Charlotte was assigned there by the teacher, and you can't just ask her to move.

... Or can you?

You bite your lip at the thought. Technically, there's nothing stopping you from using your powers on the girl. You've been hesitant up until now, but- you really want to sit next to Madison right now. Besides, you try to justify to yourself; it's not like you're compelling her to do anything, right? You're just... getting her to trust you a little. Even like you. You could use a friend anyway.

With that thought planted firmly in mind, you extend your power over to Charlotte, gently bringing her emotions to the fore so you can feel them. They are... surprisingly complex; more than you'd really thought the girl would have, although you've never actually spoken to her, so perhaps you shouldn't have judged her.

She feels very... solid. The other girls you've manipulated with your power have all felt fragile somehow. Madison felt the most solid of all of them, but even she felt like pieces of her had been broken off and smashed, then half-stitched back on in a feeble attempt to hold her together. Charlotte, on the other hand, doesn't feel at all that way. There are vulnerable parts to her, but they're still...
clinging on, frayed at the edges but ultimately whole.

You frown to yourself a little. That probably means something, but you're not sure what.

Either way, you're not done. You spread your power out further, touching her emotions with little feather-light touches, slowly getting a feel for them. There's a lot of... responsibility, you're pretty sure that one is; it evokes an image of dutifulness, performing tasks to the best of their abilities as expected. A strong undercurrent of fear whenever she looks up and glances around the room, although you're not sure what it's directed at. Patience wraps around a core of frustration, holding it at bay. Wrapped all around it are tight bands of self-control, hard but rigid.

Your breath comes a bit faster as you gently tighten your power's hold over her. There's a certain sexiness in knowing you hold this much control over someone, in knowing that with a thought, you could twist their minds, that you could tug all you wanted at their emotions until their minds are consumed by thoughts of you, that you could gently manipulate them until their lives revolved around you, revolved around pleasing you and meeting your every desire.

You wouldn't do it to her, of course. You have your limits, even if you're sure they'd seem arbitrary to anyone but you. Someone would have to be really bad for you to consider turning them into your sex dolls.

It's not hard to maintain your self-control as you begin to tug at Charlotte's mind, really, so much as you're left with... a faint feeling of regret. Even the thought of slowly moulding someone's mind like that is a turn-on; you can only imagine how good it would feel if you actually did it. But, unlike most of your fetishes, this one could cause serious harm to a person. It'd be like... indulging in a snuff fetish, if you had one (which you definitely do not, you think with a shudder).

It really is a turn-on to think about, though.

You shift uncomfortably after a few minutes. Charlotte doesn't need much playing with; she wasn't loyal to you, not exactly, but that strong responsibility you'd felt running through her acted beneath it, reinforced what you'd done. It shouldn't be hard for you to convince her tomorrow to ask the teacher to just move seats, which would allow you to move near Madison.

You unconsciously rub your thighs together as you cast your eyes around the classroom. Eventually, your gaze falls on Sophia, who looks away as your gaze falls on her, chewing roughly on the end of a pencil.

Checking first- yes, that should be strong enough, you think; you'll just make sure to arrive a bit earlier in class tomorrow so you can reinforce her conditioning- you allow your power to slip away from Charlotte and towards Sophia.

You'd brushed over Sophia's emotions before, but you spend a few moments now to feel them again. You'd felt embarrassment and disdain earlier, and they are still both there just as strongly as before, although the embarrassment is fading- maybe she felt embarrassed that you'd caught her looking at you, although that's unlikely. Sophia couldn't care less about your opinion of her.

Running underneath the embarrassment and disdain are a complicated mess of emotions, as you'd come to expect from your trio. There's the usual cruelty and sadism, of course; you'd be worried if you felt Sophia without feeling those. They run intertwined beneath everything, little tendrils of cruelty and anger dipping into her other emotions and tainting them. Lying squeezed between those branches are her boredom and apathy- the strongest of her emotions right now.
Her loyalty to you is a fragile thing yet. It lies buried beneath her disdain, the disdain threatening to choke it out. It's a good thing you did this now- there's a good chance that if you left this too much longer, Sophia would have been able to fight back against your influence enough for her disdain to completely overtake it.

As it stands, though, you just begin tugging on it again, slowly pulling on it until you can see her dart a glance towards you, for once not filled with the promise of humiliation. Satisfied for the moment with that, you seek her lust next, pulling it out from where it's lying- not hidden, exactly, but kind of... pushed down in a corner of her mind, near her repressed fragility and despair. You tuck a note about that away in your head- you should follow up on that, later, when Sophia is more open with you and you can actually do something about it- and begin tugging on her lust, pulling it to the surface. There's a thread of curiosity in there as she glances at you, but only a thread.

You spend the rest of first period entertaining yourself with Sophia, pulling alternately on her lust and loyalty and watching her trying not to let you catch her looking at you. You briefly consider making a game of it, but decide against it.

When first period ends and the bell rings, you take your time packing your bag, subtly monitoring Sophia. You can feel impatience streaming from her, but she takes her time too, occasionally curling her lip up in a sneer as you slowly put your books away. The one time she catches you glancing at her, you try to fake a flinch away, tugging on her lust as you do so. She subsides again with a satisfied sneer, happy with your performance.

When you finally leave the bathroom, you continue to keep your attention half on Sophia, ensuring she's following you and playing on her lust. She is, so you head to the bathroom again- the same one you'd played around with her in last time. You're not sure if a familiar environment actually helps your powers set their hooks in, but it certainly helps put you at ease a little.

Once you get inside the bathroom, you head over to the farthest mirror and pretend to busy yourself at the sink. You cast your eyes down, projecting the best image of vulnerability you can. If there's one thing you know about Sophia, it's that she loves going after vulnerable people.

You're not surprised when you feel her arms sliding against you, pinning you against the bench as she did last week. You are surprised at just how close she presses against you. Instinctively, you press against the bench to try and put some distance between the two of you, but she follows you forward, trapping you against the edge of the counter.

She's warm, you note absently. Deliciously warm.

"Hebert," she purrs in your ear. Absently, you trace her emotions, feeling for her cruelty. It's far weaker than you'd expected, tied only loosely against the strong, savoury feeling of her lust. "A bit upset today?"

You risk a glance up into the mirror. There, you can see her looking back at you, dark eyes smokey. From here, she looks like she's pressed herself even closer against you than it feels. You're pretty sure that you couldn't turn around to look at her even if you wanted to. She's just short enough that she has to lean up to look over you in the mirror.

Well, that won't do. Subtly, you lean back. She stiffens as you rub your ass against her crotch, and she instinctively leans back. You take the opportunity to spin around and look her in the face just as she corrects herself and leans back in. Frustration and curiosity rise up in her, and you quickly release
her lust to pull on her loyalty for a moment, forcing the frustration to subside.

"No," you say as steadily as you can. You're unsure as to whether she takes your breathiness as lust or depression, but either way, her eyes darken further. A slight smile steals over your face, and you lean forwards and wrap your arms around her for a moment as she stiffens again. It's worth the sudden pain in your hip when she pushes you roughly back against the counter, but you don't let go, and she doesn't immediately step out of your arms. "It's okay to want a hug," you tell her steadily.

She looks up at you with a knitted brow. A slight anger leaks up, not as strong as you'd expected. You tug on her loyalty again, just enough so that the anger is muted when it finally runs to the surface. "Fuck off, Hebert," she mutters, and releases you with one arm so she can yank your arms out from around her. Pouting at the loss of contact, you swap back to tugging at her lust for a moment.

Then she rolls her eyes when your hands drop down to her skirt and you begin to lift it up. "Of course you do that again," she complains. She half-heartedly pushes down at your arms, but you don't let her stop you, and she doesn't put any real effort into it- just enough that she can claim she tried to stop you. You don't stop until you've lifted her skirt high enough that your hands are resting above her navel.

"Boyshorts aren't very feminine," you pout at her. Admittedly, they're as feminine as boyshorts can get- they're cut low and do a lot to emphasize her curves. They're still boyshorts, though, and they cover entirely more of her legs than you'd like.

She just rolls her eyes at you. "I didn't wear them for you," she says rudely. Still, you can feel a thread of embarrassment rising through her. She drops her arms from your own and moves them down to your hips as though to push you away, but changes her mind midway through the action and leaves them resting there instead. Not that you're complaining. It really does feel a little like she's hugging you now.

You stay in that position for a long few minutes, allowing yourself to rest comfortably with Sophia's skirt held above her waist as you tease at both her lust and loyalty. The curiosity in her rises again, and you do nothing to discourage it, curious yourself as to what she's curious about.

Eventually, you judge that you've done as much as you can for now. Glancing down, you look into Sophia's hooded eyes for a moment before you bend an inch or so to press a kiss to her lips. You keep at it for a few seconds until her lips part slightly and you draw her lower lip between your own. A sharp pain erupts in your lip, and you pull back, a soft cry ripping its way out of you as you jerk back. Sophia looks at you from where she's just bitten you, satisfaction, cruelty and lust twining their way through her.

In retaliation, you let go of her skirt with your right hand and smack her hard on the ass. She lets out an indignant squawk that turns involuntarily into a stifled groan as you leave your hand there, apologetically squeezing her ass. "That was rude," you inform her.

You don't let her hackles rise, tugging gently at her loyalty until they fall again. Missing her usual anger, Sophia just sneers back at you, her lip curled. It's tempting enough that you lean down and give her a kiss again. When she eventually opens her mouth and bites your lip this time, it's much gentler- still painful, but you don't instinctively run your tongue against the area seeking for the taste of blood. You lightly smack her ass in return, drawing another stifled groan from her when you again leave your hand there, gently squeezing her ass. This time, when you kiss her, she doesn't bite on
your lip hard enough for it to be painful- just hard enough for her to tug almost playfully on it.

You linger for a few seconds until she bites your lip again with an annoyed expression on her face. You lean back, running your tongue over the sore area, then quickly lean in and give her another kiss, drawing back before she can bite you again.

This game continues for several minutes- you leaning in to give Sophia a kiss, and her trying to bite you when you do. She gets you a few more times, but doesn't seem to mind when you smack her in return as long as you keep squeezing her ass afterwards. The one time you try to stop squeezing it, she bites you harder the next time you lean in. You're not sure she even realizes.

It's not until the bell rings that she jerks again, as if she'd completely forgotten where you are and what you're doing. You lean in and still one more kiss from her, then quickly sidestep out of her limp grasp.

Neither of you says anything as you stroll out of the bathroom, casually clutching your bag in your hands. Behind you, you can feel Sophia's frustration beginning to rise, but damp, muted- and, for once, not aimed at you.

You can live with that.

The next day, you arrive earlier at school and spend a few minutes searching for Charlotte. She arrives at school not long after you do, heading immediately to her locker. There's not long until the bell, so you just follow her as she weaves her way to your shared classroom, tugging on her loyalty as she goes.

To her credit, even with your manipulation fresh over her mind, she doesn't acede immediately once class starts and you move over to her to ask her to swap seats with you. To your own credit, your manipulation is strong enough that she gives up without much of a fight, offering only a token protest before standing up and heading over to the teacher. He gives you an odd look, but gives Charlotte a nod; in turn, she turns and smiles at you before heading over to your old seat.

When Madison enters the classroom, she gives out a little shriek barely audible over the hubbub of the classroom. She doesn't throw herself upon you, but she fair vibrates with excitement as she sits beside you and takes your hand in her own.

Worth it.

By the end of Tuesday, your headache is growing steadily worse. It's not crippling just yet, but it's definitely getting uncomfortable.

You've made some inroads recently, you think. You've at least begin manipulating Charlotte, even if the thought of manipulating someone uninvolved in the cape scene leaves you feeling as guilty as you feel aroused. You've pushed Sophia far enough to overcome her cruelty at least for a little while- and surprisingly, hard enough that she stopped one of the Brotherhood members in your class from harassing you and Madison in class when you weren't subtle enough about holding hands, pinning him down with a steely gaze and barbed comments about the size of his dick.
But you have a busy week ahead of you still. What are you going to do with the rest of it?
Wednesday morning rolls around, and for once, you're actually feeling good about going to school. You have a cute girl waiting for you, and you're fairly sure that Sophia is now more interested in sexually harassing you than in throwing taunts at you or pushing you around.

Dad's already left by the time you're up and clattering about. There's a note for you sitting on the table- 'Taylor, had to leave early, union dispute. I'll pick you up around 5 from school so we can go to that meeting. Love, Dad.'

You tuck the note into your pocket so you won't forget, then rush out to meet the bus before it leaves without you.

As usual, the bus is running a little behind schedule by the time it pulls up in front of Winslow. Ostensibly, you're supposed to be here no later than half an hour before the bell for first period rings. Your bus has to drive around through some of the more run-down areas in Brockton Bay, though, and thus the bus drivers all naturally slow down and give way to everything and everyone, not willing to risk accidentally pissing off a gang member just to get you to school a little bit earlier. You're nearly fifteen minutes late by the bus's schedule by the time you get there.

You're not in any rush today, so you don't mind it too much. You chalk it up as being one of the Bay's many idiosyncrasies and move on.

Madison's left you another card- this one soft blue, without a message from Terry on it- in your locker, atop a small lunchbox. The meals have been getting better in quality; you're not sure if that's because Madison is accustoming herself to your tastes, or if she's getting more pushy at home when she makes them. You hope it's the first.

When you arrive in first period, you slide in beside Madison and give her a one-armed hug in thanks. She beams and snuggles against your side, staying there until the teacher arrives and coughs pointedly at the two of you, at which point she lets go with a pout at him. You take her hand beneath the table and she settles down a little, a content smile on her face as she focuses on her schoolwork.

That lasts up until second period- World Issues, with Mr Gladly- where Madison reluctantly has to let go of you and make her way to sit beside a boy- Henry? Whatever, one of the sportier boys at the school. For a moment, you're tempted to try to use your power on him, but you refrain. You're not sure you want a guy to admire you that much, even if it would get you another seat beside Madison.

Instead, you just try to focus on your classwork over the next few periods. World Issues is one of Madison's weakest classes, anyway. You probably need to pay attention here so you can go over it with Madison during tutoring later. She's not as bad in Maths and English, but you try to focus through them anyway. It gives you something to do other than glare at whoever's sitting beside her, anyway.

Eventually, the bell for lunch rings, and you hurry through the dimly-lit halls to get to your locker. You're quick enough that you manage to miss the footsteps behind you until you pull out the lunch Madison had prepared for you and close your locker, revealing Madison's smiling face behind it. You start, dropping the lunch.

Madison's hands dart forwards, fumbling to catch the lunch. She just manages to, giving you a look
just as startled as your own.

"Sorry," she says contritely. "I thought you heard me."

"I didn't hear anything," you say. Absently, you wonder what she's doing here, but you dismiss the thoughts after a moment's consideration. "Did you want to have lunch together?" You're pretty sure that without Emma and Sophia harassing you, it should be safer. Maybe not safe, but safer. Worth the risk, now.

She nods enthusiastically. "Yeah!" she says, excitement leaking into her tone. "Um, there's a place I know where not many people go. We could go there for lunch?"

"Sure." You pause, then think about it. "Where is this place?"

"Oh, it's over in the courtyard." She gestures vaguely in that direction. "There's a little area where they planted a tree and some shrubs."

You know the place. It had been during one of Winslow's many attempts to try and spruce the school up, and like all the others, had failed when it became clear that most of the students just didn't care. The shrubs had nearly caught fire after someone had flicked a lit cigarette butt in there, and only the timely intervention of the school's automated sprinkler system had saved the little corner of greenery from being burnt entirely to the ground. Over a thousand dollars worth of greenery had burned down in the meantime. A few years later, the little corner was doing well for itself, but the school had decided it wasn't worth investing in again considering the potential for a repeat occurrence.

You lead Madison over to the corner, and pull her down to sit beside you behind the tree. You immediately see why she suggested it. It isn't quite hidden from view from the rest of the courtyard, but you have to be both standing up and looking over directly at the tree to see you. It makes sense, you suppose- if the area was well-hidden, you suspect that it'd be seeing a lot more use than it is.

Emma and Sophia are sitting in the courtyard, not far from your tree, when you arrive. You ignore the two of them, pulling Madison over to the little copse and tucking yourself in behind it.

You sit down and spread your legs. Madison sits between them and pulls herself up against you, allowing you to wrap one arm around her as you slowly eat your lunch. When you finish the wrap she'd made for you, you wait patiently for her to finish eating her own wrap, then hand her the small punnet of sliced strawberries she'd put in with your lunch today. She gives you a quizzical look for a moment before understanding dawns in her eyes, and she obediently turns in your arm and begins feeding them to you. You take your time, enjoying Madison watching you with lidded eyes as you occasionally stop to suck the strawberry juices off her fingers.

You're thoroughly enjoying yourself, right up until the moment some jerk spoils it for you.

Some guy- you don't recall seeing him before, but you don't pay much attention to most of the people at Winslow- walks past with a group of his friends, sneering at you. He's dressed typically for someone who goes to Winslow, wearing a hand-me-down leather jacket and denim jeans that had been patched one too many times for you to pretend not to notice.

"Dykes," he growls as he walks past. His friends sneer at the two of you, some making disgusted faces and some leering at the two of you. One of them even puts two fingers up in a V-shape and lashes his tongue between them, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.
You sneer back at them once their backs have turned. It probably won't escalate to violence here at school- LGBT rights have progressed *that* much over the last few years, at least- but you're not willing to provoke a group of boys who might well be gang members. Outside of school, it's a very different matter. They'll probably let it go if you don't provoke them.

Still, it's ruined the mood. You look mournfully at the last few strawberries as Madison leans back against you, fingers faintly trembling as she looks uneasily in the direction the men had gone. You tighten your arms around her and pull her against you.

You stifle a sigh so Madison can't feel it.

It looks like you still have some work cut out for you if you want to be able to have faux-dates with Madison at school.

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You've only just finished tutoring Madison for the day and walking her out to the front door when Dad pulls up in his rickety old car. Madison pauses when she sees it, but eventually shrugs. For a moment, you wonder how she knew it was your car- then you remember that Dad had driven to the dinner at Emma's, and she'd probably seen it then.

You give her one last hug goodnight, refraining from giving her a goodbye kiss in front of your Dad, and walk briskly over to the car. He gives you an odd look after your interaction with your girl, but doesn't comment on that.

"You ready, Taylor?" he asks, giving you a smile as he pulls away from the curb.


The two of you chat casually about hospital work as Dad drives you over to the clinic. The path there isn't the safest, so Dad has to take it slow and careful- Winslow isn't in the greatest of areas to begin with, and New Wave has funded most of these clinics with the stipulations that they be built in some of the worst parts of the Bay. From what you understand, the original proposals had had them being built in some of the better off areas in the Bay, closer to Downtown and the like- areas where the people who need the clinics most couldn't readily access them. New Wave had shut that down, pointing out that ready access to the clinics was the entire point.

New Wave might have funded the clinics, but even they couldn't afford to pour enough money into them to pretty them up. That's immediately obvious almost as soon as you get on the same block as it and actually see the clinic itself. It's painted an ugly, bland white; from here, you can see a man in his early twenties scrubbing away with a large bristled brush at the walls, where someone's drawn some dark red graffiti on it. There are two wilted potted plants sitting out the front, the frost having taken its toll on the ferns.

It all clashes with the much more sterile interior, you find once Dad has parked the car and walked you inside. The outside might look kind of run-down, but inside, everything has been mopped and scrubbed to sterile perfection. There's a small waiting room off to the side, where three people- one white man with a gaunt, hallow face and pockmarked skin, a black man currently busy absentley scratching at his skin as he stares at a wall, and an Asian woman cradling a baby to her chest as she coos down at the gurgling child- sit in front of a small TV mounted to the wall, waiting for their turn to be called up.
You and Dad walk up to the counter, giving the security guards- two large, beefy men standing taller than even Dad, dressed in body armour and wielding large stun batons and what you recognize as PRT-issued foam launchers- a wide berth as you go.

The receptionist gives the two of you a bored look as you stand in front of her. "Yes?" she asks, tone professionally disinterested.

"Danny Hebert and Taylor Hebert," he replies. "We have an appointment with Doctor Fitzgerald."

"One moment." She clatters away on her keyboard for a few moments, likely searching for the doctor's schedule. Eventually, she finds it. "I see," she says eventually. "Doctor Fitzgerald's office can be found through the hall to the right. Walk to the end, then turn left. It's the door at the end of that hall."

You politely thank the woman and follow Dad as he follows the woman's instructions. Eventually, you end up in front of a door with a clear plastic container hanging within it, a small wooden stick with painted gold letters spelling out 'FITZGERALD' stuck behind it. Dad knocks, and a moment later a voice calls out a perfunctory, "Yes, yes, come in." You can't help but hear a harassed note in the doctors' voice- something you confirm a moment later when you stretch your powers over to him for a second, taking in the stress and fear running through him, as well as the solid undercurrent of determination threaded through with compassion.

He looks up at the two of you as you enter, taking in your appearances and nodding to himself. "Miss Hebert, I assume?" he asks. You nod, and he continues. "Excellent. I'm glad you're here. We have a lot to cover."

For the next hour- hour and fifteen minutes, actually, going by your watch- Doctor Fitzgerald goes over everything. And you mean *everything*. He starts with the duties expected of you- "General maintenance of the grounds and buildings, mostly, and perhaps some cataloguing if you can prove you're up to the task.” You make a noise of protest at that, but he quickly points out that you have no health and safety training, let alone training in medical procedures. It's not only unsafe for you, the clinic could get in actual legal trouble if they allowed you to perform medical procedures without proper training and review. Which, well- it's annoying, but okay, you can understand that.

He spends most of the time talking about something you actually hadn't even considered- safety procedures. It makes sense, you suppose; you're going to be volunteering at a clinic with a focus on treating drug addiction, built in a predominantly poor neighbourhood with minor Brotherhood and ABB influences. It's unfortunately true that those factors means that the clinic likely sees violence on an unpredictable basis. He does assure you that there are multiple safety procedures in place, several security guards on the premises at all times, and that New Wave will respond in the case of any alarms going off- but you still have to be aware of the procedures, just in case.

Finally, he concludes with a big sigh. "Are you still interested?" he asks wryly.

You nod confidently. "Yeah!" you reply enthusiastically. You're not quite sure why he feels so surprised at that, but you can also feel his weary happiness at your zeal. "Can I start today?"

He glances down at his watch, noting the time- it's six thirty. "You'll only be here for half an hour," he notes, but otherwise doesn't try to dissuade you.
"That's okay!" You grin at him. "It'd be good for me to see what working here will be like, you know?"

As it turns out, it's exactly as boring as the doctor had intimated it would be. It's hard to engage yourself in the mundane tasks of washing windows and mopping floors. Some people do it for a living, but you can't imagine how. And that sounded a lot more denigrating than you intended it to. Oops. Janitors earn their keep, you do know that. The work just isn't engaging you very much.

Still, it serves its purpose. By the time you get home, your mind is full enough that you barely think about Emma twice.

You're not looking forward to school on Thursday, which is a bit disappointing after your enthusiasm yesterday. For a moment, you'd hoped that you were beginning to regain that excitement you'd once had for learning something new. It doesn't look like that's happening, though. At least it isn't affecting your school performance too badly- you spend most nights awake until just before midnight studying, and have for a while now, so even when you're not enthusiastic for classes you're still learning the material. It just... feels like a huge hassle to try and drag yourself into school every day.

It's not too bad, though. School is somewhat less miserable now that you don't have your own personal tormentors- just the school's regular bullies. But you can't do anything about them now, so you're just going to have live and let live.

At least Madison hasn't let yesterday's episode get her down too much, you discover when you get to school the next day. The card she's left for you is noticeably more subdued than the last few have been, but the words within- "Taylor, I'm sorry you couldn't enjoy yesterday's lunch, but I made you a strawberry cake today. Love, Maddie~"- are no less sweet, and the cake she made for you does look mouth-watering.

You give her an appreciative hug when you slide into your seat beside her during first period, and enjoy your regularly-scheduled hand-holding through the lesson, but when the class ends and you're forced to let go of her, your mood instantly plummets. She notices, but the most she can do is give you an apologetic hug before you're both forced to run off to your next class.

Things don't get much better through second and third periods. You have Computer class in place of Maths on Thursdays, and while Mrs Knott gives everyone their assignments, it doesn't leave you with much to do when you're done in less than half an hour. You can't even go onto PHO and try to find something interesting- the one time you managed to circumvent the school's ban on the website (the ban itself claiming that it was "not intended for educational purposes), they'd blocked you from downloading any files anyway.

As such, your mood remains sour right up until you arrive at the Chemistry classroom for your fourth period class and see two amazing sights; Sophia stretching back in her chair, giving you a catlike grin as you enter the room- and an excellent view of her chest through her tight shirt- and a familiar boy clad in the same leather jacket as yesterday scowling ferociously at Sophia from behind her back, sporting a new cast over his nose.

You sit down at your table, giving Sophia an intrigued glance. Her grin only grows larger, right up until Mrs Knopf- your Chemistry teacher- enters the room, at which point she visibly fights it down into a scowl.
Most of the class haven't even unpacked their books from their bags when Mrs Knopf takes to the front of the classroom, clapping her hands together and clearing her throat. Everyone immediately stills, looking towards her.

"Excellent," she says loudly. "Class, as I mentioned on Monday, we are going to be moving to a new unit beginning today. We'll be studying chemical reactions for the next few weeks. Given that some of our students-" She levels a glare at someone behind you; you can't see who it is, but whoever it is is gulping loudly- "have been unfairly leaving large portions of their work to their lab partners, I have taken the liberty of assigning lab partners for the unit myself. Are there any objections?"

Predictably, several hands shoot up into the air. Even more predictably, the teacher ignores them. "I'm glad to hear it." She pulls up a clipboard you hadn't seen her holding in her arms. "Lab partners will be as following. Martin Adams, with Renee Phillips..."

You sit there for a few moments, crossing your fingers as hard as you can.

"Please pair me with Madison, please pair me with Madison!"

Finally, the teacher reaches your name. "... Taylor Hebert, with Sophia Hess..."

You're too stunned to reach for a moment. Sophia isn't. Her catlike grin returns when you turn to look at her, this time looking more than a little smug.

Two weeks ago, this would have been the worst result imaginable. Today, you don't actually mind.

When the teacher finally finishes listing off all the names on the roster, conversation fills the room for a few minutes as everyone gets up and begins wandering over to their new seats. Your own partner- a weird guy called Greg- gives you a pleading glance, but you shoo him away, gesturing for Sophia to come sit next to you. She's already on her way, but it's important that she understands that she's doing it because you want her to, not because she wants to.

She slides into the seat beside you, her smug smile replaced by a friendly scowl as she casually rearranges her skirt (why does she even wear a skirt so often? The answer arrives almost as quickly as you ask yourself- she normally doesn't, but she's been wearing them more often lately, she's teasing you) so it doesn't bunch up on her thigh.

"Hello, Hebert," she purrs. "Looks like we're going to be partners for a while."

School goes fantastically after that. It's hard to distract yourself in lessons like Maths, but with Madison at your side during first period and lunch, and Sophia sitting by you during Chemistry, you can distract yourself reasonably well.

Even the afternoons aren't too bad, now that you have your volunteer job at the clinic. You can't go every day, as much as you want to- it's not safe to walk there, and Dad can only take you there when he's not working late and he has the spare gas- but it's something. You're forced to skip Thursday, for instance, but you're able to head in on Friday.

Doctor Fitzgerald feels oddly thankful when you meet up with him again. Somebody must have told him some good news, you think.
The clinic ends up being a lot busier than normal, for some reason. The doctor reassures you that this doesn't happen often, but he doesn't have the time to sit there and explain to you what's going on- he just leads you out to the back room, where a lot of medical supplies have been left scattered haphazardly around out of place, and asks you to tidy the place up.

It's difficult work, not because the work is particularly onerous, but because nurses keep rushing in and out of the room and messing up areas you've just tidied up. It's tempting to yell at them. You refrain, but it's difficult.

You've almost tidied the room up by half past six when a mousey girl, not much older than you, walks into the room carrying a white bundle, tinged with red- dirty sheets, you suspect. "Laundry chute's over there," you inform her quickly, before she can just dump them atop the trolley you'd recently cleared off.

The girl squeaks- honest to god, squeaks- and turns to you, her cheeks almost on fire. "Um," she manages, before having to visibly shake herself. "I wasn't- I was just-"

"It's fine," you say. Honestly, you've grown sick of everyone's excuses by this point. "Don't worry about it... uh, what's your name?"

Curiously, she doesn't have a nametag on. Actually, on closer inspection, she doesn't have anything identifying her as a volunteer on. Her attire is appropriate, at least- her shirt is loose and doesn't draw any attention to her body, and she's wearing tight-cut pants that accentuate her hips without drawing attention to them- but she should really be wearing a nametag. Or so you assume. Actually, maybe you're being a bit presumptuous- this is only your second day.

"Hey!" the girl manages eventually. "My eyes are up here!"

"I know," you reply. Just for the comment, you eye her chest for a long moment, considering it. Her shirt is loose, but not so loose that it completely hides her breasts- the material rests against them. They're small, smaller even than maybe Madison's. A good size, you think.

When you finally look up at her face, her cheeks are blazing red. Embarassment flows through her, but there's no real anger there- just embarassment, and no small amount of lust. It's not strong, but it's there enough that you can feel it.

"W- Well then," she stammers. "Uh, I was just looking for- actually, never mind, I found it!" She scrabbles around behind her back with the hand not holding the sheets, grabbing the first thing her hands fall upon. You're not quite sure what use she might pretend to have for a stethoscope, but you let her get away with it, smiling teasingly at her.

"Alright then," you reply. "Have fun out there, mystery girl."

She hurries out of the room, still blushing furiously, and you turn back to your task, smiling slyly to yourself.

Well, that was interesting. You wonder if you'll see her again.

Eventually, the week comes to a close, and the weekend approaches. School wasn't terrible this week, but there's still a ways to go before you feel comfortable there.
That, though, isn't something you can do much about. Nope; you've got a weekend to plan.

So what are you going to do this weekend?
Despite all the work you put in at the clinic yesterday, and the fact that you stayed up past midnight
getting to the end of your maths textbook, you find yourself stumbling out of bed just after six on
Saturday morning, blinking drearily at the peeling wallpaper in the hall as you incautiously make
your way out of your room and down to the kitchen.

You set the percolator to bubble away and busy yourself making some toast for breakfast. Dad must
have gone shopping again, because there are more groceries in the fridge again- including, this time,
three whole tomatoes. Excellent. Several slices of a tomato are cut off, as thinly as you can cut them,
and you carefully wrap the rest of the tomato in plastic before tossing it back in the fridge.

It's not the fanciest breakfast, you lament a few minutes later; a cup of sugar- er, a cup of coffee- and
two slices of toast with thin slices of cheese, tomato, and cucumber atop them. As garnishing, you
shake a little pepper over the top and sit at the table. It's somehow even less exciting when you're
actually eating it. It does wake you up a bit, though.

You eye the clock, noting the time. It's just passed six thirty; you have plenty of time to do some
simple investigation before you head downtown or whatever.

Remembering the disaster that had happened last time you turned the computer on this early, you
retrieve a towel from the linen closet, dropping it over the modem before you turn the computer on.
The muffled sound of the dial-up kicking in is still worryingly loud, but not so disastrously so that
you're worried it'll wake Dad up.

You set the percolator to boil again, making a mental note- not that those have actually been helping-
to make yourself another cup in ten minutes or so, and load up a search engine to begin your search.

Soon enough, you're forced to duck back to your room and retrieve a notebook and pencil to keep
track of the information you're getting. There's a veritable flood of it on some very easily accessible
pages now.

As far as you can tell, there's a new mayoral election coming up soon, and every candidate and their
mothers have started talking about their plans to "fix the problems facing minorities in less accessible
areas of the lower Bay area" and "introduce economic stimuli to incentivize the youth population of
Brockton Bay to remain in school and find gainful employment in the tech/customer service/sciences
industry". You're not very good with politics, but you know enough not to trust a politician to say
what they mean outright on their page, so you spend most of your time reading up on them and then
checking various political blogs written by people in the Bay to see what they're really saying.

From what you can tell, the problems facing Winslow are as such:

First, and most pressingly, 'gang culture' has become firmly entrenched in the minds of youths living
in areas of low economic stability.

This is one you feel confident in believing, because you've seen the signs around Winslow. A lot of
students there have already signed up to one of the big gangs in the city.
Not many of the articles go into much detail on the topic, but you don't need them to; you already know all about this one. It wasn't as bad as it is now even five years ago, but as gang culture has entrenched itself more and more solidly in the minds of the citizens of Brockton Bay, it's become easier for them to recruit people. Recruitment of people as young as thirteen or fourteen swelled a few years ago, when there was essentially no oversight of the students at Winslow, and it was realized that the school could be used for trafficking.

As the gang population at the school swelled, cliques started to form. Brotherhood members would harass members of minority groups, leading to the members of the minority groups signing up to the ABB to join together against the Brotherhood in solidarity. This would lead other people to grow frightened, allowing Empire recruiters to prey on the newly vulnerable teens.

Second, and directly related to the first problem; there's a very real crime problem amongst disadvantaged youths.

Many of the political blogs you read talked about how this is due to those youths being hit hardest by economic disadvantages and the current unemployment problem in the Bay, leading to swelling crime rates as youths seek to find additional sources of income for their families, and are preyed upon by recruiters along the way. It makes sense, you suppose, although something about that niggles at you.

Third, and following implicity from the second, is the drug problem running rampant through Winslow.

Not just a drug consumption problem, either. Drugs are actively being sold by suppliers at Winslow. Teens are sold low-grade drugs like marijuana or low-grade amphetamines, acting as 'gateway drugs' and slowly drawn into trying and buying heavier drugs like methamphetamines or ecstasy. Some of them are in turn drawn into selling drugs to support their own habits, while others simply drop out of school.

There are a lot of people arguing about that one in the comment sections on the blogs, though, so you're not sure how much you should buy into it.

You're pretty sure that this is why the Protectorate and New Wave focus so much on their public outreach programs. They could spend their time out on the streets arresting drug dealers, but that wouldn't deal with the issues that have caused them to spring up. People would still be out of a job, and people would still be addicted. It might make things more difficult for a few weeks, but eventually, you'd just find more suppliers on the streets, and the situation would repeat itself.

You're about to give up when something catches your eye- a comment on a blog you'd just been about to close.

[3 days ago] GreenArien replied to xxTreeLover22xx:
"They should just shut down Winslow XD Evryone knows its got most of the drugs going thru it nyway!!"
That wouldn't help anything. My buddy at the school tells me that Rune's been riding them to push more lately. Going through Winslow's the only way they're able to keep up with demand and avoid her punishing them. Shut it down and you're not going to see less being pushed- you'll just see more aggressive pushing outside of the school.
First step's to take down Rune and her Brotherhood buddies. Hate to say it, but I think I gotta support the ABB here. They're full of dickheads, but they're making a difference. Protectorate's got it going, but they're thinking long-term. ABB's all short-term right now. Gonna have to take them
down eventually, but if they can take down the Brotherhood down, good on them. 
I miss Shadow Stalker being around as often as she used to be. I know she was brutal, but she was 
getting results like the ABB are. Too bad she decided to join the Wards. Gotta make a living, I guess. 
Just wish she'd waited a few more months.”

Well, that's intriguing. You're about to load up PHO and read up more into that when you hear the 
halls creaking as Dad walks out of his bedroom. It's nearly ten, you see when you look at the clock, 
so that makes sense.

Hastily, you close the windows you were working on and set the computer to boot down. Dad 
doesn't notice, too busy glaring sleepily at the percolator- oh, damn, you forgot to make yourself 
another cup- to pay any attention to what you're doing.

"Morning, Taylor," he mumbles eventually. "Coffee?"

"Yes please," you reply with a smile. He grunts, but a smile tugs at his lips.

Neither of you says anything further until Dad's halfway through his second cup of coffee. His cheap 
digital watch beeps at him, and he looks down at it, surprised for a moment.

"Oh," he says, looking mournfully down at his coffee. "I'd better go have a shower. Alan's invited 
me over for lunch today, Taylor, did you want to come?"

You shake your head. "I already have plans today," you say quickly. "With Madison." You didn't, 
but you do now, you quickly decide. "Gotta study some biology."

He nods, accepting that. "Alright then, kiddo," he says, ruffling your hair affectionately. You squeal 
a little and back away, leaving him to chuckle quietly to himself. You pout at his retreating back. 
Messing with the hair is not cool!

Five minutes later, Dad's in the shower, and you're on the phone to Madison. Terry answers, voice 
already chipper and hyper, but he hands the phone over easily enough.

"Madison!" he calls out in a loud whisper. "It is Tay-Tay!" He giggles naughtily at the newly-
bestowed nickname as Madison takes the phone off him.

"Taylor, hi!" she says breathlessly. "Um, excuse me for a moment- Terry!" Her voice rises abruptly. 
"Get out!"

"But I don't wanna!" you hear the kid whine. "I wanna talk to Taylor too!"

"Too bad." There's the brief sounds of a scuffle, then a loud wail and the click of a door. "Sorry," 
she says sheepishly. "He's being a brat because Dad told him he wasn't allowed to have a new game 
until he gets five more stickers on his chore chart."

A chore chart? Huh. You vaguely remember having one of them when you were a little kid. "That's 
okay," you reassure her. "Take your time, Maddie."

"Don't need to, already kicked him out." Satisfaction is evident in her voice for a moment, before 
shyness overtakes it. "Um, so. Hi."
"Hi again," you reply dryly. She responds with awkward laughter, and you can't stop a huge grin from taking over your face at the sound of it. "So, guess what?"

"Um, giant insects have invaded the Bay?" She sounds so uncertain that you can't stop a loud peal of laughter from bursting out your chest.

"Oh jesus, Madison," you wheeze. "Where did that one come from?"

"I'm sorry!" she replies petulantly. "I'm not good at guessing games. You should- um, please just tell me?" You don't miss the way that her demand turns into a plea halfway through the sentence.

You lean against the wall, smiling broadly down the phone. "I don't know that I want to now," you tease her. "I wonder what you'll come up with next~"

"Taylooor!" she whines. You don't give in, and she continues on grumpily, "Fine. Um, you bought a limousine?"

"Nope," you say cheerfully, but you don't have the heart to keep her in suspense any longer. "Dad's going to lunch with Emma's dad again, so I have the house aaaaall to myself today."

There's silence for a few moments, and you can almost hear Madison's cheeks sizzling over the phone. "U-u-um, that's nice," she says shakily. "Did- did you want me to-?"

"Yep!" You tangle your hands in the phone line, almost shaking in your anticipation. "Can you come over?!"

You're taken a little aback by how vehement her response is. "YES!" she practically yells. "Sorry, yes. Um, let me go ask Dad. Did you want me to... bring anything?"

For a moment, you consider it. "Nope," you decide. "I only need you." She inhales sharply at that.

"Okay," she says. "I'll be there in an hour, then."

It turns out to be a little less than an hour. Dad has already left by the time Rick pulls up with Madison in the car, waving genially at you. Madison climbs out of the car, clutching her schoolbag and- is that her chemistry book? You wave back at Rick, then give Madison a quizzical look.

She looks down at her books and lets out a little embarrassed laugh. "Oh, yeah," she says sheepishly. "Um, I just told Dad that we'd be doing some more tutoring. It's so embarrassing otherwise."

You roll your eyes affectionately at her, then pull her inside and quickly close the door. She looks a little nervous as you lead her to your room, so you reach down and grab her hand, squeezing it in your own. "Don't worry," you say, trying your best to sound encouraging. "There's nothing to be nervous about."

She gives you a tremulous grin. "Yes there is," she says simply. "But it's okay."

You're a bit confused. "There's not," you say more firmly as you finally make it into your bedroom. "Madison, you're the cutest girl I know. You don't-"
She abruptly comes to a stop, tugging against your hand to bring you to a stop as well. "No, that's not it," she says firmly. "Taylor, I'm not nervous about showing you my body. My body is yours. You can look at it whenever you want. I'm nervous about seeing you."

Which, well.

Ouch.

"No, wait, that came out wrong," she corrects herself quickly. "I'm not- I don't mean... I don't mean I think it's going to be bad." Her voice grows progressively stronger as she talks. This is evidently something she feels passionate about. "I want to do this. I really do. I've even been dreaming about it," she admits frankly. "But I can't- I can't just make myself not nervous. This is a big thing for me, Taylor. I can't be as casual about this as you are. This, all of this, it really means a lot to me, and that makes me nervous."

You don't know what to say to that, so in lieu of a quick response, you pull her over to your bed, then push her down and curl up beside her, wrapping your arms loosely around her waist. Your lips are suddenly dry.

Everyone wants to talk about feelings lately. You hate talking about feelings.

But you hate seeing Madison upset more.

"I'm not-" You stop, clenching your jaw as you try to formulate words. "I don't- It's not-" A frustrated growl escapes you before you can stop it. Madison trembles in your arms, but for once, doesn't turn around to try to comfort you. You let out a long sigh and try to think your words through.

"You know..." The words drag on for a moment. "I'm not... I'm not being casual about this, Madison. I'm not." The girl in question shifts in your arms, turning to look at your face for a moment. "I know it might seem like I am, but I'm not." You press a gentle kiss to her forehead, buying yourself another moment to formulate your thoughts. "I might be interested in other women, but that doesn't mean, it doesn't mean I don't like you, Madison. I do. You don't know how much I like you."

Frustration rises in you. You don't know how to say any of this.

So you just say the first thing that comes to mind.

"You're important to me." You press another kiss to her face, this time on her nose, a little ritualized gesture you've come to use whenever you want to reassure her. "Our relationship is important to me."

"Are you sure?" She sounds hesitant, like she's afraid to ask the question.

"Of course," you say confidently. "I might have other women, but that doesn't mean you're any less important to me, Madison. You're mine, and that's not going to change, and that's all that matters. You're mine, and I don't let go of what's mine."

She looks hesitant, vulnerable, but she lets go of you and retreats so she can lie beside you and stare at you.

Yeah, you're really going to have to keep an eye on her, you decide. You know she's insecure, but you didn't think it ran this deep. Did something else happen to her that made her worry about how
people felt about her like this?

Regardless, you sit up, then lean over and pull her up so she's leaning against you, getting that full-body contact going again.

"I wasn't even planning on having sex today," you murmur in her ear. "I don't think either of us is ready for that. I don't want our first time to be a cheap encounter on the couch while Dad's out having lunch with his friend. It should be special for you."

Madison burrows her head against your neck. "Okay," she breathes. "That would be nice."

You kiss the top of her head. "I just wanted to get a bit more comfortable with you," you continue. "So that our first time is less awkward. I'm a bit... Boyish. "... insecure. And horny," you admit frankly, "but if it was just that, I could take care of it by myself. I wanted to get used to seeing you naked, and I wanted to get you used to seeing me naked. That's all."

"Mmm." She kisses your neck, then sits back some to look at your face. "That's all?" she asks softly.

"That's all," you confirm.

She hesitantly grips the hem of her shirt, but she looks nervous still. Too nervous. You move forward, grabbing her hands and pulling them down.

"You don't have to," you tell her seriously.

Shaking her head, Madison exhales a long sigh. "No, I do want to," she says. "I'm just... still a bit nervous. Insecure." She scoffs. "It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?"

You shake your head vehemently. "Not at all," you reassure her. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to, Madison. But I'll make you a deal, okay? If you take off some clothes, then I'll take off some clothes at the same time. You won't have to do it alone."

Considering that for a moment, she nods, first hesitantly and then more firmly. "Okay," she agrees. "Okay. If you'll do it with me, then that's fine."

She starts with her shirt first, then her bra. You hurriedly take your own shirt off, but the first problem immediately presents itself- you don't have a bra to take off. Your breasts aren't large enough for you to need even the smallest bra most places stock. Madison doesn't seem to mind, though, because the first thing she does when she finishes taking off her own bra is to lean over and place an open-mouthed kiss over each of them, lingering for a few moments as she places heavenly little licks around your stiff nipples. "So cute," she murmurs. "I really do like your boobs, Taylor. They're little, and that's okay. They're cute. I like them." She leans up and gives you a quick kiss on the mouth before scooting back and beginning to undo the button on her pants.

A warmth spreads through your gut at her words, entirely unrelated to the arousal pooling in you as you take in Madison's own breasts.

You slide your pants down your legs in unison with Madison, leaving the two of you dressed in nothing but socks and panties. You're a bit jealous of her legs, in all honesty- she's got that cute, soft look to hers without the fat that usually builds up on a soft body frame. Your own legs, in contrast, are more muscled and toned than hers. She seems fascinated by them, pausing in her task of taking her panties off to rub circles over your calf muscles for a moment. You return the favour, running
your fingers lightly up and down her thigh, enjoying how soft her skin feels against your fingers.

She catches herself after a moment and gives you an embarrassed smile, then hesitantly hooks her fingers in her panties. You catch on and hook your fingers in your own, quickly sliding them down in an attempt to reassure Madison. She hesitates for a moment- or, no, she's just too busy staring at your suddenly-revealed pussy to keep her end of the bargain. You smirk, and just enjoy her ogling for a minute or two, spreading your legs slightly to give her a better view. Eventually, she startles out of her reverie; you give her a teasing smile, and she flushes hard as she slides her own panties down, then her socks.

When she moves to sit up, you gently splay your hand over her stomach and push her back down. She trembles slightly, but obeys, giving you a worried look. You take a moment to pull your socks off, then slide down the bed. "Don't worry," you tease her. "You took a nice long look at me. I just want to return the favour."

She blushes, but you ignore the urge to lean up and kiss her in favour of sliding further down her body and parting her legs.

Madison is already glistening when you get down there, her pussy thoroughly soaked through. You're not sure what caused that, but you're glad about it. You study it for a few moments, turning your head this way and that. It's cute, you decide eventually. Very cute. Her lips are puffy, and she's a very cute shade of pink. She's even completely shaved, and recently, judging by the lack of regrowth. You reward her for that by giving her a quick kiss, lip-to-lip, then quickly sit up and give her an innocent look.

She looks back at you with flushed cheeks, but doesn't say anything other than to lean towards you and give you another kiss, this time on the mouth. "Mm," she murmurs with a cheeky grin. "You're definitely right about this naked thing. I could get used to being naked around you."

You almost reply with "And you should!", but as tempting a thought as it is, maybe that's something that should wait for after you move out of your Dad's home. Instead, you just give her another kiss and a small grin.

"Now," you say, then pause and quickly hurry over to your closet, where you pull out a jacket and hold it out for Madison. "We're going to watch a movie. Unfortunately, we're going to have to walk past the dining room window to get to the living room, so could you please put this on?"

She accepts it easily and shrugs it on, although she looks a little disappointed until she subtly holds the jacket to her nose. "Lost interest in being naked already?" she jokes, voice muffled.

You shake your head vehemently. "I could never get tired of you being naked," you declare. "But your body is for me to enjoy, and me only. Nobody else gets to see it."

Her eyes darken at the comment. You pause, then review what you just said. You don't quite blush, but you do internally wince. You're going to have to be careful with the possessive remarks around Madison if you want to make sex with her special. Every time you remind her that she's yours, she gets a little more turned on, and there's nothing fun about orgasm denial.

Besides- it's not like her body is completely hidden. You can't see her breasts, but you're not so much taller than her that your jacket completely covers her ass.

Madison disappears into the kitchen while you head out to the living room to set up the movie. It
doesn't take long, just enough time to set a DVD into the second-hand DVD player and turn the TV on, so you wander back out to the kitchen to watch Madison as you wait.

There's something extremely erotic about watching a half-nude Madison wander around your kitchen. She notices you watching at one point, and after checking to confirm that nobody will be able to see her while she's in here, she pulls down the zipper on her jacket to reveal her breasts, but doesn't take it off. She toters around the kitchen, moving between a cutting board on which she's preparing sandwiches and a saucepan in which she's cooking the meager amount of popcorn you have in the house, taking deliberate care to make sure you can watch her nude ass as she does.

Eventually, she's done. She zips the jacket back up for a few moments as she heads out to the living room carrying the food, then finally moves over and closes the blinds on the living room windows so she can take the jacket off.

And- oh yes, you think to yourself as she follows you over to the couch and carefully lays her nude body atop yours, dragging the bowl of popcorn over so she can feed it to you. You could get very used to this.

Unfortunately, all good things have to come to an end at some point. You manage to get through three movies in the meantime- you'd wanted to push for the Earth Aleph remake of The Man in the Iron Mask, but held your tongue and allowed Madison to pick from the meager amount of romance movies you'd managed to convince Dad to buy for you- but eventually, the clock hits seven, and the two of you have to return to your room and reluctantly pull your clothes back on before Dad gets home.

When Rick rolls up to pick her up, you think he's surprised to see that Madison's clothes aren't ruffled and her hair is still intact. He can obviously tell that the two of you weren't studying, since Madison forgets her chemistry book and has to make an embarassing run back to your room to retrieve it, but it's obvious the two of you didn't go all the way today. You can see him considering that for a moment, but when he sees Madison's happy face- and believe you, have you worked hard today to bring that expression back to her- he gives you a smile and a thumbs-up. You return it along with a cheesy wink, and try very, very hard not to think about what you just spent eight hours doing with Madison in front of him.

You spend the rest of Saturday obsessing over Madison. You'd known that she harboured insecurities about your relationship with her, but you hadn't realized she was that insecure about it.

You're probably going to have to address that soon, if you don't want your relationships with other women to interfere in your relationship with Madison.

That's not something you can do anything about just yet, though. You try to put it out of your mind, and you're mostly successful come Sunday morning. Largely, of course, because you're given something else to obssess about instead; Glory Girl.

You're still not quite sure where you stand with the heroine. You've set your influence into her mind, but you're rapidly approaching the point where you're balking at using your powers on her any more. Much more, and you're not going to be just inserting yourself into her fantasies- you're going to be twisting them. And you're not going to do that to a hero.

Your doubts continue plaguing you even as you get on the bus and head off to the book club. It's not until you get close enough that you can feel Glory Girl's eager anticipation that you manage to shove
them in the back of your mind where they belong.

"Taylor!" You're immediately accosted by the heroine the moment you walk through the bookstore's door. You would return the hug, but her arms are wrapped around you so tight that you can't get them out. She's taking care not to squeeze you so hard you can't breathe, you note thankfully.

"Hello, Victora," you say with your most charming grin. She returns one of her own, which, wow, okay, you don't even know why you bothered. Her grin could and would eat yours for breakfast. You drop your eyes away from her depressingly gorgeous grin down to her jacket, which you notice is yet again different to the others she's been wearing- this one's a dark blue, instead.

When you look back up, she's giving you a naughty grin, but doesn't say anything. Instead, she just reaches for your hand and moves to lead you upstairs. Hesitation rises in her for a second, and she turns to look at you; you take the opportunity to dash in front of her and lead her up the stairs, ignoring the amusement you can feel emanating from her.

As usual, the clock in the store starts tolling a few moments after you arrive. Victoria leads you over to your seats and quickly shrugs her heavy jacket off, revealing her fetish costume beneath.

Everything proceeds as per normal until you try to lift her skirt up and she grabs your wrist waringly. You look at her, a little wounded, and she shoots you an apologetic look before turning back to her conversation for a moment. She's a little ruder than she needs to be with how she shuts the line of conversation down, but you don't mind, because it means she can explain herself faster.

As it turns out, the explanation is very simple. She leans towards you and murmurs into your ear, "No peeking today. Touching only."

A little intrigued, you gently pull on her skirt until it's just high enough for you to easily slip your hands under it. Victoria allows it, but grabs her skirt with her left hand at that point. She's far stronger than you- there's no way you can overcome that.

The reason becomes very clear the moment you touch her and find warm, wet skin there, instead of the soft silk you'd been expecting.

You shoot her an intrigued glance. She gives you an embarrassed smile in turn. She can't be obvious about anything, you know, so you stretch your powers out to her.

You take care not to actually tug on anything; you just brush your senses over her, taking in what she's feeling. And she's a mess in there today.

Her emotions are warring with each other. You can feel a thick cloud of shame hanging over her, contending with a flame of lust burning within her. No- contending with it, but also feeding it. The stronger the shame gets, the stronger the lust gets. Guilt gnaws along on the outset, but it's smothered by... something. You can't place it, but you've been feeling it from Sophia, and from Madison the couple of times you've accidentally reached for your power in her presence. Something warm and pleasant, directed at you.

Gently, you begin rubbing your knuckles along her wet folds. You're probably lucky that she isn't talking when you do, because her breath immediately hitches; if she'd been talking, everyone would have noticed that.

For a few moments, you just gently explore her pussy with your fingers, feeling how wet she is, how
wet she's getting as you play with her. Then, you try sliding a finger into her.

Try, because she immediately lets go of her skirt and pulls your hand away, shaking her head slightly. She leans back towards you and murmurs, "No fingering, either. Okay?"

You pout at her. "Why not?" you whisper back.

She glances around the room. "I'll explain later," she replies quietly. "No looking, and no fingering. Okay?"

You reluctantly nod. If those are her rules, those are her rules, but you're not happy about them.

You content yourself with punishing her by trying to draw a reaction from her as you play with her, searching for all her sensitive spots. You remember most of them from last week, but it's fun to map out her pussy with her fingers and memorize each and every one of her most sensitive spots. There's her clit, of course, although you try not to play with that too much; it feels like cheating when you make her gasp with a quick flick to it. She still enjoys it when you squeeze her lips together, too- but not nearly as much as she does when you gently rub the length of one of your fingers between her lips. The first time you do that, you draw an audible gasp from her- and that's before your hand brushes her clit.

In fact, you end up having so much fun that you miss it when the clock rings to mark two o'clock, and the cessation of today's session. Victoria has to forcibly drag your hand away so she can put her jacket back on, causing you to look around, confused. Not that she minds; you can feel that with a quick brush of your power. In fact, she doesn't mind at all. You can feel how strong her lust has grown- her shame has diminished, and whatever that warm feeling of hers is, it's grown even stronger.

"Come on," she says quietly once everyone else has left. "Is anyone picking you up today?"

You shake your head. "No, I take the bus home."

Victoria hums. "I'll fly you home then," she tells you. "If that's okay with you. I'll explain along the way."

You nod once, sharply. "Sure," you say. If she hadn't asked permission, you might have been miffed, but she did.

The two of you head outside and to a nearby alleyway, whereupon Victoria sweeps you up into her arms, bridal style and flies in the direction you point out. Silence flows between the two of you for a moment as the girl tries to gather her thoughts.

Eventually, a few blocks later, she speaks up.

"You know I'm in a relationship, right?" she asks. You nod. You know- you just don't care. "Right. Well, I'm dating someone, and I lo- I like him a lot. Not that I don't like you a lot, too," she hastens to add. "But I've known Dean for a long time, and I'm actually dating him."

"Yet you still let me play with you," you say dryly. She raises an eyebrow at how you describe it, but doesn't comment on that.
"Yeah," she says instead. "We have a bit of an open relationship. It was my idea a while back, when Dean was having troubles- well, you don't need to know about that. But anyway, he was having some troubles with some other women, and we talked it over, and came to an agreement we could live with. We set four rules."

You look up at her quizzically. "Hm," you comment. "What are the rules?"

Her hands jerk, as though she went to count them off her fingers before remembering she's still carrying you. "Oops. Well, they're pretty simple rules. One, no kissing. It gets too messy. Two, no nudity. Underwear is fine, but we can't show our privates to anyone else. Three, no sex. We can, like, dry hump, but that and fondling's as far as we can go. And four, no falling in love. Goes back to rule one. Too messy."

Considering that, you tilt your head. "Huh," you say. "I'm in an open relationship myself, but we don't have rules like that."

"... Huh." Victoria stares down at you for a moment, then clears her throat and begins to descend. She comes to a stop in an alleyway, one you recognize as only being a couple of blocks away from your house. "Well, okay, I didn't expect you to be in an open relationship too. But, yeah. That's why I had to stop you."

"Mm." You make no moves to get down from her arms, and she doesn't try to put you down, just floats in the middle of the alleyway, looking down at you. Then, abruptly- before she can react- you lean up and kiss her on the mouth.

She doesn't react for a moment, stunned. Then she shakes her head and lets out an amused scoff. "I should have seen that coming," she says tiredly. "I don't know why I expected you to let this go that easily."

"That was silly of you, yeah," you agree, and kiss her again. She's passive at first, not stopping you, but not participating, either. Then, she slowly begins to kiss you back- gently, barely moving, just barely opening her mouth and nipping lightly at your upper lip. You take the chance to quickly swipe your tongue against her lower lip. She shivers against you, and this time, after you break for air she's the one who leans forward and kisses you.

You don't let it evolve to a full make-out session, keeping the kisses gentle and soft, trying to tease her out of her shell. She responds, shying back whenever you get too aggressive, but otherwise fully participating in the kisses.

Eventually, you lean back, satisfied. Victoria blinks slowly, as though waking from a spell, and gently places you on the ground. She can't resist leaning in for one last kiss before taking a step back, though.

"I'll see you next Sunday, Taylor." She sighs, although her disappointment isn't aimed at you, and gently rises into the air.

You're tempted to whistle happily as you step out of the alleyway and begin making your way home- it's not too far from here, although for a moment you wonder how Victoria knew where you lived (the answer becomes clear momentarily: there's a bus stop just outside the alleyway, the same bus stop you wait at for your bus).

Well. That went better than expected, you think to yourself.
Eventually, though, all weekends must pass. Night falls, and you find yourself falling back into your planning sessions as you look to the week ahead.

You honestly haven't used your power that much recently. Minor uses of it, but they've been small enough to not trigger your headache. By now, it's faded entirely. You're hesitant to use it too much, because you know that it could come back with a vengeance if you push yourself too far, but the option is there again.

But you can't determine that in a moment. Instead, you turn to your notepad and begin planning to...
By the time you make it to your locker on Monday morning, your high from the success of your seduction of Victoria has crashed, and you're back to obsessing over your relationship with Madison. Exacerbating this is the slight headache you developed over the weekend; it's not bad, but you're becoming kind of paranoid about stretching your powers too far. You've seen what happens when someone ignores a headache for too long, during the aftermath of your Mom's death. The stress Dad had gone under had resulted in him developing severe headaches that had left him crippled for days until you'd made another trip down to buy high-strength painkillers.

Absently, you wonder if your late-night study sessions have been helping your headaches at all, but you dismiss the thought. It's not like you can afford to stop them even if they were making them worse. You get most of your seduction and manipulations done at school.

Madison seems slightly subdued when you meet with her in first period. You know it's probably a bad idea, but when you see her downcast face, you can't help but sit there and pull her into a hug anyway, at least until the teacher glares at you for disrupting his class. You try not to make a big deal about your reluctance to let go of her, but Madison seems to get the idea anyway, and gives you a small smile.

Unfortunately, you're not able to sit next to her in any other class, so the next time you'll be able to sit next to her is during lunch. You're growing wary of sitting next to her at lunch- not only because you're afraid of what some of the gang members at school might do to you if they get it in their head that you're a deviant who needs to be put down, but also because you're getting a little bit worried about how easily Madison is neglecting her friends in order to spend her time with you. Not that you're necessarily against the idea of Madison devoting all her time for you- the thought does have a certain appeal. Hmm...

Regardless, you do have other issues to attend to. And principal amongst them is the girl sitting next to you now, in fourth-period Chemistry; Sophia Hess.

Once, the thought of being assigned to the same project as Sophia would have caused you to break into a cold sweat. Now, there's a certain appeal to it. Not only because it gives you the perfect opportunity to gently tug at her loyalty without having to be obvious in your staring at her, it's mostly because it gives you the chance to actually learn about the girl.

For instance: Sophia is a very aggressive girl. You were already aware of this, having once been the recipient of her cruelty, but it manifests in other ways, too. She gets competitive at so much as the slightest hint that somebody might be better at something than her. It makes you feel a little cruel to admit it, but you take a certain perverse delight in rubbing your academic accomplishments in her face. She looks so cute when she bunches her nose up and sneers half-heartedly at you.

But there's more to her than that. She's a lot smarter than she gives herself credit for, for instance. You're far ahead of her in academic rankings, but you don't have much to do other than study and spend time with Madison. Sophia does.

"Track keeps me pretty busy," she confides to you quietly during Monday's Chemistry lesson. You've been making light talk with the girl about your hobbies, and the topic had eventually swung around to what the two of you do in your time after school. "We meet most days after school at four, and it doesn't let up until eight most days. Sometimes not until as late as eleven. Weekends, too, but
we get more time off those days."

You raise your eyebrows at her, sneaking a peek down at her legs. "Well, I can't argue with the results," you note.

She gives you a sly grin. "Didn't think you'd complain, Hebert. But yeah, it keeps me pretty busy."

You nod. "Seems like it," you say. "I have to admit, it's impressive that you manage to keep your grades up as high as you do."

Her face darkens for a moment, before she makes a visible effort to shake herself out of it. "Ah, it's tough, but I manage," she says dismissively. "Han- The teacher makes sure that everyone in the team has some time to sit down and do their school assignments. It's track team, not boot camp, she says. I've got to keep up my grades anyway. Not that I'm looking to get into university or anything, but it's gonna be tough to-" She cuts herself off abruptly. "Well, you know. Job market and all."

"Yeah." You're pretty sure that the track teacher is Mr Brown, actually. Who is most definitely not a 'she', if his constant ranting about transgendered folks is any indication. You frown internally, then reach down into your bag and pull out your water bottle, proffering it silently to Sophia, who takes it with a confused look. You watch her insistently until she rolls her eyes and swallows a mouthful of it. Confusion is one of the first signs of heatstroke.

Sophia barely even insults you through the rest of Chemistry, and in fact gives you a little teasing smile on her way out. You're forced to stop watching her then, when she pauses by the door until Emma comes her way. Sophia is cute, but not that cute.

The rest of the day passes in a little haze. Lunch with Madison goes alright, but you're left yearning for more than the occasional soft touches and hand-holding that you can get away with behind the tree you'd marked as your own. Tutoring isn't the most fun thing in the world, but at least Madison can snuggle up against you during that, and it gives you something to focus on besides work you've done twice over already.

Anxiety about your relationship with Madison still sits heavy in your gut by the time school is out for the day and Dad meets you in his car, though.

He takes one look at you and pauses. "Do you want to go home first, or to the clinic?" he asks.

You consider it for a minute. Going home sounds like a wonderful idea, but- "The clinic," you say absent-mindedly. Quite aside from the issue of cute girls, you volunteered to help out at the clinic, and that's something you feel you should follow through on.

Dad nods nonchalantly. "Okay then," he says. "I'll take you there. Pick you up at seven?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

Dad drops you off with a little wave and a reaffirmation of his promise to pick you up at "Seven on the dot, don't forget!". You give him a small smile and a hesitant wave as he drives off, then turn, take a deep breath, and step into the clinic.

Instantly, you note that it's as busy as it was last week. When you'd first volunteered, there were only three people in the waiting room. Now, there are so many that the two dozen seats set out carefully in the waiting room are completely filled, and you can see at least three people sitting against the wall,
looking around with a pained expression on their faces.

Well, you think to yourself as you hurry into the hospital to try and find any spare chairs you can, at least you'll have something to do if things keep being this busy.

For the next hour, you run around the hospital trying to keep up with the influx of clients. With so many little kids in there, there are constantly little messes you have to step in to clean up; they tear the magazines in the waiting room to shreds, throw the toys carefully stacked in a box in the corner all around the receptionist area, and appropriate crayons from somewhere that they begin drawing on the walls with. Someone vomits all over the floor, but thankfully, you're not asked to deal with that one. They call in an actual janitor for that.

The good thing about this kind of menial work, you soon to discover, is that there's just so much of it that you don't have time to obsess over Madison.

It's five forty-nine when Doctor Fitzgerald finally walks out into the waiting room, a harassed look on his face. You're not actively using your power, but even so, you can feel the surprise wash over him when he looks over the waiting area. You flinch a little- you thought you'd done a good job, but apparently, not by the doctor's standards.

He looks around, his gaze eventually falling near you. A warm flash of appreciation flashes through him, and you're forced to fight down a little bit of jealousy at whoever had managed to make him feel good despite your mess. He begins walking towards you, and you have to fight the urge to run.

"Taylor," he greets you calmly. "You can go take a break now, if you want. I'll get one of the other volunteers to take over for you out here until you get back."

So scolded, you hang your head mournfully in shame. "Okay," you mumble. "I'll keep it short, though! I'll be back out here soon!"

He's already summarily dismissed you, though. He nods, but his thoughts have obviously wandered away as another flash of warm appreciation steals through him. He barely gives you another thought as he hurries over to the patients sitting around the waiting room, pulling one of them aside and murmuring lowly to them.

Your depression fades somewhat when you make it to the break room to find a surprise waiting for you, in the form of a mousy little brunette.

Rather than head inside, you opt to stand in the doorway for a few moments, watching her rummage around in the fridge... and rather enjoying it when she bends down to check the bottom shelf, giving you a nice view of her pert ass. It's tempting to go over and let her feel your appreciation, but you refrain. Sophia is the one who doesn't mind you sexually harassing her, anyway. Doing the same to random clinic volunteers is rather less okay.

Besides; if you did so, then you wouldn't be able to enjoy the loud squeak she makes when she finally pulls out a small bowl of chocolate mousse from the fridge and turns around to see you staring at her. The spoon she's holding in her other hand clatters to the floor, and red immediately flares in her cheeks.

You chuckle lowly, an act that only causes the flushing in her cheeks to spread further. "Come on, mystery girl," you say just loudly enough for her to hear. "I know I can be a bit scary, but you shouldn't exaggerate it too much."
"N-no, that's not-" The girl cuts herself off, looking a little exasperated with herself. "No, I don't mean... You're not scary. You just surprised me a little, that's all."

"Ah. And there's a difference, is there?"

She nods her head vigorously. "Obviously. You're too-" Abruptly, she flushes red. Again. This girl spends more time blushing than Madison did when she stripped for you. "I mean, you're not scary enough to scare me! Yeah."

"Oh yeah?" you muse. "I dunno. I think I can be pretty scary when I want to be." You bare your teeth at her in a silly approximation of a snarl, and gnash your teeth at her for a moment when she giggles at you. "See? I can be scary!"

She shakes her head, her giggles fading, leaving behind a little grin. "Very scary," she replies. "Especially the sweater. Really makes you look terrifying."

You look down at your soft green sweater. It's lined with fleece. You're pretty sure you actually resemble a sickly sheep.

Nonetheless, you grin at the girl. "Green is the colour of terror," you reply as seriously as you can. "Didn't they teach you anything in school?"

"I must have missed that lesson," she shoots back dryly. "How silly of me."

You nod emphatically. "Colour theory's an important skill," you inform her. "I learned that in kindergarten." You wince internally as soon as you say it. God, you really need to work on this joking thing a bit.

She looks at you with raised eyebrows, but passes by the obvious comeback. "I see," she says instead. "Are you going to come in, or do you prefer lurking in doorways people need to walk through?"

You shake your head, looking her slowly up and down. "Better view from here," you declare. She blushes again, looking down at her mousse with a small smile.

"Could I tempt you in with some mousse?" she asks, waving it towards you. "Or there was some yoghurt in there, too, maybe you could have that if you don't like mousse..."

You're still a little full from the lunch Madison made for you, but you recognize the invitation for what it is and step inside, pulling up a chair at the table she's standing in front of. "I do like yoghurt," you say. You like mousse better, but the girl had sought out that mousse. You don't want to take it away from her.

She hums, then turns back to the fridge, casually kicking the spoon she'd dropped earlier off to the side as she does so. There is indeed a little tub of yoghurt, although sadly, it's up on the top shelf. You'd rather hoped she'd have to bend down again. Two small spoons are drawn from a rack beside the break room's kitchenette, and you note that she casually kicks the dropped spoon again as she walks past it.

"Here you go." She slides the tub of yoghurt and a spoon over to you, then sits opposite to you and unhurriedly begins to peel the plastic wrap off her mousse. "So," she says once she's finally
unwrapped it and has her spoon sitting in the mess of mousse, "what's your name?"

The two of you talk casually over the next ten minutes. You can't help but notice that she deflects your questions about why she's here, but several staff members wander in and out while the two of you talk, and while some of them give you impressed glances behind her back- one doctor, a man you recognize as Doctor Jones, even gives you a thumbs-up, although you're not sure why- none of them seem confused about her presence here. That solves that quandary, at least.

She's very open about personal information, though, at least the kind you're interested in gathering from a casual conversation like this. Her name is Amy, she tells you; she's seventeen years old. You note that she doesn't look too disappointed when you tell her you're fifteen in turn, though you're not sure if that's a good thing or not. You cross your fingers beneath the table, hoping that maybe she's into younger women. She's lived in the Bay area for her whole life, and yes, the weather is very cold recently.

The most interesting thing you learn about her, though, is that she likes to read. And you don't mean the kind of reading most people your age like to do, reading those terrible novellas about people having torrid relationships with capes wearing perpetual brooding expressions. No, she likes to read classical literature.

If Doctor Fitzgerald hadn't walked in, looking more harried than ever, you're pretty sure the two of you might have sat there until seven talking and teasing each other about Dracula. But, sadly, he did.

"Amy!" the doctor exclaims when he sticks his head around the doorway and sees the two of you sitting there talking animatedly. "And Taylor, hello again. Amy, you're needed over in room eight. Taylor, I know you've only just gone on break, but Chloe's finished for the day and the kids somehow got hold of their crayons again. Could you go deal with that for me?"

The two of you are already rising as he speaks. Amy gives you a hurried little wave as she leaves, pulling out- was she sitting on a bundle of sheets the whole time? Apparently, since she pulled them out from the chair she'd been sitting on. What an odd girl.

You shake your head and get back to work.

Plans are formulating in your head overnight, carrying through Tuesday and buoying you up.

You've got plans for finding a job circling in your head. You can't manage them now, not during the week, but when you spoke to Doctor Fitzgerald when you arrived on Tuesday to find a much quieter clinic, he'd agreed to act as a reference for you- and even gone a step further, telling you to go to the Brockton Bay Theatres and speak to his friend Gerald on Saturday. You should be able to start immediately, he informs you, unless he's filled the position already.

Which leaves you with just the rest of the week to plan out. So what are you going to do during the next three days?
You wake up on Wednesday with a growing headache. For a few moments, you lie in bed utterly bewildered— you'd barely even used your powers for days!— before you remember that headaches are in fact allowed to come from sources other than inexplicable superpowers.

That doesn't make it any more pleasant to deal with, though.

You make your way out to the kitchen and wash two aspirin down with your morning coffee. It helps a little, but by the time you've boarded the bus and headed off to school, it's settled into that typical low-key pounding that small headaches tend to do. It's fine so long as there are no sudden loud noises and you don't move your head too fast, but... it's high school.

When first period finally rolls around, you slip into your seat beside Madison and immediately pull her over to you so you can bury your head against the crook of her shoulder, exhaling loudly. You can feel her start a little, then her fingers begin threading through your hair. She coos quietly as she lightly massages your scalp. "Poor Taylor," she murmurs sympathetically. "What's wrong?"

"My head hurts," you whine. "I took some aspirin, but it's not helping." You pout up at her. Her head sways towards you, instinctively moving to kiss your pout away before she remembers where she is and catches herself. Your pout just grows more prominent. You're pretty sure that Madison kisses fix everything. That's unfair.

She does slide her other arm down to hug you, though, ignoring the teacher's death glare (and how uncomfortable it must be to contort herself into a position where she can rest one arm between your chair and your back) to do so. So there's that. You're pretty sure that a month ago, Madison would never have wilfully ignored a teacher's instructions, let alone do so in order to comfort you.

"Miss Clements." The sound of the teacher clucking in disapproval as he walks over to the two of you makes you clench your jaw in anger against Madison's neck. "Public in... displays of affection aren't appropriate behaviour in the middle of class. Do you have a reason for disrupting the class like this?"

"She's sick, sir." Madison's tone is a bit more challenging than you'd expected from your submissive girl. "She's got a headache."

"Then she should go to the nurse's office," he replies impatiently. "Here- Sophia!" Off to the side, you can just see Sophia's shape jerk up in response. "Take Miss Hebert here to the nurse's office, will you?"

"Sure," you hear Sophia's voice drawl. A few seconds later, you let out a small whine as a dark hand covers your eyes and pulls your head away from Madison's shoulder. Madison pouts too, but slides her arm out from behind your back, causing you to let out a pathetic little moan at the loss of contact. "Come on, Hebert," Sophia grunts.

You reluctantly allow the dark-skinned girl to pull you up out of your chair, letting out an actual groan at the pain the movement sends stabbing through your head. "Shit," you hiss.

"Sorry." Sophia does actually sound a little contrite, and her tugging becomes a little more gentle,
allowing you to rise at your own pace. Once you have, she wraps her hand around your wrist; you raise your other wrist to your eyes, making a visible attempt to try to shield off the light streaming through the classroom door. Okay, maybe you're playing it up a little, but it feels nice to have Sophia worrying over you like this. You think you deserve that much from her, at least.

You stumble your way through the halls behind Sophia, too wrapped up in trying to avoid moving too fast to even consider trying to push ahead and make your way to the nurse's office on your own. The girl is gentle with you anyway, setting her pace to one you can match without causing further stabs of pain to travel through your head.

"What did you do last night, Hebert?" she asks eventually. She sounds a little impressed, as though she thinks you'd done something exciting last night.

You shake your head, then immediately regret it. "Nothing," you moan. "I think I went to bed too late. Maybe I slept wrong or something."

Sophia hums. "Sure," she says sarcastically. "Weren't out drinking with your girlfriend, then?"

"No," you protest feebly. "I don't." You bite your tongue. You'd been about to protest that you don't have a girlfriend, but you're not really sure what qualifies as a girlfriend anyway. Is it just kissing, or is it more involved than that? Do you have to have sex to be girlfriends? On TV, they always told each other they loved them. Maybe that's it? "I don't have a girlfriend," you say eventually. "Just Madison."

Sophia lets out a low, rough chuckle. You wish you were feeling well enough to use your powers to see what she's feeling. This kind of thing is so much trickier when you have to try and figure out what someone is feeling just through what they say. "Right," she says, lightly sarcastic still. "You saying that Madison isn't your girlfriend, then?"

You squirm uncomfortably, blinking at the sudden influx of light when you drop your hand away from your eyes. By the time your eyes have adjusted again, Sophia isn't looking at you any more. Damn it.

"Madison is... Madison." You squeeze Sophia's hand gently, smiling when you feel her hand tighten in response. "She's my girl, but she's not my girlfriend."

Sophia scoffs a little, shaking her head. "You're a weird one, Hebert," she replies. You're glad to notice that her tone has gone back to a joking one, though. "Come on, we're almost there."

She leads you to the nurse's office, a dimly-lit, sterile environment. There are three plastic chairs in there, a cot with a stiff white linen sheet, and too many posters filled with disturbing diagrams of people's innards for you to want to count.

"Miss Hess." You hear the nurse's cold tones emanating from the far corner of the room, where a small door with a glass frame gives him some semblance of privacy and keeps the school's physical medical files out from the hands of students. "Who have you bought me today?"

She levels a flat, unimpressed glare at the nurse. "Taylor Hebert," she says. "Says she's got a headache. I was asked to bring her here. Got me out of class, so eh."

You can see the doctor move backwards on his wheely chair through the glass pane of the window. "Yes, yes. Take a seat on the cot, Taylor. Would you like Sophia to remain with you, or-"
"Yes," you reply instantly, squeezing Sophia's hand. She smirks at you, but doesn't argue, just taking a seat in a nearby plastic chair. You didn't think she'd mind getting out of first period.

"Right," he replies distantly, his voice trailing off. You're pretty sure you're not meant to hear what he says next, judging by how his voice drops lower but he's clearly forgotten that the door is ajar. Both you and Sophia can clearly hear what he murmurs. "Hmm, depression, anxiety, no history of family illness..."

Depression? You wonder absently what he's reading from. Maybe he has a list he likes to read off of? The most common list of illnesses in Winslow. You imagine depression and anxiety would be pretty high up there.

"Okay," he says eventually, louder this time. You're meant to hear this one. "Let's see what's wrong."

For the next ten minutes, you undergo a variety of simple tests. The nurse measures your heart rate, shines a light in your ear, puts a wooden stick on your tongue and asks you to say 'aaaah', and other strange doctor miscellania as you've experienced so many times before. You're impressed at how much patience Sophia exhibits, yawning and staring around the room instead of mouthing off to either of you.

The doctor eventually nods to himself, as though he's confirmed something. "Right," he says. "I suggest you go see a GP, but I don't think you're sick. Tell me, Taylor, have you been doing anything stressful lately?"

"Uhh..." You rub the back of your neck sheepishly. "Yeah."

He nods. "I thought so," he says. "You should speak to your parents about it, but I recommend you take some time to yourself for a while. You're exhibiting signs of stress, that's probably where your headache comes from. In the meantime, I can't give you any more aspirin yet, but if your headache is still bad by lunchtime, come back and see me and I'll give you some more. Okay?"

You nod reluctantly. Take some time to yourself? You already do. That's silly. There's like, an entire hour each day where you're not doing other stuff! But then your head throbs again, and you wince. Okay, maybe it sounds silly, but the man is a registered health practitioner. You probably shouldn't dismiss his advice out of hands. Then again, he's also a Winslow employee, so who knows...

He keeps you in there for the rest of first period, giving your head a chance to recover a bit. You mostly just lie there, staring at the ceiling and clutching Sophia's hands. She doesn't let go the whole time, which surprises you a little bit, but comes as a welcome surprise.

Eventually, though, the bell for second period rings, and you're forced to trudge there with Sophia. She lets your hand go once you reach the office doors; even your pout doesn't persuade her to pick it back up.

When you're about halfway there, and away from the worst of the noise of the other students as they barrel to their next classroom, Sophia leans closer to you. "I don't know if it'll help, but when I get stressed, I go running," she tells you. "It's a good escape, and gets you thinking about other things. Maybe it'll do you some good."
You nod, taking the advice in seriously. It might help, it might not. You'll see how it goes.

Your headache does fade somewhat by lunchtime, but you go back for the aspirin anyway. By the time you get home, it's mostly abated. You remember what the doctor said, though, and instead of reading up on your World History texts until midnight, you stop studying at ten. For a while, you're left floundering- what can you even do?- before you remember what the mystery girl, Amy, had talked to you about yesterday.

It takes some digging around, but eventually you find your copy of Pride and Prejudice. You wander in and out of the story as you go, less enthralled by some parts than others, but you persevere. And, sure enough, you do feel somewhat more relaxed when you head to bed the next night, your head for once not brimming with formulas and chemical equations.

The next day, you wake up early, having set your bedside clock to ring at six. Sophia had advised that you go running in an attempt to clear your head, and you're willing to give it a try, at least. You take a plastic bottle of water with you, not daring to drink a cup of coffee first in case it unsettles your stomach.

It's unsafe to wander too far around your house, so you end up just jogging around the block a few times. After a bit over half an hour, you feel yourself getting winded, and swap to walking for a few minutes. You alternate between walking and jogging then, until you think about an hour has passed-fifty-four minutes, you discover when you head back inside- and head over to the shower to get ready for school.

You're actually a little surprised at how much better you feel now. Not necessarily mentally, but physically. You never quite realized that you'd constantly felt so tired until, finally, you feel like you actually got a good night's sleep for once. It might not last forever, but you quite enjoy not feeling like there's a constant weight on your back any more.

Of course, not everything is good. You're pretty sure you annoyed your teacher by keeping Sophia out so long, judging by the way he keeps shooting you little glances throughout first period that day, and for a while you worry that Sophia is avoiding you. She slides into place without seeming to be too concerned come Chemistry, though. Maybe she's just hiding her annoyance with you. You try to keep your head down and not annoy her, and it works- she doesn't make any biting comments towards you or anything.

But still, overall, you're feeling a bit less stressed out, which is good.

Now you just have to keep that up over the weekend.

Speaking of which; with your suddenly much more plentiful free time, you spend a bit of time working on your plans for the weekend. You've already booked up some of your time on Sunday to go in and see about this job Doctor Fitzgerald had told you about, but the rest of your weekend is free.

In the end, you decide to...
You still keep up with your running on Saturday, but you don't bother getting up quite so early. You don't have to be ready for school a little after right, so you can afford to sleep in until seven and take your time getting ready. You still don't drink any coffee— the air outside is cold enough to wake you up anyway— but you do eat a small bowl of some of Dad's weird nut-and-berry cereal and wait half an hour before heading out.

It's only been a few days, so the sight of the same few blocks around your house haven't quite worn out their welcome yet. You try to vary it as much as you can, criss-crossing through up and down the paths, in the hopes that it'll help you stave off the boredom for as long as possible. You're pretty sure that boredom is eventually going to start frustrating you, though. You'll have to consider some way to liven things up... later.

For now, you just return to your house, absently noting that it's already approaching nine. Dad's awake and standing around in the kitchen when you get back inside; he greets you with a "Hello" and a quick hug around your middle, but otherwise doesn't react much to your entrance. You frown a little, at that. You're pretty sure that most fathers are meant to have more of a reaction than that to their daughters going running in unsafe neighbourhoods.

You're not going to complain, but you frown unsettled at his back. You hadn't thought he was that upset by your refusal to talk.

You shake your head, trying to dismiss the sudden worry that rose in the pit of your gut. It's not like there's anything you can do about it, anyway. You're certainly not going to start talking about that kind of stuff. Dad still loves you anyway, even if you ran away from him... after he opened up and tried to talk about something clearly important to him.

You're pretty sure he does, anyway.

... Then again, you'd thought about Emma too, and look where that'd got you.

Shaking your head furiously, you try to dislodge the doubts suddenly swarming you. No, Dad isn't Emma. One conversation isn't enough to kill your relationship with him.

Maybe you should make an effort to try and do stuff with him again, though. Just in case. It can't hurt to be too careful.

You head to the phone, trying to ignore the sudden unpleasant gnawing in your stomach. It's not something you can do anything about right now, so you should focus on things you can do, right?

The phone rings through, dialing for long enough that the answering machine rings through. You're about to hang up when you hear a soft click, and the harried tones of Madison's father echo over the line. "Hello?"

"Er, hello," you say weakly. "It's Taylor. I was just wondering if I could speak to Madison?"

There's a pause, but when Rick finally replies, his voice is much lighter than it was before. "You're seeing her more than we are these days, it feels like," he says cheerily. "That won't be a problem, Taylor. Hold on, I'll just go give the phone to Madison."
He hurries upstairs, the slap of his feet loud enough against the wooden stairs that you can hear them through the phone line. Eventually, you hear three loud knocks on a door and a short murmured conversation before there's the fumbling sounds of a phone changing hands and Madison's happy voice issues from it.

"H-hey, Taylor," she says faux-casually. "It's nice to hear from you." Warmth practically radiates from the phone at her tone.

Your mouth turns up in a grin at her words and the way she says them. "I know the feeling," you reply, grinning wider at the dopey giggle she lets out at that. "I missed you."

"You just saw me yesterday," she teases you. Then her voice becomes a little more serious, and she admits, "But I missed you too. Do you want me to come over today?"

"No," you say quickly. Then, realizing how that sounds, "I was actually wondering if I could come over to your house today. Unless that's not okay, if you have something else on, then I can just stay home-"

Madison reacts very quickly to that. "No! No, um. Well, yes, actually, but no. I do have something else on, but it shouldn't take all day." Her voice goes quieter, as though she's a little ashamed. "Dad invited Emma's dad over for lunch today. I know you probably don't want to see her, so maybe you could come over after that instead?"

Well, that spoiled your mood quickly.

"Yeah," you reply quietly. You're aware that Emma's been trying to get into contact with you again, of course. Emma wouldn't be Emma if she didn't. You've just steadfastly ignored her efforts. "What time is she leaving?" you ask, at least attempting to sound casual. You're not sure if Madison understands, but you hope she appreciates your efforts anyway.

"Um, she should be gone by around one, but maybe you shouldn't come around until two anyway, just to be safe." You've never heard Madison sound so small before. "I'm really sorry about this, Taylor-"

"Don't be," you say, a little more harshly than you intended. "Don't be," you say again more gently. "You haven't done anything. You've been a good girl. Don't ever think I'm mad at you for something outside your control, okay?"

"Okay," she says hesitantly. "I really am sorry, though. I wish she wasn't coming over so you could come here now."

"Mmm." You make a noncommittal noise. As much as you appreciate the thought, you wouldn't want Madison's father to be unable to invite his friends over for lunch just so you could fondle Madison without feeling uncomfortable around Emma. That would be awful of you. "It's really fine, Madison," you say gently. "I'll just do some work until I can get Dad to drop me off around two, okay?"

"Okay," she mumbles. "I'll see you at two then."

As you hang up the phone, you tighten your hand around it and let out a long sigh. You wish you weren't paranoid enough to think it, but as soon as Madison had mentioned Emma, you'd wondered
if she'd manipulated things to try and get herself in a position to see you. Again. You can't dismiss the thought as ridiculous, because that's exactly the kind of thing she'd try.

Shaking your head in annoyance, you brush past Dad on your way again, almost causing a piece of toast slathered with jelly to fall to the floor. You hastily rebalance the plate on the bench, giving him a perfunctory "Sorry" as you head over to the computer and boot it up. At least doing some research might calm you down, you think to yourself with an annoyed pout.

Indeed, doing some research had born fruit.

In your notebook, you'd written separate sections for each of the capes you'd looked up. Originally, you'd tried to write the information down as you'd found it, but the pages you'd scribbled information down on quickly became an incoherent mess. Instead, you'd clearly delineated where each section began and ended so you could refer back to it quickly.

You'd started with the cape you needed to know the most about: Rune.

**Rune**

You already knew that Rune is a Brotherhood cape, and that she's one of the primary people responsible for the current state of Winslow, but that's as much as you'd known. Now that you've spent some time researching it- well, you're pretty glad that you did. It would have been nasty to run into Rune without knowing what she's capable of.

Rune is, as far as you can tell, a younger girl. You think this partially because of a short tangent in Rune's thread on PHO, quickly cut short when a moderator stepped in and cut the discussion short, and partially because of the girl's height and stature. She didn't carry herself as an adult did, walking with that cocky arrogance common to so many of the Brotherhood teenagers in Winslow. In fact, if you had to guess, you'd guess that Rune might even be a bit younger than you, although that's pure speculation. You kind of hope so, though.

Rune is, apparently, one of the Brotherhood's biggest pushers- the people who actually go out and interact with people, trying to push them into following the Brotherhood's goals and get embroiled in with them. A lot of the Brotherhood's capes don't have powersets suitable to this, as their powersets are either too combat-focused or won't let them hold out for long enough to make an escape; they mainly rely on a small subset of their overall cape force to do that, and are forced to rely on unpowered members of the gang to a significant extent.

She's also a cruel person. There are several mentions of her having personally assaulted people, both minorities in the Bay and members of the Brotherhood. The minority bashings all seem to have been fairly chaotic- likely done on impulse, a PRT Agent on the board notes, crimes of opportunity- but the assaults on Brotherhood members sound painful. A woman in the thread, someone who claims to have gotten out from under the Brotherhood's thumb thanks to the Protectorate, claims that Rune likes to punish people who fail her. These punishments are often rather... cruel. Sometimes, they're as simple as beatings, usually reserved for when people lose substantial amounts of money or drugs under her watch. Other times, she likes to humiliate people. One person in the thread recounts a memorable instance in which a Brotherhood member was forced to hospitalize himself in order to get not one, but two dildoes removed from his rectum. Those, apparently, are saved for when people really irritate Rune. Physical punishment and humiliation all in one.
So far as the people on PHO can tell, Rune is able to telekinetically move objects. Weight may come into play on it somehow, as she seems to move heavier objects slower. Weight or size, but the general thread consensus is that it's weight, else the city would probably see her carrying around things like metal darts to take advantage of her capabilities. Sometimes, she uses her powers for offensive purposes, but just as often, she uses larger objects as transport, mimicking flight capabilities (something none of the city's Protectorate members had been capable of until Dauntless, a fact Rune takes full advantage of) or providing herself with mobile cover and shields. Not the kind of power you want to have to take on alone.

If you're going to fight Rune, you think, you're probably going to want Victoria along. Not just to help you by drawing fire without risk to herself, but also for her flight capabilities. Without her, you can't follow if Rune just drags a chunk of concrete up and flies away on it. You could try to run after her, but she has a lot more stamina than you do.

You briefly consider getting someone who has some form of ranged attack, as well. Closing in on Rune might prove problematic unless the person doing it is a speedster, as Rune's attacks are effective both at short and medium range. If Glory Girl is around to draw fire, and you have someone who can blast her from afar...

But then again, it might be best if you didn't fight her at all. You're not quite sure how you'd manage that, though. Maybe there's a way you can approach Rune without risking combat? That might not be the greatest idea in itself, though- you're pretty sure that the only ways to do that would be to either find out who she is outside of her cape identity and seduce her non-cape identity, or put yourself in the Brotherhood's eye in order to draw her out. Neither option appeals to you very much.

Iron Rain

Iron Rain is, of course, the Brotherhood's leader. You knew that much before you got into this. That's also the extend of your knowledge on her; you know she exists and leads the Brotherhood, and that's about it. Given the Brotherhood's influence in Brockton Bay, and in Winslow specifically, you need to correct that. You almost wish you didn't when you finally do.

Unlike her brother, Kaiser- someone else you'd tried to look up, but you hadn't had much luck in trying to find information about him; apparently, he likes to avoid the public eye- Iron Rain doesn't seem to care about keeping a low profile. She takes care to avoid killing heroes, with speculation in her thread being that she avoids doing so for fear of drawing in out-of-town reinforcements, but doesn't seem to show much reluctance in fighting off anything short of Brockton Bay's entire Protectorate or Lung himself. There are many, many videos demonstrating her powerset and attitude. She wears a full-bodied... what is essentially a set of plate armour, complete with a helmet that entirely conceals her face from anyone looking. It's vaguely reminiscent of a knight's armour, which weirds you out for a moment until you remember that of course she wouldn't think of herself as evil.

As expected of the Brotherhood's leader, Iron Rain is a very nasty and vindictive woman. Reports flood in constantly throughout the thread of Iron Rain encouraging prejudice against minorities or outright leading attacks on them. She pushes drugs through the city, some of the relatively harmless kind (such as marijuana) and some of the much more harmful kind (starting at crystal meth and working her way up the chain from there). She extorts businesses, and has been linked to several arson cases where businesses failed to pay her. There are sundry crimes on her list. Overall, she seems to be a very... okay, you'll say it; she's a bitch.
But she's a **deadly** bitch, and that's what has you scared.

Iron Rain's power seems similar to Hookwolf's, inasmuch as she's able to summon and control shifting masses of metal. That's about where the similarities end, though. Where Hookwolf summons metal over his own body and essentially uses it to "shift shape", Iron Rain is able to summon pieces of metal in the air, and even rain those pieces of metal down as she pleases. She's demonstrated some form of magnetic control, as she's shown herself to be able to control the direction and speed of the falling pieces of metal. She does seem to be limited in how fast they can go, and she doesn't seem to be able to make them rise in the air, but that hardly makes her any less deadly.

If you're going to face her in combat- well, you're not. There's no way you're ready for somebody as ridiculous as that. You feel like you'd need half the capes in the city on your team in order to tackle somebody who can, quite literally, rain death from above.

No, you think you'll stay right the hell away from Iron Rain for the time being. If you encounter her, try to stay under cover as much as possible, and just get the hell out of there as soon as possible.

**Vista**

Vista is somebody you've been a little bit interested in for a few months now. Not because she's a powerful cape, although she is that, and not because she's an experienced one, although she is that, too. No, you're interested in Vista because she's just so **pretty**. She reminds you of Madison, in that you don't think you'd mind staring at her for hours on end.

You're pretty sure that Vista is the youngest member of the Wards in Brockton Bay, although you can't confirm that. She's definitely the shortest, though, and the most petite. Her costume almost seems designed to obfuscate her age somewhat, but she's been active as a cape for too long for that to really be effective. There are images of her as a cape stretching back for **years**, which actually vaguely horrifies you a little. She looks to be younger than even Rune did, although you're pretty sure she's at least a teenager now, if not far into her teens. Thirteen or fourteen. If she's thirteen or fourteen now, and she's been in the Wards for literally years, then she must have been as young as nine or ten when she first joined. And her time in there hasn't been entirely inactive, although from everything you can see, the older members of the Wards and the Protectorate members have made every effort to keep her out of combat where they can.

It makes you feel a little perverted to admit it, but Vista really is an attractive girl. Your hands shake a little as you consider her. She actually is really young. The knowledge that you're seriously considering seducing someone who's barely into her teens... turns you on, actually turns you on quite a lot, but makes you feel a little queasy too. At least, when you look at a picture of Vista from two years ago, it doesn't stir the same feelings inside you. You're not sure you could handle being attracted to a prepubescent girl. Even if you'd never act on it either way, at least you can reassure yourself with that thought.

Your feelings on Vista are a little complicated, you have to admit. There's a faint thread of revulsion in your stomach even now, even acknowledging that she's actually in her teens, but it's drowned out by faint feelings of lust- and, more strongly, feelings of protectiveness. What kind of fucked-up person could hurt a child, even if that child is a cape? Then you check yourself. Do you really have any room to talk, considering the thoughts you're having about her?
Either way, you shelve your notes on Vista at that, stomach roiling with nerves. Maybe, maybe that's another thing you can just... push off for future Taylor to deal with. Not dealing with being attracted to Vista sounds like a perfect idea to you right now.

Parian

Parian is somebody you're interested in for an entirely different reason to your interest everyone else. It feels a little weird even to you that you have to make a distinction between people you want to seduce and people you actually have a legitimate interest in you, but it's not a bad kind of weird. Just the same kind of weird you experience when Dad accidentally buys low-fat milk instead of full-cream milk. Like you'd gotten used to something and had it suddenly change on you.

Parian is quickly becoming a famous name in Brockton Bay. The Bay doesn't have a lot of rogues in town; most of them tend to head to the bigger towns like New York, where they have substantially larger client bases and there are a lot more heroes in town to help protect them. Nobody is quite sure why Parian set her business up here, but the mayor was certainly grateful for it when she announced her decision.

Her store's website advertises her as a fashion designer and clothing maker. There's an entire separate page on her prices for costumes for parahumans, but you're not particularly concerned about those at the moment- you don't have anyone you need costumes for, and you're pretty sure any prices that justify making an entire page for themselves are so far beyond your reach that looking at them will depress you. No, you're interested in something rather different.

It's not a use you would have considered, but a part of the rogue's powerset involves the control over thread- at least, as far as anyone on PHO can tell. You'd think this would limit her to just sewing, but there are applications of that that you hadn't considered. For example: lace. The problem with the production of lace has never been the production of the raw materials, just how difficult it is to actually make the lace. Once upon a time, people had used needle and thread to sew lace. Nowadays, it's usually done via machine, but it doesn't usually end up as good as it used to look. Parian's power, however, is perfect for exactly that. And, utilizing exactly the same thought process you immediately leapt to, she moved on to creating the perfect items with her lace production capabilities; that is, lingerie for women.

You don't click on the page to open it, because you happen to know that one of the models Parian utilizes for her catalogue is Emma, after a lengthy negotiation with Alan regarding the legality of minors modeling underwear. Your feelings about Emma are complicated enough- you don't need to feel the urge to masturbate to images of her in lacey lingerie on top of all that.

Her address is listed prominently on the website, though, ostensibly so customers could physically visit her shop and view her wares. You write the address down in your notebook, and make a physical note, letters thick and underlined- Take Madison to visit Parian!

You're forced to close your research hurriedly when you eventually look at the time and see the clock reading twelve past one. Hurriedly rushing to the bathroom, you yank a towel out of the hallway closet as you go, ignoring Dad's bemused expression as you run past him.

One quick shower later, you run out of the bathroom clad in nothing but a towel and skid over to
your room, searching madly through your underwear drawer. So much of your underwear is so boring. And by so much of it, you mean all of it. Dad buys your clothes, and you're not going to ask him to buy you sexy lingerie. That's weird. In the end, you throw on just a pair of green panties, then hurriedly get dressed in the first t-shirt and pair of jeans you can find so you can run out to the living room, where Dad just raises an eyebrow at you.

"Dad!" you say urgently. "Can you drive me over to Madison's please?!"

He gives you a slightly alarmed look. "Sure," he says cautiously. "Is there something wrong, Taylor?"

You shake your head wildly, your hair spinning around and throwing little droplets of water everywhere. "No, nothing's wrong, I just told her I'd be over at two and I lost track of time. I'm going to be late, come on, come on!" You run over and try to tug on his wrist to get him to stand up further, but he just grins at you and continues to sit passively, watching your efforts to get him to stand up. "Come on, Dad!" you whine.

He chuckles and stands up. You let go of his wrist and pout at him from behind as he ambles slowly over to the kitchen and retrieves his car keys from the fruit bowl in there, then drags his feet out to the car. "Daaaad," you moan when he's halfway there. He just throws you a cheeky grin and pokes his tongue out at you when he finally gets in the car. You hurry over and climb in the passenger seat beside him, just he turns and raises an eyebrow at you.

"What took you so long, Taylor?" he asks. You just groan and let your head fall against the console of the car.

You arrive at Madison's house a little after two, looking anxiously around to make sure that Alan's car isn't still here. It's not, but you do notice Madison looking down at you through her window in her bedroom on the second floor as you approach. She disappears, and a few moments later, the door swings open, revealing your girl standing behind it.

Throwing out a quick "Thanks Dad!" behind you, you hurry over and pull her inside, closing the door behind you. There, you pull Madison into a tight hug, ignoring Terry standing behind her and making gagging noises as he pretends to vomit over the floor.

"Ew, girl hugs," he says with a shudder, and toddles off towards his bedroom.

Eventually, you pull back from Madison so you can peer down at her and see her shining eyes. "Come on," you say, and you grab her hand and lead her up to her bedroom.

There's a lock on Madison's door that wasn't here last time you were here. When she sees you looking, she blushes and looks down, but you can see she looks a little proud of herself. "I put that on there," she says proudly. "In case, um. Well, so nobody can walk in on us."

You pat her ass gently. "Good girl," you purr, and lock the door before you pull her over to the bed. She follows you over, still blushing heavily, and attempts to pull herself into your side, but you hold her away and look her over critically. She's dressed in a skirt today, which is good, but she's dressed in a t-shirt. Less good.

"Take your shirt off," you instruct her. She immediately obeys your command, folding the t-shirt nicely and placing it gently on the edge of her bed. "Good girl. Now, where do you keep your shirts?" She points silently at a dresser over against the far wall, a mammoth thing easily twice the
size of your own. You're a little jealous. "Good girl," you praise her again, and she preens a little. "Now, I'm going to find you a shirt more suited for you today. Is that okay?"

She nods, giving you a happy smile. "Yeah, okay," she agrees readily. "If you want me to wear something I will, that's fine."

You nod sharply. "Good," you say. "Take off your bra and panties while I find you a shirt."

Madison has a lot of shirts, but it's not hard to find one that suits your needs. You only need to find one that buttons up at the front, after all. When you turn back, you find her neatly folding her panties atop her shirt; when she's done with that, she sits straight back up, revealing that she's also taken her bra off. Her nipples are pebbling in the cold air, and you have to resist the urge to go and warm them up for her.

You walk over and reward her with a kiss, which she returns eagerly, then step back and hand her the shirt. She takes it and begins pulling it on, but when she moves to the first button, you grab her hands and pull them to the side. Quickly, you turn and make sure- yes, you'd remembered to lock the door- and kneel in front of her, raising yourself high enough that you can still almost look her in the eyes even from your seated position. She shifts, and you lift her skirt and bend your head to gain visual confirmation that, yes, she has taken her panties off.

"Good girl," you praise her again, and give her another soft kiss. She smiles, and you lean forward and press one swirling lick to each of her nipples before you raise yourself and sit beside her on the bed again, loving the way she shivers as the cold air hits her nipples after you're done with them.

"Now, I'm going to tell you to do something. If it's not okay with you, you can tell me no now, and I'll drop it. And if you're ever uncomfortable doing this in future, all you need to do is tell me so and I'll understand, okay?"

She nods hesitantly, licking her lips. "Um, okay," she mumbles. "I probably- okay."

You nod, pressing a kiss to her neck. You're glad she didn't actually say that she probably won't say no to anything you ask of her. You love that she's so submissive towards you, but you don't want her to follow everything you say religiously. Her desires are just as important as your own here. If she would feel uncomfortable doing something, regardless of how much you want her to do it, it's important that she knows that she can tell you no.

"Good," you murmur. "Now, every time you know we're going to be alone like this in future, I want you to take your panties off beforehand, and show me that you've taken them off when we're alone. Is that okay?"

She considers it seriously for a moment. Then she licks her lips. "I don't mind," she says quietly, "but, um, would you mind if I only did that when we're at home? I don't think I'd be comfortable not wearing panties in public. Somebody might see."

You nod. "That's okay. Thank you for agreeing to do that for me, Madison."

Madison nods, then edges towards you, pouting slightly. You recognize the sign for what it is, and slip your arm around her, drawing her in to a hug that she happily settles into.

Before now, you hadn't actually put a lot of thought into what you were going to do at Madison's. Casting your eyes over her room, your eyes fall on two things; she has a small TV in her room, complete with... you're not sure what console that one is, but you think it's one that plays DVD's too;
and she also has a narrow bookcase, filled with what you recognize as trashy young adult romance novels. You level a soft glare at the bookcase and turn away before you offend your girl by insulting her taste in books.

"Okay, Madison," you murmur. "What movie do you want to watch?"

She hums quietly. "You can put on anything you want. I don't mind as long as you cuddle me through the whole movie," she bargains.

A soft chuckle escapes from you. "Sure, I'll take that deal," you say, and reluctantly release Madison so you can walk over and browse through the DVD's she has stacked off to the side of the small TV.

She doesn't have much of a variety- some romances, some comedies, some rom-coms, and- you turn to her with a raised eyebrow when you pull out three DVD's, a copy of each of the three Rambo movies. She just shrugs at you in response, causing some interesting movements in her chest that distract you from questioning her further.

More out of morbid curiosity than anything, you put in a copy of the first movie- First Blood- and pull Madison down on the bed so you can spoon her from behind.

In the end, the movie isn't really very exciting. Madison seems to like it more, although at times you have trouble telling whether she's hissing in excitement or hissing because you're playing with her breasts throughout the movie. You make a game of finding out, but you're pretty sure she figures it out, because as soon as you start gently tugging at her nipples through all the action scenes, she stops hissing entirely and just bites her lip. Which is fine. There's something incredibly sexy about Madison biting her lip.

Eventually, you're forced to reluctantly let go of Madison's breasts so you can get up and put the second movie in. You hurry back as quickly as you can once it starts, carrying the remote so you don't have to wait over there and hit play like you did the first time. While you wait for the movie to load and play through the opening segment to get to the title screen, you idly amuse yourself by gently rubbing the remote between Madison's breasts, allowing the buttons of the device to rake over the flesh there.

Finally, you can hit play and put the remote down. Playing with toys is fun and all, but there's something so much more satisfying about being able to actually feel your girl's body with your hands. Especially her breasts, which are almost perfectly sized for you to hold in your hands- when you cup her breasts in your hands, they're sized just right for you to be able to run your thumbs all over her nipples and areola as you like. It's amazing. You're able to content yourself through the entire duration of the movie just playing with them.

When the movie finishes, it's not quite time for you to go home yet- only a little after five thirty, and Dad won't expect you to ring until around six. Which is fine; as soon as you hit stop on the movie, Madison rolls around in your arms and presses a hot kiss to your mouth. Somehow, you're fine with that. You're even fine with raising your shirt as high as it'll go when she nervously tugs at it, seeking permission; she sighs happily at that as she rests her nude chest against your own and waits pliantly for you to kiss her.

You get so embroiled in your make-out session that you almost miss the clock hitting six. Unfortunately, you have to break away for air at one point, and you see the watch on Madison's wrist as you grab her hands and hold them above her head. Not that you move to stop immediately- you go back in again, and then again, spending just a few more minutes exploring Madison's mouth.
with your tongue.

Worth it, you think smugly when you finally pull away and tug your shirt back down. By the dazed expression on her face, Madison obviously agrees.

Madison is, thankfully, coherent enough to remember to take off the new shirt and put her old bra and shirt back on before the two of you head down; you're pretty sure you would have forgotten that, otherwise, and had her wander down in her new shirt. How embarrassing. You can't hide her mussed hair, though, and Rick gives you a knowing look, causing you to flush and shrink down in embarrassment as you pick up their phone and call Dad.

He doesn't arrive for another half an hour. You amuse yourself by kneeling down at the coffee table in the living room and watching Terry madly colour in what you're fairly sure is meant to be a tyrannosaurus rex, although you're not sure you remember them being quite this shade of hot pink in the documentaries you watched as a kid. Madison kneels down beside you and begins to colour in herself, a practice Terry clearly welcomes by the blinding smile he gives her.

When Dad finally arrives, you see him blinking in surprise at you. Your smile falls off your face. What? You hadn't been doing anything wrong.

Madison gives you one last hug goodbye, unseen by either of your fathers, before you head back home to your quiet house.

The air is still awkward between you and Dad when you wake up the next morning. Neither of you had broached the topic of whatever had caused that look on his face when he picked you up last night. You just chalk it up to one more way you've let him down and move on.

You have other things you need to focus on, anyway. Like Victoria.

Victoria meets you at the entrance to the bookstore as normal come noon on Sunday, scooping you up happily into a hug. You find yourself instinctively reaching for your power to search through her emotions and find out how she's really feeling about you and your relationship with her now, but you hold yourself back. It'd be nice to know what she feels about you, but... you've already manipulated her this far with your power. You'd like some of your relationship to be based on something real, even if her lust is manufactured. Wow, that sounds way more screwed up when actually said out loud.

You have to actively stop yourself from leaning up and claiming a kiss from the girl, reminding yourself that the two of you are in a public place. You're pretty sure she's in the same predicament, judging by the way her eyes keep flickering down to your lips.

"Come on." You take her hand, attempting to pull her forward. You're stuck for a moment, and you're viscerally reminded that Victoria is just... stronger than you can hope to be, but then she seems to hover off the ground just slightly, and suddenly it's no harder to drag her around than it is to drag Madison around. You do have to ignore the affectionate look she gives you as you drag her up the stairs, though.

The usual ritual unfolds; Victoria takes her heavy jacket off when the clock rings and everyone busies themselves taking items out of their bags, revealing her fetish outfit to you, but not to the rest of the table. Your hand immediately snakes its way down to her leg and up her skirt. You don't tempt
fate today by trying to lift the skirt to get a good look at her bare snatch- not in public, not in public, you keep reminding yourself; you'll just have to find a way to get her over to your house without your father being any the wiser soon. You do, however, immediately begin playing with her. She just spreads her legs a little wider, giving you easier access.

For the first time since you've started coming here, you turn to Victoria's book and try to actually pay attention to what everyone is saying. To your surprise, they're reading an entirely different book today- a book called Stardust. You've never heard of it before, which makes it a bit difficult for you to try and follow along with the conversation, but you give it a valiant shot- as best you can when your mind is half-focused on caressing a superhero's bare pussy in front of an unknowing crowd of her adoring fans, anyway. Honestly, you don't think anyone can blame you for being a bit distracted.

Now that you're actually paying attention, it's impressive how composed Victoria manages to appear. You can feel how wet she's growing as you play with her, but the only visible signs of what you're doing to her are a faint red tinge to her cheeks and the occasional soft gasp when you hit a particularly sensitive spot. Even people who look directly at her aren't able to tell what's going on. That's very impressive. Idly, you wonder how well she'd be able to hold on to her composure if you actually stuck your fingers inside her and fucked her in front of her fans. Would they be able to tell what was going on, or would Victoria be able to hold on and prevent herself from moaning or jerking around in the throes of an orgasm? Would she even care, or would the pleasure overcome her so far that she would beg you to continue even as people would inevitably take their phones out to record her?

Sadly, you won't be testing that today. Even if she'd let you, which you're not sure she would yet, the fantasy just isn't worth the problems that would ensue. At the very least, you'd lose the even greater erotic potential of chaining Victoria to you romantically while she's still dating her boyfriend.

If you ever need to break Victoria and her boyfriend up, though- well, there's an idea on how to do it.

You content yourself by just hanging on to Victoria's words, occasionally offering up your own thoughts on the book's technical writing when they talk about a page you can actually read, until the bell chimes two and everyone begins to pack up to head home. Once more, Victoria quickly shrugs her jacket back on and waits for everyone else to head home before gesturing for you to lead the way down, causing you to scowl a little. As though you need to be told to lead the way. She just chuckles a little, causing your scowl to melt into a scolding frown.

She doesn't actually let you lead her down the stairs, though. When you near the top, she pulls you back to her, pulling you close. Almost nose-to-nose.

"Need a lift today?" she asks softly. In response, you kiss her, grinning impishly when you feel her lips move into an annoyed scowl for a moment before she softens and kisses you back. Honestly, what did she expect, putting such tempting lips so close to you?

You part soon without even attempting to stick your tongue down her throat... more than once. You lick your lips, savouring the taste of her watermelon-flavoured lip gloss, before you reply. "If you wouldn't mind," you say, "but I actually need to go to the library before I go home."

"And so begins my life as a taxi," Victora sighs long-sufferingly. You stiffen and open your mouth to reassure her that you don't mean to demean her or her offer, but she just smirks at you when she sees it, and you snap your mouth shut. Well, you suppose you can allow her to verbally tease you this once. You did just spend two hours teasing her, after all.
You lead her down and outside, where she scoops you up in her arms again and flies you off to the library. You're tempted to kiss her again on the way there, but you refrain- there are too many people with cameras around, and while it's unlikely that anyone would be able to see what you're doing with her, let alone take a picture of it, you'd prefer not to gamble on that.

Eventually, she finds her way to an alley just outside of the library, in fact partly curling behind it. You note absently that she seems very familiar with this alley- she doesn't even bother to look where she's going before she descends- but before you can put much thought into it, she pulls you into a hot kiss of her own. When she pulls back, you're left feeling a little dazed until you see the impish smirk on her face; in turn, you dart forwards and press another kiss to her lips, then dance away with a teasing grin. She growls, but you just chuckle and jog out of the alley, knowing that she won't risk chasing you too fast where the public can see it.

She catches up to you, actually landing on the ground, when you make it out of the alley. The two of you walk up to the library, hands occasionally brushing against each other as you go. You're tempted to hold her hand, but- no, no, public issue. Man, this whole cheating thing is way more complicated than you'd thought it would be.

When you get in, you move immediately to the fantasy section. Victoria follows you along, looking a bit confused until you clarify, "I have a school assignment." Then she nods her head knowingly.

"What's it on?" she asks. "Maybe I could help."

"Uh..." You look around briefly, stalling for time. You see her smile out of the corner of your eye. "Uh, it's about how writers write about family!" Yeah, you immediately regret that one.

She hums. "Oh, is that so? Maybe I really can help you, then. I do happen to know a couple of excellent series where the author featured family ties very strongly. Maybe I could show you?"

"Oh, that'd be great!" your traitorous mouth says without your permission.

You and Victoria end up wandering the library for well over two hours, holding hushed discussions about your favourite series and what they're about. Victoria, you learn quickly, does not hold her book clubs just so she can bask in the idolization of her fans; she actually is very cluey about her books. "My sister reads them a lot," she informs you quietly at one point. "We don't have much in common, so I try to at least keep reading so we have something to talk about when she gets depressed."

By the time the library closes at five, you and Victoria are engaged in a lively discussion about the themes of one of the recent series imported from Earth Aleph, the Harry Potter series. You've never read it, but Victoria swears by it. "It has a weak ending," she tells you, "but the author is really good about setting up the book's aesthetic. It's probably the best fantasy world in any book I've read just for how it makes you imagine its world."

You nod along, content to just listen to her rambling on about this series as she casually flies you home. By the time she lands, you're actually a little interested in reading the series. Sadly, there's no way you could afford them- Earth Aleph imports are just way too expensive, and companies here won't receive publishing rights for at least another year or so until negotiations have gone through with the author.

Once she lets you go, you lean up to give her a kiss goodnight. She returns it, and surprises you by
being the one to brush her tongue against your lips first, not that you're complaining. You open your mouth and draw her tongue in, eagerly sucking on it for a few moments before she reluctantly disengages.

"Seeya later, Taylor," she grins, and with a wave, she flies off. You wave to her as she moves, then shove your hands in your pockets with a weary sigh.

Well, that was a fun- and productive- day. Unfortunately, all good things have to come to an end. You trudge home, mind already filling with plans for the week ahead of you.

In the end, your list of responsibilities just keeps on growing. You've got to tutor Madison, you're pretty sure you have a job now, you've got whatever this thing with Sophia is, you've got to try and keep Madison from worrying about your relationship, and now you've got to worry about your Dad and Emma, too.

There's only so long you can hide from them, though, and you're pretty sure that if you put that off much longer, it's going to bite you in the ass. Gah. Fine.

In the end, you decide to spend the next couple of days...
Interlude 1- Doctor Fitzpatrick

Some days, Kirk wishes that he'd gone into journalism, as his then-girlfriend had once urged him to do a good... god, it was over thirty years ago now. At the time, journalism had just seemed boring to him. "What good could I do the world as a journalist?" he'd asked Anne once. In retrospect, probably not the wisest thing he could have said to someone studying journalism herself. He's pretty sure that was one of the biggest factors that had played into the end of their relationship.

Medicine seemed so much more glamorous back then. He'd been lured in by the promises of respect amongst his peers, the size of the paycheque it seemed everyone in medicine got, the idea of physically helping people, day in and day out. Nobody had prepared him for the reality of it all. Nobody had explained to him how to cope with failing his patients. Nobody had sat him down and explained to him that sometimes, you just can't save a patient.

Even if someone had, though, there is nothing that could have prepared him for working in Brockton Bay.

Across the table, Amy Dallon sits behind her foster mother, glaring sullenly at her mother from behind her back. There are shallow bags beneath her eyes, and her face is sallow. Sleep deprivation, if he had to guess. Mild symptoms. Two to three days of eight to nine hours of sleep and the symptoms would clear up.

He turns his attention to Carol, who is still searching through her briefcase. In front of her is stacked the pile of forms he had just handed to her. Requisition forms and receipts, mostly; the documentation regarding how he was spending New Wave's funds. He has to fight down a queasy feeling at the sight of them.

Carol makes a small noise when she finally finds the sheets she's searching for. Kirk's eyes close in resignation when she pulls out a thick sheaf of papers headed with the stylized grey-and-blue logo of the Brockton Bay Parahuman Response Team. "Here you are," Carol says smoothly. "Director Piggot asked that I pass these on to you while I'm here."

He takes them and puts them to the side without looking at them, already knowing what they are. It looks like he won't be making it back home in time for dinner tonight, either. Hopefully Renee would forgive him.

"Thanks," he replies. "Is there anything else you need from me today?"

Instead of answering, Carol turns to Amy and jerks her head towards the office door. Amy seems to stifle a sigh as she climbs to her feet and exits the room, turning back to give him a conspiratorial eye-roll before she closes the door behind her. He raises his hand to his mouth and pretends to cough to cover his smile at the girl's antics.

Carol removes her briefcase from the table and puts it down to the side, pinning him with an intense look. Her eyes bore directly into his, not flinching away from his own returned gaze. After a moment, she relaxes. Kirk has passed whatever test of character she set out for him.

"How is Amy doing?" she asks quietly.

He blinks. "Here, or in general- never mind." Stupid question. "She's not doing as well as we'd
hoped. Barring her from practicing after seven has annoyed her, I think."

That doesn't seem to be what she wanted to hear, but apart from a displeased frown, she doesn't try to fight what he said. "I understand. Has she been socializing?"

He shakes his head for a moment, then pauses. "Most of the staff members feel she's unapproachable, but several of the volunteer staff have made attempts at talking to her," he recalls. "Amy has rebuffed most of them, but there are a couple who she seems not to mind too much."

Carol nods, her shoulders softening. "I'm glad to hear she's talking to someone, at least," she mutters. He almost shakes his head, but stops himself from saying anything about it. "And you? How has the hospital been treating you? Is there anything else you need?"

He shakes his head. "I don't suppose you've decided to reconsider my proposal for increased security measures around the clinics?"

She shakes her head. "I've considered it, but it's just not feasible. Between all the clinics, we'd be paying nearly a million out of hand, and two million a year beyond that to hire the additional guards. We're doing the best we can, but we don't have that kind of money to spare."

"Okay." There's no point in fighting it any further. It's never gotten him anywhere before now. "The PRT officers stationed in the lobby have done a lot to help ease patient concerns, so I'll have to thank Director Piggot for that." His hands twitch down towards the lowest drawer of his desk. "Nadia is liaising with the university, but most of their students prefer to go to the hospital directly for their work experience, but there's not much anyone can do about that."

She sighs. "Okay. I'll try to send Amy by a few more times this month. Thank you for trying to get your staff to talk to her. None of the other clinics have bothered," she adds with a sour twist to her mouth. "I'll be out of town next week, I've been hired to represent someone out of town. If you need anything, call Sarah or Neil."

He nods. "I will."

Carol doesn't get up immediately, instead resting her head on her hands. He refrains from offering her some painkillers for the headache he's fairly sure she's feeling right now. She never took well to people offering her medication. It reminds her too much of her husband, is his guess. Painkillers aren't antidepressants, but they're drugs all the same. He's seen how the side-effects have affected her family; he can't blame her for wanting to stay away from medication after that.

Eventually, she shakes her head and moves to stand. "Thank you, Kirk," she says, offering her hand out. Her grip is stronger than his own. He's pretty sure that that's meant to offend his masculine pride. Lucky he doesn't have much of that left.

"No, thank you, Brandish," he says seriously. He refrains from saying anything further. The more he talks, the more she will draw him into saying.

She flickers a half-smile at him, then turns. Her stern and reproving mask is already sliding back onto her face by the time she turns completely away from him.

He waits until she's gone, her dry "Come on, Amy" hanging in the air between them as Panacea stumps after her foster mother, scowling at everything and everyone, before he allows his own sigh to escape him.
What a mess.

He waits for a few minutes, just in case she forgot anything and comes back in, before he pushes his chair back and opens the bottom drawer of his desk. He ignores the bottle of whiskey sitting in there, resisting the temptation to break a five-month streak of sobriety, and pulls out the thick bundle of papers in there. Placing them on his desk, he pulls out his pager and hits a few buttons.

After shuffling papers around his desk for a few moments, Harry finally walks in, smoothing down his wig. The kid's been obsessed with it ever since the chemotherapy was successful, despite how the platinum blonde of the wig clashes with his dark skin. "Yes, Doctor Fitzpatrick?" he asks.

Kirk silently hands the stack of papers over to the boy, trusting him not to read them. Not that it mattered- the boy already knows that it's the unedited version of the papers he'd just given to Carol.

He'd once thought it'd stop stinging so much to do this, but he can still feel the shame of betraying New Wave's trust.

"Tell Lung he'll be getting his money this month, too," he says quietly.

He hates lying to them. But he's a doctor, and his job is to ensure the safety and well-being of his patients. If that means lying to a hero and making deals with a gang to keep the Empire out of his hospital, then he can live with that.

His hand twitches down to the lowest drawer of his desk again.
"They're back again."

Matt looks up from the computer, glancing out the window at the two girls who were just walking into the library hand-in-hand. They disappear deeper into the library, walking out of sight of the office windows and moving to one of the tables placed in a cozy place behind the stacks.

"Huh," he grunts. "Four weeks now. Good for them, I guess."

"I think it is." Jerry grins at him, hands still busy folding a sheet of protective plastic over one of the new books. Matt is briefly fascinated by the light shining from the man's bald head over the dividing screen between them, separating their workspaces from each other- and, more importantly, hiding the TV and DVD player they had stashed back there from prying eyes. "Good to see someone's getting some use outta the place. Might get them outta this shithole and into a place worth something, you know?"

He shrugs. "Not my daughter, not my problem," he replies. He does pull the register over to him and begins filling out the attendance sheets, though. Attendance to these after-school sessions is sparse enough that he can't afford to miss a single participant. Hard enough to get Blackwell to agree to pay the two of them to stay after-hours when there's only five people who attend them regularly. She'd probably just cut the hours entirely if he didn't mark down two of the five.

His computer chimes, drawing his attention to a notification on one of his taskbar icons- his email program. He groans when he opens it to find it's from Blackwell again. Another notification that the Wards bitch is going to be conducting one of her "regular searches" of the school's facilities over the week. The library is scheduled to be looked over... on Wednesday, apparently. Not that the girl actually does it as regularly as Blackwell claims- it's just another one of the tools she likes to use to try and keep everyone in line.

"Hey, Larry," he calls over his shoulder. "Blackwell says Stalker's gonna be doing another sweep of the library on Wednesday. Might want to get Kev to move his stash." The bald man lets out a barking laugh. "God, that's what, the third one this month?"

"Second." He shakes his head. "One before that was at the end of last month. Still a pain in the ass, though."

"Yeah, you're tellin' me." Larry lets out an aggravated puff of air. "Kid's gonna move his stash if we keep makin' him move his stuff like this. Who're we gonna get our supplies from then?"

Matt shrugs. "There are plenty of dealers around the place," he reassures him. "I've been thinking of trying to find another dealer anyway, since Kevin keeps jacking up his prices."

"Dunno about that." The man tears a piece of sticky tape off the roll, placing it down on the final loose bit of covering on the book and triumphantly placing it in the completed stack. "From what he's been sayin', doesn't sound like there're many dealers around still gettin' a good supply goin'. Brotherhood's been havin' some issues with the ABB again, Lung keeps hittin' their suppliers or something."
Matt rolls his eyes in response to that. "So get another supplier," he returns. "Or not, I don't care. Fuck, whatever, prices'll fix themselves eventually. Just get Kev to move his stash so he doesn't get taken out like Oliver did, yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Larry replies dismissively. "Fuck, this is annoying. Wish Rune'd pop that bitch a good one already."

Unseen by Larry, his eyes narrow at that, actually offended. "Oi," he shoots back, trying to keep the annoyance from leaking into his voice. "Get off it, dude. You know she's doing our kids a favour keeping them away from this shit."

"Fuck," Larry says reluctantly, annoyance clear in his tone. "Yeah, god, fine, yeah, don't want Rico anywhere near this crap. Still a pain in the ass for us, though."

"Won't argue with that." Matt turns his concentration back to the email, ignoring whatever inane crap Larry's spouting now. He casually turns his head to check that Larry's still behind the divider, then hits the 'New E-Mail' button and types in an email address from memory.

Hey, it's Matt. Got Kevin to move his stash tomorrow as requested. Olivia's given him detention, so he should be up here between second and third. Cameras are set up if you can't make it. Hope this helps.

Hitting 'Send', he leans back in his chair and cracks his knuckles. "There we go," he replies, satisfied. "Told her Wednesday's all good for us. Work for you, Larry?"

There's the soft clump of another book being placed on the completed pile. "Yeah, sure. Ain't like we got much else to do, huh?"

Matt chuckles. "Well, I dunno about that. Yvette's brought me back some new DVD's from her trip up to New York. Ever heard of a movie called Transformers? Apparently a big thing over in Aleph. Cars that transform into fucking huge robots or some shit, blowing shit up all over the world."

"Huh." Larry sounds thoughtful. "Sounds like my kinda movie then. Guess it'll give us somethin' to do tomorrow after we finish cataloguin' these books, yeah?"

Matt's eye is caught by another email flashing on his computer, marked as being from '. He checks again to make sure Larry's still occupied putting covers on the books before pulling it up.

Your message has been received and approved. It has been sent on to the appropriate parties. A copy of your message has been sent to Director Piggot of the Brockton Bay Parahuman Response Team for archival and review purposes. Thank you for your contributions to our efforts here in Brockton Bay.
- Agent Daniels, PRT Identification Number 22147.
Do not reply to this email. If you have any further inquiries, please contact the Parahuman Response Team on one of the phone numbers provided.

"Yeah," Matt replies. "Sounds good, Larry."
Monday morning rolls around, bringing with it another wave of frost. The footpaths are slippery when you go for your jog that morning, forcing you to pick your path carefully so you can avoid slipping and falling painfully on your butt. Again. You've done that one too many times before.

The chill in the air does a good enough job at waking you up that you're not feeling tired by the time you stumble back home at seven, at least. Admittedly, you're pretty sure that your fingers are actually frozen now, and you're probably going be nursing your left hand for the rest of the day after you go to pick up your cup of coffee and realize it's actually really freaking hot, but it's almost worth it.

Still, even after showering and changing into your school clothes, you still feel half-frozen. You slide a jacket on over your clothes. It helps somewhat, but not as much as you'd like. At least the bus has a functioning heater half the time.

When you arrive at school for the day, nearly ten minutes earlier than normal (the bus driver was grumbling the whole time about someone called 'Will'; you're pretty sure they have a new boss who's pushing them to get to their routes on time) you're back to freezing your butt off. Winslow does have a heating system, but it's not perfect. It works about half the time during the day, and it's only really the classrooms that get warm. The hallways always end up freezing. Everyone just rushes through them as fast as possible to get to their next class.

The good thing about being so early for once, you discover, is that Madison doesn't have enough time to open your locker and slip your lunchbox inside before you can sneak up on her. The bad thing about that is that you're pretty sure she messes up your lunch when she shrieks and tosses your lunchbox in your locker after you slip your arms around her. But you find it hard to care about that, because- "Oh my god, Maddie," you exclaim. "How are you so warm?"

She relaxes after hearing your voice, turning around to look at you and wrap her own arms around you. The hallways are clear enough this early in the morning that it should be safe to hug for a few minutes, you decide. "I just wear warm clothes," she declares against your neck. "Like all not-silly people do."

You don't even care that she just called you a silly person. "No, but seriously, you're so warm," you say, amazed. "You're like a little space heater. I want to drag you around with me all day."

Her face heats up against your neck. You're not even a little ashamed.

"That might be hard," she says, "but I'll do my best and be a good little heater for you at lunch if you want."

You laugh quietly against her ear, causing her to redden even more. Interesting. "I'll make sure to hold you to that," you tease her. "I'll wrap us both up in your jacket so we can be even warmer."

She gasps. "Can you actually do that?!" she exclaims. "Taylor, if that's possible then we have to do that one day, okay?"

You laugh again, and she gives you an adorable smile. Your heart does a little flip, and you can't stop yourself from leaning down to give her a little kiss on the nose right there in the middle of school. Her face flushes, and she grins at you even wider. "Maybe one day," you assure her. "I'll
take you out somewhere nice and private, and it'll be cold enough that we'll have to share my jacket. Might be a tight fit, though, we'll have to take our shirts off first so we can make sure we both have enough room in there...

She's blushing so hard even her neck is turning red. Her expression is a little dazed as she tells you, "Taylor, this needs to happen."

"Okay," you agree easily. "If you want it, then I'll make it happen." You don't think you actually have a jacket large enough, but you're starting a new job tomorrow morning. You'll just make sure that's one of your first purchases. It's a weird fantasy for her to get hooked on, but you've had weirder, and if she gets off on it, then you don't see a reason not to do it for her.

She nods and tucks her head back against your collarbone. "Good," she murmurs. Then she stiffens and half-turns back to your locker. "Oh no, I think I ruined your lunch," she gasps.

"It's fine," you tell her. "I have something more delicious to occupy myself with now anyway." And you give her a quick lick on the neck to make it clear what you're talking about. She shivers, but still looks sadly at your locker.

"I spent so long on that brownie," she says mournfully. You chuckle and give her a quick kiss on the neck before reluctantly releasing her from your arms. Even more reluctantly, she lets you go, allowing you to take a step back and away from her.

"I'll see you in class, Maddie," you tell her. She nods, looking a little depressed. You're immediately tempted to step forward and wrap her in your arms again, but this time, you actually have to refrain.

At least it doesn't take long for class to arrive, less than twenty minutes. Madison greets you at the door with a thrilled little hug and allows you to drag her over to your seats, where she cuddles up to your side. The teacher rolls his eyes when he sees the two of you again, but he just lets out a long-suffering sigh and ignores the two of you. He must have something more important occupying his mind. It's nice to have your own little personal heater through the class, and Madison definitely doesn't mind you holding on to her. With Sophia sitting behind you, nobody dares say anything about the two of you in here.

Unfortunately, first period doesn't last forever, and you're eventually forced to let go of your little heater. She pouts at you as the two of you are dragged off to your next class, where you're forced to sit and freeze your butt off again.

Okay, maybe not freeze it, but damn it, it's just not warm enough now.

This uncomfortable state of affairs lasts until fourth period, where the presence of Sophia beside you is enough to drag your attention away from the frigid temperatures.

You're pretty sure that Sophia is actually taunting you. Ever since she was assigned to sit beside you, she's been wearing more and more provocative clothing every day you have Chemistry. It's a subtle thing- one day, her shirt was cut a little lower than normal, and the next day, she was wearing a skirt cut half an inch higher- but damn it, it's working. Every time you look at her, all you can see is the teasing glimpse of thigh disappearing up her skirt, the curved swell of her breasts, and the shape of her lips as she smirks at you. Damn it, damn it, you're going to have to concede this one to her—there's no way you can compete with her in the looks department, even if you started actually wearing skirts.
Idly, you wonder if there's a way you can lure her into a disused bathroom again. You want to get a proper taste of her, not some teasing kisses and nibbles that leave you as horny and unsatisfied as they do Sophia.

You're brought back to reality when she speaks. "You should probably pay attention to the lesson, Hebert." She smirks at you again when you blink, processing what she said.

You grin lecherously at her when you get the message. "But you're so much more interesting," you say in what you hope is a flirtatious manner.

She scoffs lightly, but she seems happy with your comment. "Yeah, trust me, I know that. It's actually pretty important today, though," she tells you. "I snuck a look at Knopf's lesson plan. She's got a group project planned for us."

"Ah." You slump down and lightly frown at her. "Well, fine. But if I have to pay attention now then you'd better give me something good to look at later."

Sophia crinkles her nose a little. Your scowl immediately falls off your face at the cute look. "Fine," she says crankily. "Just listen so you can get us both a good grade, Hebert." You raise an eyebrow at that- but, fine. If she wants to trade sexual favours for grades, well, you'll happily take that deal. She seems to realize the direction your thoughts take, because she rolls her eyes hard, but she doesn't try to take it back.

Sure enough, Mrs Knops does bring herself to stand in front of the class. "Good afternoon," she says calmly. "I have a project for you all today. It's a group project that I expect each of you to complete in your own time. If you need materials, see me after class. If for some reason you can't negotiate with your partner to meet after school, I've also booked the anteroom off the library after lunch each day. I expect you will need to work hard if you wish to complete your project during lunchtime."

It's not a particularly difficult project, you're glad to see. It's just a complicated list of questions about different reactions, referencing parts of the chemistry textbook most of the class hasn't read through yet. There's just enough of it that you can't reasonably expect to do it on your own- likely an intentional decision by Mrs Knopf, given her frequent complaints about students who don't work hard enough in her class. If you can't do it on your own, then quite a few students in here are going to have trouble completing it without working harder than they normally do.

This project does raise one sticking point, however.

Either you're going to have to sacrifice your lunchtimes with Madison, or you're going to have to invite Sophia over to your house. And you don't want to sacrifice your lunchtimes with Madison.

You sigh, resting your head in your hands. Damn it. And you'd had such a good day up until now, too.

"Right," you groan. "Sophia, do you have the time to do this project during lunch?"

She's already shaking her head by the time you finish your sentence. "Nope," she says. "Got track meetings tomorrow and Thursday, and I've got to see the principal on Friday. Only days I could do it are today and Wednesday."

"Damn it," you hiss. Briefly, you consider asking her if you could go over to her house, but- going over to Sophia's house? Placing yourself as Sophia's mercy? You toss that idea in the discard pile.
"Damn it."

"Hey, it's not that bad." Sophia knits her brow. "We can just go after school and do it, track doesn't start until five-"

"I tutor Madison until five," you interrupt her. "And she needs the help. Damn it. And the town library closes at six."

Sophia shrugs beside you. "So come over my house, or I'll head over to yours. It's not that big of a deal-"

"Not that big a deal?" you repeat, faintly incredulous. "No, I'm not doing that, Sophia. No matter how hot you are."

She stares at you. "Fucking hell, Hebert," she swears. "Don't do this to me. I need my grades to stay up."

You grit your teeth. Unfortunately, it's true, and you know it. Sophia is intelligent enough, but she's not the kind of student who works well in an academic context- like Madison. Back when they'd still been actively bullying you, one of the few measures of reassurance you'd had was keeping an eye on their grades so you could assure yourself that at least you had that over them. That was when you'd started staying up so late studying, so even when they sabotaged some of your assignments, you were still able to keep your grades up. Sophia isn't able to do that, though- she consistently gets C's and D's, with only the occasional B. An important assignment really could be enough to throw off her grade average.

"Shit," you hiss. "Okay. Okay, Sophia, fine. We can work on it over at my house. But- you can't- you have to do what I say there."

She stares at you for a moment. Her eyes dart over your face, as if she's searching for something. You're not sure if she finds it, but when she next speaks, her voice is softer. "Fine, I can respect that. Your house, your rules. But nowhere else. We're at school, or we meet in town, I do what I want. And if you ever come to my house, then you follow my rules, no complaints, no working around it, same as your house. Deal?"

You offer your hand. "Deal," you say firmly. You can live with those, you think. Besides- it's not like her restrictions matter. By the time you plan on going over to her house, Sophia is going to be begging to follow your rules. "When can you come over, then?"

She taps her fingers over her thighs. "I'll be busy today and tomorrow, but I should be free from seven from Wednesday on. That good for you?"


That afternoon, you head on over to the library with Madison. You'd spent a delicious lunch with Madison, eating a thoroughly stirred salad and a brownie that probably wasn't meant to be partially covered in balsamic vinegar. Okay, so maybe it hadn't been such a delicious lunch. You'd still spent the time with Madison, which makes it more than worth it.

Madison has a secretive smile on her face, as though she knows something you don't know. Madison
can't actually keep a secret from you for her life, so you're content in letting her hold on to whatever she knows for now.

Sure enough, when she sits down at the table besides you, she quickly pulls a rolled-up letter from inside her jacket. "Taylor!" she squeals. "Guess what, guess what! We had a surprise test in Home Economics, and I got my results back?"

"Oh?" you ask. Judging by her reaction, she's done pretty good. And, indeed, she has- much better than you thought she'd been doing, actually. She unrolls it in front of you, proudly displaying the read 'A+' scrawled in red marker up the top.

"It was pretty hard," she rambles, "but I managed to get it all down. It was all about cooking and stuff, which helped, but I wouldn't have remembered it all if it wasn't for you helping me as much as you have." She smiles sweetly at you, then leans over to give you an affectionate hug.

You take it a step further, and push out your chair so you can pull her up into your lap. She lets out a happy squeal as you hold her in place and pepper her face with affectionate kisses, scrunching her nose as your hair tickles her face. She holds her face up, non-verbally asking you for a kiss; you're happy to oblige.

When you part, you lean in and steal another one from her before speaking. "Good job," you praise her. She closes her eyes again, preening at your compliment. You give her a kiss, then another, then another. "But don't give me the credit here, Madison. You're the girl who was smart enough to learn this stuff."

She giggles and holds her face up for another sweet kiss. After you give it to her, she shakes her head a little, accidentally rubbing her nose against yours in the process. It kind of tickles. "I learned it, but it's only because you taught me, Taylor. Thank you, thank you."

You chuckle again. "A teacher's only as good as their student," you inform her. Then, before she can try and refute you again, you lean and deliberately place a kiss along her jaw, just beneath her ear. She shudders against you, her argument dying off as she sucks in a shaky breath. You place another kiss there, then slowly trail your lips down, leaving a trail of wet kisses down to her neck, then her collarbone, then her shoulder. You look up and give her a devilish grin as you continue kissing even lower on her body, kissing down the front of her shoulder, then over her chest; her eyes flutter as you tug on her shirt, then her bra, freeing one of her breasts for you.

It's risky, playing around in here like this, but she deserves a reward for all her hard work.

You kiss lower, suckling your way down her breast until you're able to take her nipple into your mouth. You tug on it a few times with your teeth, thoroughly enjoying the way she tries to hold her moans in, then release it so you can finally reach your actual goal. There, you begin pressing wet kisses all over the side of her breast for a moment, before you lean in and begin sucking on it, hard. She lets out an actual moan at that, then quickly clamps a hand over her mouth to prevent another one escaping her. You don't stop, though, continuing to suck at her breast until you're sure a bruise will form. Then, and only then, do you tuck her breast back into her bra for her and lean up to give her another kiss on the mouth.

There; you're pretty sure she'll be satisfied with that as a reward. Being physically marked by you, the soft pain a reminder of the fact that you've claimed her as your own- well, you think the heaving of her chest and the wetness on your thigh as you spin her around to sit facing the table tells enough of the story.
You can't resist one last little promise, though.

"Keep getting good grades like that," you murmur in her ear, "and I might not be able to stop myself from doing that every time." To punctuate what you're saying, you give her a little nip on the neck.

She turns her head, giving you a sweet little smile. "You promise?" she asks.

"Of course." You nip her neck again. "I'd want everyone to know that such a smart girl is mine, after all."

She turns back to her work. Her happy smile doesn't fall off for the rest of the day.

The start of the next day also happens to be the first day at your new job. You get up even earlier than normal so you can wash yourself and still catch the earliest bus there.

You're not even sure how you'd fallen into the job, not really. You'd mentioned to Doctor Fitzpatrick last week that you were looking for a job to help out with the family finances, and he'd told you that one of his friends ran a movie theater and was looking for a casual assistant to work around the area. He'd offered to bring up your name, and you'd accepted. The next day, you'd come home to a phone call offering you a trial position at the theater. You'd accepted, of course, but that was it- a phone call and a notification that you'd be starting today.

The owner of the theater turns out to be a haggard man in... his late fourties, you would guess. He's dressed in a tailored suit, but his beard looks like he hasn't trimmed it in a few days. That's even grosser than a normal beard. He introduces himself as 'Mr. Harding', but hurriedly excuses you, leaving you with vague directions to go clean the place up a bit.

The job itself isn't very exciting, but you didn't really expect it to be. Mostly, you walk around with a long-handed dustpan and broom, sweeping the floors and picking up the trash left over from a midnight screening last night. You arrive at seven, and you're done by eight. One hour's work, at ten dollars an hour, a generous rate. Two to three mornings a week, and afternoon work on Mondays until eight. Four to five hours a week. It's not great, but it's something- and it could potentially lead to more. Plus, discounts on movie tickets. Always helpful.

You're content enough with it, in part because nobody tries to speak to you- not that there's anyone to speak to you, there's only two other workers working right then and there are virtually no customers- and in part because the work is finicky enough to require you to actually pay attention. You have to get in behind chairs and up the stairs, you have to clean in the aisles and try and get gum off the handrails, and all other sorts of weird places. You're not sure why people leave this kind of rubbish behind, but they do.

Mr Harding is kind enough to let you use the restroom to change out of your uniform and into your school clothes when it hits eight. He shows you to a locker with a blank white sticker on it, and asks that you keep your uniform in there when you're not using it. He has a contract with a dry cleaner, and will get them dry-cleaned every Sunday, when the theater isn't open.

You're content enough with the job. It's not exciting, but it's good money for the hours, and keeps you busy.
There's a bus running between the theater and school, but school's close enough that you don't feel you need to worry about it. You just jog there instead, and make it just in time to see your regular bus pull up- and, yes, the bus is on time again. Huh.

You're actually in a pretty good mood, right up until the point you walk up to your locker and find Emma leaning against it. She sees you at roughly the same time as you see her. You're tempted to just turn and walk away, but- you have to get to your locker eventually, and she knows it. She's never been one to be scared of cutting the first few minutes of class, either. Shit.

You take a deep breath and try to square your shoulders as you move towards your locker. It's not a very successful attempt.

"Emma," you greet her flatly.

"Taylor," she replies. "It's nice to see you."

You can't help but roll your eyes. "Yes, well. Could you move, please? I need to get to my locker."

She doesn't move. "Actually, I was hoping we could talk," she says.

You look around the halls, taking in all the people surrounding you- there are at least seven or eight people in the halls. None of them are close enough to hear your whispered conversation, but, yeah, no."

She grimaces. "After school," she compromises. "We can meet up at your house- or, no," she corrects herself hurriedly when you scowl, "my house? No? The library- look, just pick a place," she says. There's a faint note of exasperation in her voice, but also a pleading note in there. "Please, Taylor."

You scowl, but-

- you can't put this off forever. You know you can't. You created this entire damned plan of yours to get the entire Trio down on their knees before you. Sure, you've adapted some, compromised some- you won't be forcing Madison to do anything like you'd originally planned for her to do any time soon- but there are aspects of that plan that are kind of vital. Emma being one of the Trio is kind of the most intrinsic one of those.

And, you know Emma well enough to know that she won't give up. When there's something that she wants, she reaches out and she takes it. The fact that you don't want to talk to her won't deter her.

"Fine," you say bitterly. "I'll call you this afternoon and tell you where we can meet up. Bring your wallet. I'm not paying for it."

"Okay." She nods resolutely. "Okay. Please don't back out on this, Taylor."

You sigh. "Just get away from my locker," you mutter.

You can't even have two nice days in a row, you grumble to yourself. Something always comes along to spoil your fun.
The restaurant you chose is a small one, not too far from your house. It's called 'Moretti's Dining'. When you were a kid, it was called 'Mama Moretti's'. At some point, the woman who ran the restaurant died, and her children renamed it to what it's called now.

It's a small, cozy restaurant. Dad's taken you out here before. The prices are low enough that the two of you can afford to go out a couple of times a year, usually for each of your birthdays. The food is good, the atmosphere is friendly enough, and it's in one of the better parts of the district you live in.

The waiter- a man in his very early twenties- recognizes you as you walk in, bringing a small warmth to your stomach. "Aha!" he greets you. His nametag tells you his name is Trey. "It is good to see you again, Miss..."

"Taylor."

"Miss Taylor. You're not with your father today?"

You shake your head, clutching the sleeves of your jacket together. "No," you say quietly. "I'm here to meet with, uh, a.. a girl. Emma. Emma Barnes. Is she here yet?"

"Hmm," he hums. "There have been a lot of girls coming in tonight. Can you describe her to me?"

"Um. She's got red hair. Around my age, pretty-"

"Yes, I see," Trey interrupts you. "Yes, I think I know who you're talking about. If you follow me, I'll show you where she's sitting."

He leads you through the restaurant, which is surprisingly crowded considering it's not even six. You draw your shoulders in more, trying not to draw any attention to yourself. Most of the people aren't paying attention to anyone beyond their own tables, but some of them glance curiously at you as you follow Trey in. You retreat further into your hood and shy away from them.

"Here we are," he murmurs eventually. He's led you to a table up at the back end of the restaurant, one with faux-bamboo dividers around it as though to provide the people inside with some privacy- or trap them inside. Instinctively, you take a step back, but then Trey steps aside, and you spot Emma inside. Your feet die, and your throat closes up. Trey seems to sense that something is wrong, because he hesitates from where he was standing just before, where he was beginning to move away as though to resume his job, and steps forward to clasp you on the shoulder. "Good luck," he whispers softly, a message for you alone. You watch forlornly as he strolls through the building again, casually weaving his way through a mess of toddlers with practiced ease.

You turn back to Emma, who's watching you with guarded eyes. She looks... like you imagine you do. She's wearing her own jacket, a heavy maroon thing with thick black buttons at the front. On her head sits a woollen beanie, and the hands clutched around what you think is a hot cup of tea are clad in thick black gloves.

But it's not her clothes that draw your attention. Reluctantly, you drag your gaze up to her face, taking in her expression. She looks... guarded, fearful. Similar to how you feel. Her eyes are sunken and bloodshot, as though she hasn't been getting enough sleep for the past few weeks, and she's barely wearing any makeup, just some lip gloss. You can't remember the last time you saw Emma without any makeup on.

You slip inside the booth to the seat opposite her. Her eyes watch you warily as you slide inside, and
her grip tightens on her mug.

"Hi," she says quietly.

"Hi," you reply. You wish you didn't sound hesitant and fearful saying it.

Neither of you says anything more for a few moments. Emma opens her mouth a few times as though to say something, then visibly bites back whatever she's going to say and closes her mouth, only to repeat the process seconds later.

Your hands start shaking beneath the table. You wish she'd just say whatever she wants to say. Let you get out of here. Let you run away. Again.

But instead of saying that, you just clench your jaw and dig your hands into your thighs.

Before you can help yourself, your power snaps out, settling over Emma's mind. You quickly try to reel it back, but it's uncooperative. It's a strange feeling, like your power is mentally dragging its heels.

Or, no. You can't blame your power for this one. It's not your power that wants to stay there. It's you. You hate not knowing what she's feeling- no, that's not right. You just... You want, you need to know what she's feeling. You can't- you can't sit here, right across from Emma, and just trust that she's not going to hurt you. You don't- you can't trust her like that.

It's a double-bind situation. You can't sit here, not knowing what she's feeling. But you can't use your power on her, either. You can't trust her because she might be toying with you, but you can't not trust her, because if you use your power to verify that and it turns out she is, you... you can't trust yourself. You don't know what you'll do.

(Yes you do. You just can't admit defeat to yourself. Can't admit that you'd rather run away and cry than admit that Emma beat you, again. Can't admit that you're not sure what your power will do if you're using it in a situation like that, what effect it'll have on her if you use it when you're stretched out to breaking point.)

You pull your power roughly back, before you can get a taste of what she's feeling. There are other people around, you tell yourself. She can't do anything here.

There are other people at Winslow, too.

"Do-" Emma says, then stops, shock spreading over her face, as though she's shocked that she managed to say anything. "Do you want a drink? There's tea, if you-"

"I don't drink tea any more," you interrupt harshly. You haven't drunk tea since Mom died. Emma should remember that. She remembered enough of the other little details about you.

Emma pauses, then subsides. "Sorry," she mutters. "There's coffee, too. Or juice, or milkshakes, or, I don't think they'll give us any wine, but-"

"Just water." You shake your head briefly, trying to interrupt her flow of words. "Water's fine."

"Right." She stares at you for a moment, a forlorn expression briefly making its way over her face before she turns away from you and waves a waiter over. You're left waiting for a minute or so, the
nearest waiters busy with other tables already, but soon a waitress comes over- a different one, this
time, a girl named Violet. She's a cute girl. College-aged, most likely. She has a generous bust, with
a streak of her hair dyed violet, contrasting well with the rest of her platinum-blonde hair. "Could we
grab a drink of water, please?"

"Sure," Violet replies. "Anything else?"

You look over at Emma, who quickly drops her hand away from her own hair with a faint blush.
"Do you know what you want for dinner?" she asks you.

You're tempted to go for the most expensive things on the menu you can, just to spite Emma's wallet
a little, but you refrain. You need familiarity more than you need to win one over her right now. "Just
a bowl of minestrone," you tell her. "And some herb bread."

Emma nods as Violet writes down your order. "I'll have some insalata caprese," she instructs the
waitress. "And another side of herb bread."

"Sure," the waitress agrees easily. "That'll be about twenty minutes." With that, she turns and walks
away, giving you a great view of the girl's tight ass.

Emma coughs, and your attention is drawn back to the other girl, who is currently trying to hide an
annoyed expression. You can't hide the flicker of annoyance that flows through you, and the
annoyance fades instantly from her expression as she almost flinches back.

"Sorry," she mutters. "A bit of tea went down wrong." She hasn't touched her tea since you sat
down.

"It's fine," you mutter.

Awkwardness stews in the air between the two of you now that your distraction has left. You don't
attempt to say anything. What can you say?

Emma slowly retreats more into herself as the quiet stretches on. You let her.

A few minutes after Violet rushed off, another waiter- this time, a guy named 'Andrew'- comes over
with your glass of water. You take it, thanking him quietly, but don't take a drink. You just clutch the
glass tightly in your hands, watching the water inside ripple as your hands shake.

The silence stretches on for long minutes. Occasionally, you glance at the watch on Emma's wrist to
watch the time tick past, but that's as far as you dare to look at the girl.

Twenty-five minutes pass from the time the waiter brought your water over before you see someone
heading over, bearing a bowl and a large plate. It's Trey, you recognize when he gets closer.

"Alright, here we are," he says faux-cheerily when he finally makes it over to your table. "One plate
of insalata caprese for the fine lady over here, and one bowl of minestrone for the lovely lady over
here." You suck in a breath at the comment, but let it go in a sharp exhale when he just smiles
pleasantly at you, not a hint of flirtation in his manner. Good.

"Thank you, Trey," you mutter. His grin grows a little more genuine, and he pats you on the
shoulder as he stands and leans in.
"Don't stay quiet too long," he murmurs into your ear. "Women like that, you have to catch their interest and hold it if you want them to stay around." He winks at you as he stands, and you can feel heat burning in your cheeks.

Emma gazes between the two of you, a light frown on her face. "Thank you," she says loudly. "That's fine, thank you for bringing our meal." She straightens her posture, clutching her fork tightly.

Trey gives you another wink as he before he turns to walk away from you, then spinning back momentarily and mouthing the word "JEALOUS" in an overly-exaggerated manner. Your cheeks burn hotter, and you shrink back down into your chair. Yes, you already know that Emma is a jealous woman, does he really have to point it out so obviously where everyone can see?

You pick up your spoon and try to eat a mouthful of the minestrone, but your hands are still shaking slightly. Most of the minestrone just splashes out of the spoon and back into the bowl. Across the table, Emma gazes at you with concern written over her face, but she doesn't say anything. Good. Instead, she just pushes her plate of food over to the side, not caring at all about the meal set in front of her, and seems to gather herself for a moment. You drop the spoon into the bowl. You're not hungry any more.

"Taylor..." She closes her eyes and gathers her courage. "Thanks for coming today."

You scoff. "Yeah, well, you're not leaving me with much choice," you say a little harshly. You immediately regret it when you see her stiffen again and retreat into herself. Not enough to apologize, though.

She visibly has to gather her courage again. You can't help but feel a little impressed despite yourself. You're pretty sure that if you were in her position, you'd have just left. Not that you'd mind if she did. Then you could leave, too.

"Yeah," she says. "I wouldn't do this if it wasn't important, Taylor. You know that."

You don't know anything about her any more, but you refrain from saying that.

If anything productive is going to come out of tonight, you get the feeling that you're going to be refraining from saying a lot of things you really, really want to say to her.

"Okay," you say instead, not agreeing with her, but not fighting over it, either. "Well, I'm here. Say whatever you asked me here to say."

She shakes her head for a moment, then lets out a huge sigh. "Great," she mutters, quietly enough that you're pretty sure you aren't meant to hear it. "Isn't this going swimmingly. Alright." She says the last word louder. You're meant to hear this now. "I need to tell you that I'm sorry."

Anger rises in your gut for a moment, quickly fought down, shoved into that same place you've been shoving your simmering anger since you decided to talk to Emma this morning. You can't help but scoff again, though. "Yeah, right." You shake your head disbelievingly.

"Taylor..." On the table, you can see her hands beginning to shake. Absently, you note that your own are still shaking, harder this time. You're not sure whether you're shaking with anger or fear, now. Maybe both.

"No," you cut her off. "You're sorry? That's what you asked me here to say?"
She shakes her head quickly. "No," she says, an undercurrent of fear in her tone. "No, that's- I just- I needed to say that. First. I needed to say that first. In case you walked out. In case I don't get to say anything else tonight, I wanted you to hear that."

You subside somewhat, but don't say anything, choosing to pick up your glass of water and raise it to your mouth. It's difficult to swallow any with your hands shaking this badly, but you give it your best shot.

"Right," she breathes. "Well, um. I guess you want an explanation then, huh?"

You roll your eyes. "It'd be nice, yeah."

She nods to herself. "Right, um. Where should I start. Okay, um. Do you remember that summer you were away at camp? A year after your Mom died?"

You nod. How could you forget? That was the last time- well. You'd enjoyed that camp, enjoyed the chance to get away from Dad's misery for a while and go to a place where people legitimately seemed happy in your presence.

And then it'd all gone to hell when you returned.

"Good," she mutters. "That- It all started when, um. It all started... Sorry. It's hard to talk about this."

You give her a curt nod. It's hard to not feel sympathetic for her when she's blinking away tiredness from her eyes and cringing into herself.

"Do you remember that phone call?" she asks. "The last one we had, where I hung up on you. It started that night. I hung up on you because we'd driven into a bad part of town, and Dad started getting nervous when he saw someone had blocked our path with a dumpster..."

Over the next five minutes, neither of you touch your food as she haltingly describes a horrifying tale of what you can only assume was an attempted assault on her person when a group of gang members- she doesn't know what gang they're from, doesn't care- stopped their car and violently dragged her out. Her voice trembles, and at times falters entirely for long moments, as she describes how she felt through it all- the way she almost went into shock, the way her thoughts spun away from the situation, the way she could only distantly register the pain and the horror until they actually started in on her- and, yeah. You know exactly how she felt through all that. It's not how you'd felt when she'd dragged you out of that shower and shoved you in that locker, but, it's close. You know that helplessness, that fear, that sense of the world slowly slipping away from you as you struggle helplessly against it.

You look up at her. She stares back at you with a fragile expression. Her hands tug nervously at a frayed thread on the cuff of her jacket. There's a small pile of broken threads on the table in front of her.

Your hand is tight enough around your glass that you're afraid it might break.

You don't let go of it.

"Emma," you say evenly, "could you pass me the pepper?"
She pauses in her recollection of her tale, looking down at the table. The pepper is in easy reach. You could just reach out with your free hand and pick it up. She knows it. You know it.

She looks at you, at the rigid set of your shoulders, at your hand tight around the glass. You wonder, absently, what you look like. Do you look angry? Scared? Defensive? All of the above?

Emma lays a trembling finger on the pepper shaker and pushes it over to you. Your shoulders relax, just slightly.

"Thank you," you say, voice still carefully even. You don't pick up the pepper, though. You just let it sit there, your gaze focused on it. Your hands stop shaking quite so hard. "Keep going."

You can feel her looking at you, but you don't let your gaze rise from the jar of pepper. After a short pause, she picks up where she left off.

She goes on, voice going scratchy as she describes how she'd tried to fight them off, how she'd struggled and hit them and it was useless because there were more of them and they were bigger than her, stronger than her. She tells you- and, you note absently, it's only here that her voice regains some strength- about how it was only the intervention of a hero that had saved her- Shadow Stalker- and how Shadow Stalker had proceeded to attack the men assaulting her, how Shadow Stalker had broken them and driven them off and saved her.

"I stayed in my room for days after that," she recalls. "I was too- too terrified to come out. Mom tried to get me to come out, but I couldn't. I thought- it felt, I don't, I don't know-"

You help her out.

"It felt like everyone knew," you say. Your voice sounds dull, almost emotionless. You don't look away from the pepper shaker. "Like everyone could look at you and see what had happened. Like there's a mark on your body, and everyone could see it. Nobody got to touch you, but they made you feel helpless. Like they were in control, and they stripped that away from you, made you feel like a toy for them to play with, like you didn't matter. Only they're important enough to matter. Them and what they want. And every time you went outside, you could feel their eyes on you. You can feel them looking at you, judging you for not getting away. You hate it. You try to tell yourself, it isn't my fault. But you feel weak anyway. Worthless. Like every time they look at you, you're a victim all over again, and all you want to do is go back inside and hide."

You finally look away from the pepper shaker, looking at Emma instead.

Her face has paled. She looks stricken.

"I understand," you say as calmly as you can. "Thank you for dinner, Emma."

And you move back out of the booth, ignoring her attempts to reach for you, and run away.

Dad greets you as you walk back in the front door. "Taylor?" he says, sounding a little surprised. "I thought you were going out to dinner with Emma. Did something happen?"

You ignore him, barrelling straight through the house and into your room, slamming the door shut behind you. He follows you and knocks loudly. You ignore him. You can't deal with him right now.
It's nine oh-one PM.

Your room is a mess. Your bedspread is ajar. Your notes are spread across your desk. Your books aren't in order on your bookshelf. Some of your clothes aren't folded. Your breaths are coming more rapidly. You shouldn't have run home.

Your room is mess. Disorganized mess. You hate it. Why did you let it get like this? Why didn't you realize what a mess it was before?

With shaking hands, you move over to your bed and begin smoothing it out. You don't stop until it's perfect, until every wrinkle is gone, until your bed is exactly as it should be. Exactly as you want it to be.

It's nine forty-two PM.

You move on to your desk.

Slowly, methodically, you work your way around your entire room, bringing to it a sense of order. You arrange your books, first by alphabetical order, then by colour, then by size, then back to alphabetical order. You tuck your notes together, ensuring all the pages line up neatly together and rest exactly in the corner of your desk. Your pencils sit in a straight line against the wall, arranged so you can reach them with minimum fuss. You fold your clothes; then, unhappy, unsatisfied, you take out your entire closet and begin refolding your clothes, item by item. You arrange everything carefully in there, top to bottom. Jackets, then shirts, then underwear, then pants. You take them out three times, sorting them differently. By size, first. Then by style. Then by colour. You're satisfied, eventually, with the colours. Black on the left, white on the right. Dark to bright.

Your hands are still shaking.

It's four fifty-five AM.

Your bedroom is in order now. Everything is where you need it to be.

You climb into bed, and watch the minutes tick down.

You're going to have to make a decision soon, you know, as you watch the clock tick closer to seven. You can stay home, hide until Dad leaves, and put up with it when the school calls later. Maybe staying at home will calm you down. Maybe it'll make it worse. You don't know. It sounds tempting. Or you can go to school. Sit down and try to pretend nothing happened last night. Pretend you didn't just describe to Emma the way in which she victimized you. Pretend that you don't walk through the halls with your arms tucked in defensively. Hug Madison. Hug Sophia.

The clock ticks down. Your deadline approaches. What do you choose?
1.18

You rise from your bed the second the clock hits six o'clock. You refuse to look at it, knowing that if you see it now, you're going to spend the next half an hour straightening it. Instead, you head over to your dresser and quietly pull out some clothes suitable for running, then strip, pull the clothes on, and walk briskly out of your room.

Dad isn't awake out there. Good. You pass straight to the door, pausing to make sure the spare key is still there- it is- before you head out into the streets and begin jogging. You realize quickly that you forgot your water bottle, but- you'll live.

Your shoes slap against the asphalt of the roads, the sound seeming louder than it should be thanks to the stillness of the houses around you. You concentrate on your breathing, a basic rythm you'd picked up from Sophia. Two steps, left, right. Inhale. Two steps, left, right. Exhale. Two steps, left, right. Inhale. Over and over. The minutes blur by, but you're barely cognizant of them. You just jog. Left at Baker. Left at Kappel. Left at Elm. Left at Terracotta. Back home. Left at Baker. Left at Kappel.

Your legs burn, but that's okay.

Eventually, it's seven. You keep going. Seven fifteen. Seven thirty. Seven forty-five.

By eight, your legs are aching, your lungs are burning, and your throat feels parched.

Oddly, your thoughts feel freer. Clearer.

Sophia was right. Jogging does help. The simple rythm of it, the way the world falls away around you- yeah. You can see why she does this.

Dad is gone by the time you return home. He left you a mug of coffee sitting on the table, and a small piece of paper. A note, you think at first, telling you to go to school. But when you pick it up, the message is simpler than that. Warmer than that.

I called the school and told them you might not be in today.
Talk to me when you're ready. I'll be here for you.
I love you.

Your chest aches, but it's a good ache this time.

With Dad's implicit permission to skip school, you feel assured about your decision to skip school for the day. You feel bad about leaving Madison alone- actually, you feel really bad about that, and kind of lonely- but you can't deal with Emma today. You need some time away from her, some time to process what she said last night.

Instead, you head back to your room and get another change of clothes, then head to the shower. You're covered in sweat. It feels a little gross, even if you're pretty sure you don't stink too badly. Once you're in there, you take your time, luxuriating in the heat of the shower and allowing the water to run down and soothe your aching legs. You're tempted to take care of another ache while you're in
there, but... maybe now isn't the best time. Not so soon after last night.

You climb out and towel off, getting dressed in your clothes. They're not very exciting, but you're not planning on doing very much that's exciting today. You just need to distract yourself. You're feeling a little better already. The jog, and the following shower, definitely helped.

The change jar isn't getting any fuller, but you reach in and pull out some coins anyway. Dad won't mind, and you know that he'd prefer you take the bus to the clinic rather than try to walk there yourself. It's not safe to walk through those parts of town, especially not for a young girl like yourself.

... Not that it feels much safer to drive right now, given what Emma told you last night. Still, buses aren't cars. They have security cameras, and there are more people on them. They should be safe, right?

You walk to the bus stop. When the bus arrives, you hide in the seat closest to the bus driver, and make sure you're in view of the security camera at all time.

Luckily, you do make it to the clinic safely. The bus driver gives you a little wave as you step off the bus; you wave back, but don't smile at him. He closes the door in your face. Rude.

Shaking your head, you turn and head over to the clinic. It's not that far away from the bus stop, so it doesn't take you long to arrive. According to the clock hanging at the back of the room, in fact, it's not even nine thirty when you get in.

The receptionist- a different one, today, a man with darker skin and a wig- gives you an odd look as you approach the counter and pull the sign-in book over to you. "Aren't you meant to be in school right now?" he asks. His voice is deep, and there's a strange coarseness to it, like he's inhaled too much smoke in his life.

You shrug half-heartedly, but before you can work up the willpower to answer, you're distracted by the sound of someone calling your name behind you. You turn, and are immediately confronted by a man in a long white labcoat- Doctor Fitzgerald. He's actually wearing doctor-y clothes today. Do doctors really wear coats like that? Huh. You'd though that was just a TV convention.

"Isn't today a schoolday?" he asks. You just nod and half-shrug your shoulders. "... Does your father know you're here, at least?"

"Yeah," you reply. "He, um, rang the school and told them I wouldn't be in today. I needed to, to do something else. I can't go in today. So I came here. That's okay, isn't it?" You can't help the fact that you're pleading with him by the end of your sentence.

He looks at you searchingly. Whatever he finds in your face, he seems to come to a decision as he steps forward, past you, and moves to the sign-in book. For a moment, your heart falls when he picks up the pen and scribbles your name out, but then he turns to you with a gentle expression on his face.

"We can't have a minor volunteering during school hours," he begins. "I'd be forced to report you for truancy if I knew you were here. But I don't know you're here, and I'm going to be very surprised when I walk into the storeroom later today and find that someone has inventoried all our supplies for us. Okay?"

You nod, your jaw set. Yeah, you understand. He's bending the rules for you. You don't understand
why- you'd been hoping he just wouldn't find out- but you're not going to argue. "Yeah," you say. "It's weird how that happens sometimes."

"Good." He stands, then hesitates. "Did you bring lunch?" Shit. No, you didn't. He must see the answer on your face, because he continues, "No, that's okay. Take your lunch break at one, and tell Claire I told you it's okay to have one of the sandwiches in the fridge."

"Okay," you say. Then, impulsively, you lean forwards and give him a quick hug before rushing off to the storeroom.

You've been in here before, but you weren't really paying attention to just how much stuff is in here when you were last here. You'd just been focused on cleaning it up. Now, you look around, and you marvel a little. You had a vague idea before now of how many supplies a clinic or hospital needed to run, but now you can really appreciate it. There are eight stacks in here, each with five shelves on them longer than your forearm. And there aren't many empty spaces on them.

Inventorying the room is going to keep you busy, at least. Just as you like it.

Spotting a clipboard containing a thin sheaf of papers hanging on the side of the stacks, you grab it off and check that they're the right sheets. They are, and so you get to work.

When you emerge a good three and a half hours later, you've done a very solid amount of work. Five shelves have been fully inventoried. Along the way, you've been checking the seals on the boxes, marking down which ones have been opened and how many supplies have been removed from each box. You don't know if it's helpful, but if anyone's stolen supplies, at least Doctor Fitzgerald will know.

Doing this has... helped, you think. It's calmed your mind, at least. Your thoughts aren't jumping from place to place, now, and you're not feeling quite so miserable. You're not feeling *perfect*, but you can deal with that. You're used to not feeling perfect.

It's actually a little past one when you make your way out to the break room. A handful of nurses are still trailing their way out of the room, some of them clutching cups of vending machine coffee in their hands. You tilt your head, considering- but, uh, yeah, you haven't even received your first paycheque yet. Yeah, you'll avoid buying any for the moment.

There aren't a lot of people in the break room when you make your way in there. There's a woman with shoulder-length hair, as black as your own, two men sitting down at a table- you note their clutched hands beneath the table; your chest feels warm again at the sight- with empty mugs sitting before them, and-

"Taylor?"

- Amy is sitting in what looks like an awfully comfortable little lounge at the back of the room, clutching another styrofoam cup in one hand and a book in the other. She's giving you a bewildered look, which you return. What? You're not *that* surprising, you think...

"Aren't you-" She climbs out of her chair and moves closer to you, but her words trail off when she gets close enough to get a good look at you. She shuts her mouth, raising her cup awkwardly to take a sip before she says anything. "Um, never mind. Are you on break right now?"
You nod. "Yeah. Doctor Fitzgerald told me I should take a break now, and ask, uh, Claire? For a sandwich."

She snorts. "A sandwich. God, that man. Okay, no, come on." She grabs your hand, but- no. You dig your heels in, refusing to move.

"Where are you trying to take me?" you ask steadily.

She pauses and looks back, giving you a scrutinizing look. "Just to the cafeteria," she says slowly. "My f- New Wave funds it. This coffee tastes awful anyway, so I was going to get myself a better one. I'll buy you some lunch and we can talk."

If warm feelings keep bubbling up in your chest like this, you're not sure how you're going to stay angry even at Emma for long. You discard that thought as quickly as it floats through your head, choosing instead to waggle your eyebrows at Amy. "Buying me lunch already? That's moving a bit fast, but okay..."

She splutters, and you grin, darting past her. She follows you, still attempting a denial. "That's- that's not what I mean, Taylor!"

You stop, schooling your face into a pout, and turn to her. "Oh," you say, trying your best to sound dejected. "You don't want to have lunch with me?"

"I- I-" Her face goes red. You can't help the grin that takes over your face, and her pleading expression quickly turns into a scowl. "Taylor!" she groans. "Stop teasing me."

"But I'm not teasing you. You just want to go on a daaate~" you say in a sing-song voice. Her face goes even redder, and all she can do is gape at you for a moment, before she groans and buries her face in her hands.

"Argh," she growls. "Call it whatever you want. Keep teasing me and I'll make you pay for your own lunch."

Ack. You pout at her. "Fine, fine," you say. You don't actually know where the cafeteria is, so you let her show you the way. You don't actually follow her, though- you remain in front of her, turning your head just enough that you can see when she's about to turn. You almost trip over twice. Worth it.

You haven't actually been in the cafeteria before. It's not a very large place, just a small place with a counter at one end and half a dozen tables at the other.

"Yeah, it's not very big," Amy tells you when she sees you looking. "It's more here so the families of the people who come in to get treated can get something cheap to eat. Um, is a pie okay? They have beef or chicken. And a drink, maybe..." She deliberately sweeps her eyes up and down your body, and says in a sweet tone, "A chocolate milk?"

You smile at her, probably showing a few too many teeth. She looks far too proud of herself for managing to tease you in turn. "Why, Amy, I didn't know you were into that kind of thing."

"There's a lot you don't-" she says instinctively, then stops and recoils when she realizes what she is about to imply. "Uh. Uh, never mind! I'll just get you a Coke. Be right back!"
You snort as you watch her run off. Teasing Amy is hilarious.

She comes back a couple of minutes later bearing three large paper bags, two bottles of Coke, and a face that's finally cleared of its redness. She places two of the bags in front of you, then eagerly tears open the other one, revealing a slice of marbled cheesecake. "I know I shouldn't," she says matter-of-factly, "but Idra makes some really good cheesecake." And she takes a large bite of it. You can't help but watch, fascinated - not by her eating, but by the way her eyes flutter closed, by the smile that steals across her face, by the way her little pink tongue darts out to brush off a few extra crumbs and wow, you're actually feeling jealous of a cheesecake. That's a new level of weirdness, even for you. You're going to have a new image for tonight, you think, although the kind of eating you're imagining is rather less literal.

Her eyes flutter back open, and she freezes when she sees you staring intensely at her. "Wh- what?" she asks, her face heating up again. That didn't take long.

"Nothing," you hum. Probably a bit too early for you to be sharing those thoughts with her. "So what kind of pie did you buy?"

She gives you an odd look, but drops it. You do see her looking consideringly down at her cheesecake, though. "Chicken," she says. "I didn't know which you'd prefer, sorry."

"No, it's okay," you assure her. "Thanks for buying me lunch, Amy."

She shrugs. "Thanks for having lunch with me. Most of the people here wouldn't dream of it."

"Yeah, well, that's their mistake," you say, and smile at her. "They're really missing out, but I don't think I'll tell them. I want to keep you all to myself."

Her face turns red again, but oddly, she looks pleased rather than flustered. Damn, your teasing must be off. You're not getting the right reactions from her now. "Thanks," she mumbles. "So! Um, um. Oh! I was reading a new book. It's an Earth Aleph book, my cousin gave it to me, said she thought it was sexy, she's always been a bit weird... It's called, um, Twilight, I think. It's a bit creepy, though..."

You and Amy end up being drawn into a discussion for well over an hour. A little after two, you see Doctor Fitzgerald stick his head into the cafeteria with a harried look on his face, but Amy doesn't notice, and when he sees the two of you talking animatedly, he stops, then quickly retreats, an odd look on his face.

Eventually, enough time passes that Amy actually yelps when she casually glances at her watch. "Three?" she shouts. "Oh man- Taylor, I'm sorry, I have to get back to work. Um, I'll see you again, hopefully?"

You nod firmly. "Definitely," you vow. If nothing else, you're going to keep coming back just to see her, and that cute little tongue of hers. And the cute rest of her, but you're fascinated by that tongue. The fact that she actually has good taste in books, well - that's just an added bonus, you think.

It's with that positive thought that you go back to inventoried, barely aware of how much your mood has improved since last night.
It hits four when you finally prepare to go home. You only need to be home by six, but you don’t think Amy's going to be coming back down, and you need to prepare for Sophia's arrival.

More than that, though, you seize the bus ride as an opportunity to begin writing down your plans for the next couple of days. You blew today- and you're pretty sure you're going to have to make up for that- but there's still two more days in the week after you finish up with Sophia tonight.

You plan to...
The sky is showing the faintest hints of darkening by the time you get home around four thirty. There's still a couple hours of light left, but you can tell you're still in the colder portions of the year.

You head inside, giving Dad just a small wave as you head inside. He gives you a small nod and a warm smile from where he’s sitting in the living room, but doesn't try to get up and give you a hug, which you're very grateful for. You don't know how you'd take it, but you're pretty sure it wouldn't be well- you're not in nearly a good enough mood at this exact second to accept spontaneous hugs.

Oh- wait. You stop. "Um, Dad, I have a friend coming over around seven. We're working on a Chemistry project together."

He raises his eyebrows. "Your Chemistry teacher is giving you a lot of work," he notes. You fight down an instinctive blush. "Okay. Do you need me to cook dinner for her?"

You think about it for a second, then shake your head. "No, don't worry about it. In fact, just cook yourself something, I'll make Sophia and I something to eat after she gets here."

He accepts that easily enough. "Okay. If you need anything, come get me."

With Dad notified, you feel safe in moving to your bedroom, where you stand.

... It might have been done during the middle of a breakdown, and you probably shouldn't feel good about it, but your room is so clean.

You shake your head, then move to your bag. You pause for a moment when you don't find them in there, but- oh. Now you remember. You'd taken all your textbooks out of your bag and placed them in your bookshelf when you'd needed more books to fill the spaces in your bookshelf.

You grab your Chemistry book from the shelf it's on- filed under T for Trudgett, the last name of the author- and place it on the book, then go back to the bookshelf and begin pulling out all your other textbooks from on there. You grumble a little as you do it- it's inconvenient, but your bookshelf is so neat with them on there- but it's over with in a couple of minutes.

Then you sit down in your chair and actually go over your Chemistry work for a bit. And, yeah, you were right in your first impression of it. The questions aren't complicated; they're just involved, time-consuming. You imagine that if someone had to actually sit down and read through the textbook to answer the questions, it might actually be hard. Score one for reading ahead.

You go through and organise yourself for the study session ahead, grabbing a piece of paper and tearing chunks of it away to bookmark sections in the textbook relevant to the assessment. It's a bit hodgepodge, but there's not much else you can do without post-its, and given you only borrowed this textbook from the school library, you're not going to risk tearing the page with shoddy post-it notes.

When you're just about done, you hear a loud knock on the door. Quickly, you scramble to your feet and rush out, just managing to beat Dad to the door. You swing it open to find Sophia standing there
holding a duffel bag. She's wearing her track uniform and her customary scowl.

"Hey, Sophia," you say. You don't smile. There's something inexplicably weird about Sophia standing on your front porch.

She grunts. "Hey, H- Taylor," she amends, noting your Dad's presence behind you. "Can I come in?" You're surprised for a moment, as you'd assumed she'd just barge in, but- right. Your deal with her; you're in control while you're at your house. Okay. Good to see she remembers. Apparently better than you did.

"Yeah." You hold out your hand, and she automatically reaches out and takes it. The two of you stare down at your entwined hands for a second, before you look away, your cheeks reddening a little. "Come on, I'll show you to my room. Have you had anything to eat?" You try to pull her in, but she resists for a moment.

"Hold on a second," she says. You can't quite identify her tone- she sounds a little breathy, but maybe a little annoyed. She steps past you, coming to a stop in front of your Dad. "Hi. I'm Sophia." She extends her free hand out to him, and he takes it with a little stunned look on his face as he looks at your entwined hands. Then his face splits into a silly grin, and you roll your eyes. Great. What kind of weird thoughts is he having now?

"Danny," he introduces himself in turn, shaking her hand. "Okay, Taylor, there's food in the fridge. If you need anything, you know where I am."

"Yeah," you reply. Then finally, mercifully, you're able to pull Sophia away and towards your room, where you tug her over to your desk and let out a long sigh. "Geez," you mutter. "Okay, do you want something to eat before we start?"

She shrugs, then lifts her duffel bag off her shoulders and looks at you questioningly. You gesture beside your desk, where there's enough empty space for her to drop it. She does so, then sits on the edge of your bed and raises a questioning eyebrow at you. You- metaphorically- drool a little. Your throat is suddenly dry. Sophia smirks at you, as though she knows exactly where your thoughts have gone, but rather disappointingly she doesn't even try to tease you.

"Um." You cough lightly, and her smirk grows bigger. "Right. Um. This Chemistry assignment. I know we're both going to be pretty busy- actually, I have to cut things short tomorrow so I..." You trail off. Okay, look, nobody could blame you. If they had a Sophia reclining on their bed, they'd probably have trouble trying to focus on their schoolwork, too. But they don't. Nobody else can have a Sophia. She's yours. "... Um, I bookmarked the sections of the textbook that have the information we're after. Hopefully we should be able to do it in the time we have left. But, um, I'm going to be working later tomorrow, I hope, so I might not be available for as long. I'll loan you my textbook-"

"Won't you need it?" she interrupts, then shakes her head. "Wait, sorry. Forgot I shouldn't be interrupting."

It's so tempting to give her a pat on the head. "No, it'll be fine. I already know most of this stuff, so I shouldn't need anyone the textbook to answer the questions."

She lifts an eyebrow. "You already have the answers, huh? You should help me write mine then," she jokes.
You consider it for a moment. "I dunno," you say doubtfully. She opens her mouth, but shuts it again, looking annoyed. "I mean, I could, but then I'd have to spend time over the weekend doing my answers, and I have stuff I need to do over the weekend. That doesn't seem like a very good deal for me."

She rolls her eyes. "It was just a joke," she says. "Don't worry about it."

But you just shake your head. "No, it's, hm. You look at her consideringly. It's probably a bad idea, such a bad idea, but- you really need to get some relief soon. You can't believe you're actually seriously considering doing this. "We could make a deal," your traitorous mouth says.

Sophia gives you a look. "A deal?" she asks.

You nod, silently cursing yourself. "I don't mind spending some time over the weekend doing my assignment, but I'll be losing some sleep to do it," you tell her. No need to tell her that you'll be losing that sleep anyway, you think. This weekend is probably going to be a busy one. "So I'll help you now, but only if you make it worth my while."

For a moment, she pauses. Then she chuckles. Actually chuckles. "Well, well, Hebert," she says with a wide grin. "Never thought you'd be that bold. Alright, I'll tell you what. Tell me what you want, and I'll consider it."

Huh. Honestly, you'd kind of expected to be slapped for that one. Sophia is weird.

"I want..." You consider it for a moment. "I want- I want a kiss," you declare. "No- no wait. Two kisses." She doesn't look angry. Maybe you can push it a bit further. "No, uh, more- five. Five... ten. Ten minutes of kissing. Per day I spend helping." She waits, so you push on. "A- and I want you to take off your shirt," you finish in a rush, stumbling over your words. "Um, not your bra. Unless you want to. I'd be happy with that. But you don't have to. For- for the whole session. Every session."

She considers it. She actually does. You can see her thinking it over.

"And if I let you do that, you'll help me?" she checks. "And I don't mean just getting the answers here, Hebert. I want you to help me get them good. I need good results here. A plus, not a B, not even an A. An A plus. And you have to get the same, this is a group project."

You think about it. You really do. This weekend is going to be a busy one, but- you're pretty sure you can manage. And if not, you can always just skip sleeping on Sunday. You'll be half-dead come Monday, but you can do it.

"Yeah." You nod determinedly. "I can do that."

She lifts an eyebrow, but she doesn't even seem angry. "You're a bit of a perv," she notes. "You know that?" But despite her words, she doesn't seem even a little hesitant when she pulls off her shirt, revealing her bra beneath it. You'd expected her to be wearing a disappointingly covering sports bra, but she's actually wearing a delightfully revealing little white number, decorated with frills of lace. The pale material contrasts deliciously with her dark skin. You're tempted to lean down and lick around the bra to see if she tastes like chocolate. You refrain, though. You want this to happen again, and pushing her like that is an excellent way to ensure you can't.

She crawls up your bed, arranging your two pillows so that she can lay on your bed comfortably and still raise her chest high enough for you to have a good view of her bra.
"Alright," she says. Despite the words coming out of her mouth, even you can hear the undercurrent of arousal in them. "Come on, then. Let's get this over with."

You stumble over to the bed, then stalk forward on all fours until you find yourself leaning over her. You can't resist raising one hand to brush at her bra for a moment. She watches your hand closely, but doesn't try to push it away. In fact, she just closes her eyes as you brush your thumb over the bumps in her bra where her nipples are straining against the material.

You keep your hand there, balancing yourself on only your left hand as you lean down and kiss her hungrily. Her mouth opens as your lips touch hers, and you waste no time in meeting her tongue with yours. Even your eyes flutter closed for a moment as the two of you kiss.

You don't know what her skin tastes like, but her mouth tastes like chocolate. There's a flare of jealousy in your stomach for a moment- who's been trying to seduce your Sophia with treats?- but you fight it down like the absurd thought it is and just focus on the all-too-thrilling sensation of Sophia gasping against your lips as you suck on her tongue. Her hands wrap, almost unconsciously, around your waist, holding you against her. In turn, you stop holding yourself up so high, and press your arm down over hers, forcibly preventing her from moving it. She loses it for a moment, then- if you were more inexperienced, you might have mistaken the pleased shudder that runs through her as a mini-orgasm. Even now, you're not sure it's far off. You've felt Madison make that little shudder too many times to mistake it for an actual mini-orgasm, though.

She tries to retaliate for that once she regains her senses a little, but you don't let her. You squeeze her nipple through her bra, drawing a low moan, which you take advantage of to swirl your tongue around her own. She tries to fight it for a few minutes, tries to press back and regain some control over the kiss, but you don't let her. You just lean further down over her, allowing your weight to gently press her down into your bed, and continue to dominate the kiss. Her resistance grows weaker as you dart in again and again, exploring every inch of her mouth and claiming it- claiming her- as yours.

Eventually, she's no longer even pretending to fight it. Every time you draw away to take a breath, her breathing is more ragged. She occasionally makes weak attempts to slip her tongue into your own mouth, but she yields easily when you just lick and suck at it.

By the time you draw away from her, a good eighteen minutes after the kiss started, you're barely able to keep yourself from just dry-humping her thigh until you come. By the weak jerking of her hips, she's trying to fight the same desire.

You roll over, your body trembling slightly as you lay on the edge of the bed beside Sophia. "Jesus," is all you manage to whisper. She nods shakily.

Maybe it's a good thing she didn't take her bra off, you think dreamily. If you'd been too focused on her breasts, you wouldn't have been able to do that to her. Of course, then you'd have been able to tug at her nipples as you held her down... Mm. Another time, maybe.

The two of you lay there, trying to recover, for another ten minutes before Sophia draws herself up, body still trembling slightly. "Alright," she says hoarsely. "You had your fun, Hebert. Now hold up your end of the deal."
You do, of course, although it takes a bit longer than you'd expected. Maybe you should have kept yourself under control a bit better- hah, nah. Sophia doesn't seem to be in too much of a hurry to return home, and you're fine with the thought of skipping studying for one night, so it doesn't bother you too much that Sophia stays at your house until well after ten. Besides, she holds up her end of the bargain and doesn't put her shirt back on, allowing you to perv at her bra all you want. Why would you complain?

When the time hits ten thirty and she starts tugging her shirt on, you do impishly lean forwards and steal another quick kiss from her. She freezes, which causes you to smile a bit; then she scowls and throws a pillow at you. You're pretty sure that breaks the terms of your agreement a bit, but you're fine with that. She didn't agree to have you kiss her whenever you want; you think you can take a pillow to the head for it. Besides, it's one of her soft scowls. She doesn't mind much.

There's a car waiting for her out the front when you walk her to the front door. It's a nicer car than you'd expected- a white car in a newer style. You've seen ads for it just a couple years ago. Her parents must be more well-off than you'd assumed.

"Thanks, Hebert," she says when the two of you get to the door. "I'll see you at school tomorrow." You're tempted to lean in and give her another kiss before she leaves, but you don't want to push your luck- and you definitely don't want to out her in front of her parents. You settle for just giving her a wide grin.

"Definitely," you agree. And with a little wave, you watch her leave.

You don't get much sleep that night, mostly because you stay up way too late with your fingers buried inside your wet pussy. Look- it's not your fault that all the women around you are so hot. You regret it the next day, a little. Just a little, mind- it'd been a really pleasant way to end the day. You're tired, but not so tired that you can't function at school the next day. A quick shower wakes you up, as does the frigid cold when you go for your run.

The bus is, again, on time at school. This time, you're sure of it- they definitely must have new orders from upper management. As you wander inside the halls of Winslow, you wonder how long it'll last.

Madison greets you at your locker, where she's waiting anxiously for you. When she sees you, she lets out a huge sigh of relief, and practically attaches herself to you when you get close enough for her to hug. "Taylor," she moans quietly. "I missed you yesterday. Where were you?"

You hug her tightly against you, sighing softly. You really had missed the feel of Madison against you. "Sorry," you murmur. "Some stuff happened, and I had to take the day off. I'm sorry I didn't call. Let me make it up to you?"

She nods, then tucks her head against your collarbone. "Okay," she mumbles. "Whatever you want. Just let me hug you."

"Of course." You hold her tighter against you. "For as long as you want." And you remain true to that, allowing her to cling to you like a limpet despite the sneers it draws from some of the people who stalk through the halls prior to the bell. Even after the bell rings, she doesn't let go of you; you just shuffle slowly through them, keeping your hand pressed gently around Madison's back. When you get to the classroom, the teacher just heaves a world-weary sigh and points you to your shared desk. At least nobody can sneer at you here, with your other girl sitting behind you, sharp glares promising violence at anybody who looks at you and Madison wrong.
She seems somewhat appeased by the time the bell rings and you have to part for your next class, which is good. Her reaction is somewhat exaggerated anyway, you know- she did miss you, but you're pretty sure she just wanted an excuse to hug you for longer than normal, too. You know she's grown somewhat dependent on you, but if she was so dependent on you that she couldn't let you go after just a day spent apart, you'd have to - well, you're not sure what you'd have to do. Stage an intervention, maybe. Or just quit school and stay at home all the time with her. If Sophia and- and Emma weren't here, then- well. No use considering that.

Chemistry is similarly interesting. You slide in beside Sophia, who blushes- actually blushes- when you deliberately brush up against her arm. It's a delicious sight, watching her already dark skin grow darker. Still, she doesn't back down. Even after having surrendered to you once already, she still pushes at you in class. It's hard to fight off your smile when she does. There's something almost relaxing about this familiar push-and-pull with Sophia, now that you know that when push comes to shove, she's willing to lie down and let you take over.

This is another relationship you could get used to, you think. Pushing comfortably at each other in public, and holding her down and having your way with her in private- yes. Yes, you're fine with that image.

... Not that you're there, just yet. You shouldn't get too far ahead of yourself. It's a nice fantasy, but if you're going to make it reality, it's going to take some work yet. She still thinks this rule only applies at your house, after all.

You float happily through the rest of the day. Sophia gives you looks through the day that stir something hungry deep in your gut, while you spend the rest of your time with Madison, basking in the warm glow she exudes whenever she's around you. Morning, lunch, and tutoring- if only she lived with you, you could basically claim her all day.

Things continue contently even after school. Looking at your finances, you're pretty sure that you can't actually afford to take Madison out anywhere very special just yet, even with the work you're doing now. Still, you can take her somewhere, which is more than you could do before you took this job at the theater.

Speaking of.

You're forced to apologetically cut short your study session with Sophia that day. She shrugs nonchalantly, looking down at her sheet- and, yeah, you are already nearly two thirds done. "It should be good," she tells you. "Don't make a habit of it, though."

This time, she doesn't throw a pillow at you when you steal a kiss before you escort her to the door. She does roll her eyes. Still, progress.

You head off to work, sticking your head in quickly to let Dad know where you're going. He gives you a quizzical look- you know what he's thinking; since when did Taylor get a job?- but you don't stay to give him an explanation, knowing that eventually he'll come to accept it.

It's a little after eight thirty when you arrive. You don't actually start until nine, but it's best to make a good impression.

Mr Harding greets you when you arrive. "Hello, Taylor," he says when you get there, still not even dressed in your uniform. "Thanks for coming in- Trent and David are both off sick for the week.
This is off the books, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone. It's illegal for me to hire you this late-

You nod. "Yeah, I understand," you tell him. "Don't worry, Mr Harding, it's all okay. Just give me the cash tomorrow and we'll call it even." You grin at him, and he gives you a tired smile.

"Thanks," he says simply.

You do understand. The movie scene in Brockton Bay isn't doing too well. Movie tickets are a moderately expensive luxury, and with the town's economic crisis, not a lot of people are treating themselves. It's hard to afford yet another casual worker, especially when he can't be assured that the people he hires will actually do the work he needs them to. Unfortunately, it's just one of the problems that arise when gangs effectively rule large portions of the city.

You don't end up working the cash register tonight, busying yourself behind the counter getting all the food people order instead. Aiden handles that instead- a college-aged guy, working part time to help pay for accommodation, he tells you. By the time midnight rolls around, all you can smell is popcorn. Buttery, rubbery popcorn. Even when you walk away from the stand, it's all you can smell.

The movie finishes around one-thirty, so Aiden and you busy yourselves cleaning it up afterwards. Between the two of you, it takes a solid half an hour to get the theater presentable- not perfect, but good enough.

Thus, it's two by the time you two finish up for the night. Aiden offers to drive you home, an offer you gladly accept- you hadn't actually considered how you'd get home that late- and you stumble up to your bed, passing out almost immediately.

And then you wake up four hours later to the beeping of your alarm clock, swear loudly, and do it all again. You're tempted to just skip your jogging for the day and sleep in, get that extra hour's sleep, but- no, you need the exercise. It's not good to ruin your developing habits this early.

By the time eight o'clock rolls around, you're feeling thoroughly miserable, in the sleep-deprived sense, rather than the depressed sense. It seems everyone around you can tell when you finally arrive at school, because the first thing Madison does when she sees you is draw you into a hug. You pout against your girl, then try to hide your trembling lower lip against her neck. It's an awkward fit, but you manage. You wrap your arms over her shoulders, completing the hug.

"I'm so tired," you whine to her. "Maddie, I'm so tiired."

"Poor Taylor," she coos. "It's okay. It's okay. You can go to sleep at lunch, if you want. I'll wake you up for class."


She pats your back sympathetically. "I know," she says placatingly. "But you can't. You can sleep now, and then you can sleep during tutoring, I'll work on my own today. Okay?"

You pout harder, letting out a wordless whine. "Fiiiine," you eventually manage. "But only 'cause you're so comfy."

She chuckles, blushing a little. "You're so sweet," she coos again. "Come on, Taylor. Let's go to class."

You wander around for the rest of the day in a sleep-deprived haze. Madison seems to find it cute, which is good, because you're pretty sure that if she found it annoying you'd have to push her harder than you're capable of right now to use her lap as a pillow. Or maybe not, but you don't really want to find out.

By the time tutoring finishes for the day, you're feeling a little better, mostly because you fell asleep on Madison's lap for the full hour and a half. She really does make for a comfortable pillow, you note. You make sure to give her a very thorough kiss afterwards, to make it clear to her how much you really appreciate it.

The nap leaves you just alert enough that you're capable of paying attention when Sophia comes over that afternoon. Which is good, because as it turns out, Sophia is wearing a different bra today- a thinner one, and a smaller one. It's not quite small enough for you to see her areola, but it reveals enough of her breasts that you're pretty sure it's meant to tantalize you. Or maybe she just doesn't have that many bras that cover her up. Who knows? Either way, you're glad that you're awake enough to appreciate it.

After your requisite "ten-minute" make-out session- today, it lasts for a solid twenty-three minutes- you get stuck into the assessment. It's honestly a little amazing how quick Sophia is to adapt to the material once you explain it to her. You revise your assessment of her intelligence a little- she's smarter than you gave her credit for before, and you hadn't thought she was dumb then. Honestly, you're not sure what her problem is. As far as you can tell, she just doesn't seem to be there half the time, and has no time to devote to her homework. It's weird.

She finally finishes the assessment up a little after eleven. Nearly ten hours of work, but by the expression on her face, you can tell she'd expected it to take even longer.

"Wow, Hebert," she says, looking down at the sheets of paper she'd written her answers on. "I have to admit, I'm actually a little impressed. You're a good teacher."

You hum. "You're just smarter than you give yourself credit for," you politely refute her.

She smirks and shakes her head. "Whatever, don't take the compliment, then. Look, I have to admit, this is actually a lot better than I thought this'd turn out. You definitely held up your end of the bargain." For a moment, she hesitates. Then she bites her lip for a second and leans back on your bed, causing her breasts to wobble a little. Releasing her lip, she continues, "Alright. What do you think about continuing this little arrangement?"

"Huh?" you ask intelligently.

Sophia gives you a condescending smirk. "This arrangement- you helping me out with Chemistry in exchange for this." She gestures down at her bra-clad chest. "We keep this up, you keep helping me with Chemistry." She pauses. "On a Friday, at least. I don't think I can keep coming three days a week. Tutor me on a Friday, I'll keep letting you perv on me. Sound like a deal?"

You're also going to have to plan your weekend out. You know this, and you've been preparing for it- in fact, once Sophia leaves, you're planning on collapsing immediately to try and catch up on as
much sleep for it as possible.

This is your first weekend in which you actually have disposable income. It's a big moment for you.

So what do you plan to do over this weekend?
You can't contain your enthusiastic grin as you consider Sophia's offer. For a moment you wonder if you could push her further, but- that'd be, maybe not an *awful* move on your part, but certainly not a nice one. There's a line between sexually harassing Sophia like you did in the school bathroom, you think, and blackmailing her with her chances at improving her grade in Chemistry. A strange line to draw, sure, but you're growing accustomed to that.

"Yeah, sure." Sophia's smirk changes into a more gentle grin as you agree. "On Fridays, then."

She nods. "Could change sometimes, but I'll try and let you know before if I can't make it on any particular day," she says. "Thanks, Hebert. Appreciate it."

You grin lewdly at her, raking your eyes up and down her body. "So do I."

Sophia doesn't end up staying for long after that. Today, when she leaves, she pulls away on a bike- a regular cycling bike, not a motorbike. You wonder about that, but then, as tough as Sophia is, you kind of doubt that even she could take on a whole gang of people loyal to the Empire on her own. She probably rides it just so she doesn't have to run through their territory.

You collapse into your bed a couple of minutes later. It's already nearly eleven. Absently, you look towards the brochures on your desk- just junk mail Dad had picked up from the mailbox. You look through them occasionally so that you can look through the specials, lately with less of an eye towards groceries and more towards, well, some places you could take your girls out.

Those thoughts swirl through your head as you you fall asleep, plans running through your head all night.

When you wake up, it's nearly eight. Excitement bubbles up in you, and without even stopping to get your clothes out of your dresser, you run straight out to the living room and switch on the computer and modem. The modem screeches loudly as it connects, but you're too excited to care much- it's late enough that Dad should already be awake anyway. You wait impatiently for everything to boot and load up, then begin typing madly.

Internet banking has come a long way in the last few years, since some of the big companies in your world have begun sharing information with their Earth Aleph counterparts. Not all of them, just the ones with counterparts, but a couple of banks were among the first wave to initiate contact with people on the other side of the portal. Some Earth Aleph fads didn't catch on- honestly, a lot of them seem really weird to you- but they did have some neat ideas, like smartphones, and internet banking. The ability to do your banking from home was a big hit, especially in Brockton Bay. Other banks were forced to scramble to catch up, and so online banking became as easy as it is today.

The bar inches up, the little wheel around the mouse spinning for long minutes, and- and- yes! You let out a little cheer as your account finally opens, the bolded letters '$52.44' sitting happily in there. There's a fifty sitting in your pocket that Mr Harding slipped you yesterday for working through the midnight screening. Over a hundred dollars. And it's yours! You can do so much more stuff now!

Your plans spin roughly in your head for a moment, before you sit firmly down. No, you know what
you need. There are two things you need to get most urgently, and as much as you might like to buy a choker for Madison to let everyone know she's yours or a butterfly vibrator for Victoria for her to wear during her dates with her boyfriend, you have a promise to keep, and a more urgent desire to fulfil.

Dad's just stumbling out of his room when you run back into your room to gather your clothes, then careen into the shower. You're done in record time, and you might even still have some shampoo foam in your hair but you don't even care because now you have money.

... Okay, you do actually care. You run your fingers through your hair carefully before you head over to the phone, making sure that you don't really have any shampoo in your hair. You don't, which you confirm by carefully looking your fingers over as you pick the phone up.

The dial tone rings through only twice before there's a soft click, and childlike giggles echo through the line. "Hullo!" Terry hollers through it. "Who is this coz this is Terry's house!"

"Hey, Terry," you say, chuckling a little. "It's Taylor. Could you put Madison on the phone for me?"

"Yep! Yep! Yep!" You can hear him scampering through the house chanting 'yep' as he runs. He stops fairly soon, then knocks loudly on a door. "Maddieson!" he shouts. "Guess who's on the phone 'coz it's TaaaayTaaaaay." A naughty giggle escapes him. You're a little confused. Why did he say your name like that?

You hear a loud whoosh over the line, then the sound of someone grabbing the phone. "Thank you, Terry," you can hear Madison say. "Go play in your room, okay?"

"Okay!" he shouts distantly.

Madison sighs into the phone, and you can hear the sound of a door closing. "Good morning, Taylor," she says tiredly. The sound of springs squeaking is loud enough that you can hear it over the phone. "Sorry about Terry, he's been a little hyper lately. He kept waking everyone up last night."

"Aww." You want to give her a sympathetic hug, but you can't. Damn. "Well, I might have something that can help you with that." You're actually glad she can't see you, because your naughty grin probably wouldn't make her feel better in the way you want her to. "Are you busy today, or can you come stay over tonight?"

"S-stay over?" she asks. "Um, I don't- no, I'm not." Her voice turns determined towards the end. "Um, I can be at your house by six-"

You interrupt her. "No, you don't need to do that," you say. "We'll head back to my house later, but I want to take you out somewhere first."

"Oh." There's an embarrassed pause. You wish you were there so you could see her red cheeks. You love making women blush. "Um, okay. Do you want me to wear anything in particular, or...?"

You shake your head, even though you can't see her. "No," you reply. "Just wear whatever makes you feel comfortable. Although," you can't resist adding after quickly checking if Dad is close enough nearby to hear you, "you probably don't need to bring any pajamas with you. Dad won't be home tonight. You can wear my clothes tomorrow if you want."
Suddenly, there's a loud thunk, and the sounds of someone swearing high above the phone. There's a few more susurreations, and then Madison picks the phone back up. "Sorry," she squeaks. "I dropped the phone. D- do you mean that we're going to-" She just makes an incoherent noise after that.

You check again for Dad's presence before you say anything. "Yeah," you confirm. "Unless you have any problems with that. Do you?"

You can almost hear her shaking her head over the phone. "No!" she says instantly. "No, I've been, um. I've been watching some- some videos to try and learn how to, um, yeah. Oh no, this is so embarrassing..." She actually sounds a little upset. You intervene immediately.

"No, don't be embarrassed," you tell her. "It's my first time too, Madison. I don't think either of us really has any experience. We'll just do our best together, okay?"

"O-okay." Her tone has gone to determination now. "Where do you want me to meet you?"

"There's an outdoor movie downtown," you begin, then give her instructions on how to get there. Eventually, you end with, "You should get there around five, because that's when the movie starts."

"I'll be there," she vows.

You're soon sitting giddily on the bus, clutching your purse beside you. You've carefully tucked the change from your fifty dollars into it, and your card rests in its usual compartment, so you think you're all set.

The bus arrives Downtown fairly quickly, although you're not sure why you're surprised about that- it is the safe route, after all. It's not even ten by the time you get off. You set off into the mall, clutching your purse- your money, your money- eagerly to your side.

... And then you immediately regret not doing any research on the topic.

As it turns out, there are a lot of cellphone providers. A few big ones, and then it seems there are a handful of smaller ones, too. Different people offer different plans, and there are different phones that do different things, too. Earth Bet's cellphone production is a long ways behind Earth Aleph's- from what you understand, Earth Aleph has some horribly exploitative business practices involving people from third-world countries; Earth Bet couldn't do that if it wanted to, which you sincerely hope nobody here ever does, given the problems in most of those regions- but the trade between the two Earths is picking up, and apparently one of the big commodities Earth Aleph has been selling has been cellphones.

Most of the smartphones in the store have more processing power in them than your computer at home does.

You end up spending most of the time you'd allotted for searching for a plan just moving around all the different stores, trying to compare the phones in them. A lot of them just aren't very good, having low-quality cameras (and really, what's the point of buying a cellphone with a bad camera? You wouldn't be able to use it for anything fun then) or having really bad storage. Most of the better ones are right out of your price range, although there are a handful you note down for later- ones that can connect to the internet on the move somehow as long as they're within certain regions, mostly. Very useful.
In the end, you settle on a simple one. It's got an alright camera— you make the clerk demonstrate it for you—and it's got nearly an entire gigabyte of storage, a concept that would have boggled you a little before you'd started looking at some of these smartphones earlier. It sets you back fifty dollars even, and a purchase of twenty dollars pay-as-you-go credit devastates what's left of your finances. But now you own a cellphone!

You play with it as you walk over to the thrift store, casually setting up a system in it. You make a folder innocuously called 'My Treasures', then go in there and start making sub-folders for each of your girls. Or, at least, Madison, Sophia and Victoria. It doesn't feel right to do that to Amy yet. Kind of like you're pushing her, sexually, even though there's no way she could know about it. In fact, the fact that she couldn't know about it makes it feel worse, somehow. You'll just wait for her.

The system is all set up by the time you get to the thrift store, and you pocket your phone once again as you head in. This particular thrift store is one you've been to a lot, although nobody in there recognizes you. A lot of thrift stores like these are partially run by volunteers, and volunteers drop in and out all the time.

For a moment, you're tempted to head over to the book section here—maybe you could pick something up for Amy, find something for her to read and give the two of you something to discuss over at your house?—but you shake your head. No, you'll hold off. Maybe next week. This week, you have something more important.

You bypass the women's section, heading straight to the men's section. You don't like your chances of finding a jacket large enough over in the women's section.

It still takes a fair bit of searching around to find a jacket that's suitable. Some of them are too small, not big enough for both you and Madison to crawl into, while some of them are actually too large. Yes— you don't want one that's too large. You want it to be just large enough that both you and Madison can fit into it, but also just small enough that the two of you will be pressed tightly against each other within it—just small enough that you'll barely manage to fit your arms inside, small enough that Madison is going to feel herself be unable to resist you playing with her. Not that you intend on doing anything with that, but nobody said you couldn't wear it with more than one of your girls. And while the concept of tying Madison down and fucking her doesn't appeal to you very much— Madison is more than willing to let you do whatever you want to her—you really love how crazy it drives Sophia when you stop her from being able to move, from being able to do the first damned thing to resist you from doing every perverted thing you can imagine to her.

Eventually, you do manage to find one that's suitable. It'll be just a little loose around you and Madison, you think, which means it'll be the perfect size for you and Sophia. Eventually. It doesn't even cost too much, which is good. It costs fifteen dollars, leaving you with just enough for you to take the bus to the, and then for you and Madison to later take a bus home, with just a little change left over.

It's not quite time for that, though. The movie doesn't start until six, and it's not quite twelve. And as much as you're looking forward to what you're going to be doing to Madison later today, you have another girl you're quite eager to meet up with today. Last week, you'd half-seen an announcement on the door to the book club, announcing that the club would be meeting on Saturday this week, not Sunday.

In fact, that's why you'd chosen this particular thrift store, and from there this particular area of the
mall and its surroundings. You'd known that they'd be close enough to the bookstore that you could jog there.

Victoria greets you as you arrive, as usual. You move immediately over to her and give her a hug, then- ignoring her surprised face- you gleefully pull out your new trophy.

"Look what I have!" you babble excitedly. "It's only a cheap one, I know, but I have a cellphone now!" You wave it around in front of her face, making sure she can see it. She laughs lightly. "I can see it, Taylor." She sounds amused. "You didn't have one before? You should have asked me. I would have bought one for you."

Before you can even think about it, you're shaking your head. "No," you say firmly. "I-" Then you clamp your mouth shut hastily and glance around. Luckily, there is nobody around, but nonetheless you make sure your voice is quieter when you begin talking again. "I'm not going to ask you to give me anything," you say, quietly but firmly. "The only thing I want out of this relationship is you, Victoria. Not your cellphones or your probably ridiculously expensive cellphone plans."

She gives you a befuddled look, which quickly turns into an appreciative shake of her head. "I don't think that's what people usually say, but okay. Come on, let's go upstairs. I'll give you my number once we're up there, okay?"

You nod and take her hand, pulling uselessly at her for a moment before she stops resisting and allows you to lead her upstairs. There, the two of you enact your now-familiar ritual; as soon as the clock hits twelve, Victoria strips her jacker off her and sits down, spreading her legs for you. The only difference is, today, you have a cellphone. And that's a very big difference.

She silently takes your cellphone when you offer it to her, fingers rapidly darting over the keys as she enters in her details to your contacts. Soon, she hands it back, and you have Victoria's cellphone number- or at least her contact list. You can't be sure about whether it'll work, so better safe than sorry, you think.

Shoving your phone down to your lap, you continue to lightly play with Victoria's pussy as you type out a message.

[Taylor] *You're really wet today.*

She really is.

Her phone chimes, and she looks down at it, then glances quickly over to you before rapidly typing out a response.

[Victoria] *knew ud b comin 2day*

Your nose crinkles at her atrocious grammar, but you don't comment on it. Beside you, her lips pull up into a grin as she watches your expression. In response, you type out a new message.

[Taylor] *Your grammar is atrocious.*

Her grin turns into a smirk when she reads the message.

[Victoria] *only 4 u bby <3*
In response, you press down on her clit, hard, then continue. She jerks at the sudden movement and lets out an involuntary hiss of pleasure.

[Victoria] *Sry. I dont have unlimited txts tho. Gotta watch char limits*

You ease up on her clit at that, but don't quite stop your assault on it. She squirms a little.

[Taylor] *I think you can do a little better than that.*

She bites her lip as she sneaks a glance at you before responding, trying not to shudder too obviously in front of everyone.

[Victoria] *Okay Ill try*

You don't know what consequences that might have. She might be running up against her message cap on a fairly constant basis, or even be running over it anyway. Unsurprisingly, you're okay with that. If she has to stop texting people quite so often, or even cut down on the number of texts she sends to her boyfriend, in order to satisfy your grammatical demands- well, you're more than fine with that. In fact, now that you think about it, you kind of want to do that- kind of want to push her into texting you more so that she has to push away from her boyfriend to keep up with you. But, maybe not today.

With a promise to stop her assault on grammar extracted, you give her clit one last flick, then go back to playing with her pussy lips. Her cheeks are a little red now, which you point out to her with a text- *Are you blushing now? I thought we were past that.* - and watch as the blush grows a little deeper.

For the rest of the two-hour session, the two of you exchange flirty little texts like that. It's an odd feeling, to have one hand up her skirt against her bare skin while you're busy sending her lightly flirtatious texts with your other hand, but you can't say that you mind too much. Even by text, Victoria is a good conversationalist.

The sound of the clock ringing out at two abruptly bursts the little bubble you've built around the two of you. You jerk a little, causing Victora to let out a soft groan before she yanks your hand out from under her skirt so she can hurriedly take her jacket off the back of her chair and pull it on.

When everyone else has gone, their murmurs fading from the shop's space, you allow yourself to give Victoria a lecherous grin. She shakes her head disapprovingly at you, but she can't stop a smile from spreading over her face.

"Come on," she sighs, and offers her hand out to you. You take it and lead her down through the bookstore. When you get outside, she pauses- bringing you to an ungainly stop when you try to take another step forward and find yourself abruptly unable to move- and looks at you. "Do you want to go home, or do you have something else you want to do first?"

Shrugging, you shake your head. "I've got a date in town later, so I can't go home just yet," you tell her. "I was hoping we could spend some time together first. Maybe we could head back to the library first, unless you have something else you wanted to do?"

She shakes her head, scoffing playfully. "Two girls in one day?" she asks playfully, giving your shoulder a little bump. "Somebody's a busy little bee. But yeah, sure, I don't have anywhere to be until I pick my sister up at seven, so I'm yours until then. Still gotta get you to read those books"
You don't complain as she scoops you up into her arms, just lean up and bite her earlobe reprovingly when she's high enough that nobody can really see what you're doing. You're doing the best you can to keep everyone happy. It's not nice to make fun of you for trying to make time for her instead of just taking Madison out today. She laughs brightly in response.

The flight to the alley outside the library doesn't take too long, which is good, because it's surprisingly cold up here. You're not quite sure if Victoria feels the cold as badly as you do—does her forcefield protect her from temperatures? You haven't seen enough footage of her fighting to have seen if she's been hurt from fire at any point. But, you think you'll just avoid asking her that. Probably not the greatest conversational topic.

You're thankful when she sets down, though. It's slightly warmer down here, especially since the wind can't really reach you. And, of course, it lets you participate in your time-honoured activity by leaning up and giving her a quick kiss before you climb down from her arms. She steadies you as you stand, allowing you to lean in and draw her into a longer kiss this time, something she happily participates in. It still only lasts a few moments, and then the two of you are heading inside the library.

Once you're inside, you lead her over to a desk and shift your chair as close as you can to hers so you can lean your head against her shoulder. You can't see her expression, but you swear you can almost feel her raising her eyebrow at you. "Feeling a bit cold?" she asks, amused.

You shake your head in response. "No," you tell her truthfully. "Just trying to get a look down your shirt, but your jacket's in the way." You pout mournfully as you play with the buttons of her jacket.

She chuckles. "Maybe later. We're in the middle of a library anyway, Taylor."

A great sigh heaves its way out of your chest. "Yeah," you mumble. "I know." Reluctantly, you move your chair back away from hers. You do make sure to grab her hand beneath the table, though—you'll compromise, but not that much.

For the next little while, you and Victoria just sit around talking about books. It's nice, you think. Books are something you know a lot about, and there haven't been a lot of people at Winslow who know very much about them. Madison tries her best, and you appreciate her a lot for it, but her taste in books doesn't line up very well with yours. She's more the young-adult romance kind of girl, while you have an appreciation for the classics and their like. It reminds you of Amy, you think absentely. Maybe you should introduce the two of them. Or not. You do like hoarding Amy to yourself.

Eventually, it's nearly four. Victoria yawns and stretches back, drawing your attention to her marvellously toned arms for a moment before you drag your attention back to her.

"Okay, nearly time for us to go," she says. "We—wait, yeah. Hey Taylor, are you still interested in reading Harry Potter?"

What—oh, yeah, now you remember. That series you and Victoria had talked about last week. "Yeah, but I can't afford them," you tell her. "And someone's borrowed the library copies."

"Aha!" She snaps her fingers, then pulls her bag up. "I actually thought that might have happened, so I brought my copies of the first two books with me today." From deep within her bag, she draws out
two books, emblazoned with the large letters 'Harry Potter' on the top. She places them down too quickly for you to read them. "I'll let you borrow them for the week, if you'd like. I'll need them back by next Sunday, though, my sister wants to borrow them then."

"Okay," you reply, and give her a warm smile. "Thanks a lot, Victoria."

She sways a little forward as though moving in for a kiss before she remembers where you are. "Right," she mutters to herself. "Don't worry about it, Taylor, it's fine. I have another book I need to read for book club anyway."

You shake your head. "No, I do appreciate it." You tug the books over to you, glancing down at the covers before tucking them down in the bag with your jacket and cellphone case. "I know how hard it is to lend out books that you really like, so I really do appreciate it that you're loaning them to me."

She shakes her head, but doesn't disagree. "It's not that big a deal," she insists. "I like having stuff to talk with you about, Taylor, and I'd really like to talk with you about my favourite series. I don't mind loaning you my books anyway. I know you'll give them back."

"Of course," you affirm, even though she doesn't look like she needs the reassurance. This time, it's you who has to remind yourself that you're in a public space. Victoria just looks so kissable. All the time, really, but especially now. She seems to catch your expression, because this time she's the one to give you a lecherous grin.

"Alright," she says, standing. "Come on, Taylor. It's getting late." She stands. For a moment, she goes to offer you her hand, but you're already holding it. She looks down, a little consternated, as though she'd gotten so used to holding your hand that she'd forgotten she was doing it. You give her a small amused grin and begin tugging her towards the library's entrance.

It doesn't take long to lead her to the alley. You don't make any move to try and climb up into her arms, though. Instead, you pull her deeper in- back around the bend, so nobody passing by on the street can see- and begin trying to undo the buttons on her jacket.

"And what do you think you're doing?" Despite her words, Victoria's tone is amused, and she's not making any moves to try and stop you. Still, you look up at her and pout as you try and undo them.

"You said you'd show me later," you whine a little.

"I said I might," she corrects you. "It's getting dark in this alley, Taylor. What do you even think you'll see?"

You consider it. "I don't care," you declare eventually. "I just want to look at you. You're pretty," you add with what you hope is a seductive fluttering of your eyelashes.

Victoria rolls her eyes with an amused huff of a sigh. "Fine, but we don't have long." She brushes your fingers away and deftly begins to undo her own buttons. You stand there for a moment, watching eagerly, before her fingers pause and she grins tremulously at you. "You're only going to look, right?"

You shiver slightly and nod. "I didn't want to pressure you," you say, but you gladly place your bag down, tucking it against the alley's dirty wall. When you look back, you can't help but let out a gasp.

While you weren't looking, Victoria has taken off a lot more than just her jacket. She's holding her
shirt and bra over one arm. As you watch, she nervously tucks her other arm across her chest, incidentally pushing her breasts a bit higher. She swallows. "I-" Then she stops and shakes her head. She tries again. "I... hope you like what you see," she says with a nervous smile.

You rest your gaze on her nervous smile. "I do," you say softly. "Of course I do."

Her smile turns a bit softer, more wistful. "Good," she says simply.

You spend a few moments running your eyes down her body, allowing yourself to thoroughly appreciate the fact that she's now only wearing an indecently short skirt and a pair of shoes, before you drag your eyes up to her face and step closer. This is a big step for her, and as much as you want to raise your camera up and take some pictures of her or leer at her for the next half an hour, that's not something you can bring her to do. Instead, you step forward and bring your arms around her in a hug, resting your hands against her warm back. She settles into the hug.

You don't know what prompted her to do this- it could have been a lot of things; giving her your number, your comments about not wanting her money, going on a mock-date with her before your date with Madison, even just appreciating her gift of her copy of her books. You do know, though- even without your power- that this isn't something she'd do on a little whim.

This is, after all, her breaking another of the rules of her relationship with her boyfriend. Kissing is one thing, it's long since happened, but letting you look at her bare breasts- a sight that is supposed to be reserved for her boyfriend exclusively- is another betrayal. One she made for you. You don't want to spoil that acknowledgement of her relationship with you with sexual antics, no matter how much of a turn-on the thought of Victoria cheating on her boyfriend with you is.

Instead, you just hold her against you, gently tracing figure-eights over her bare back.

After a few minutes, you part from her, giving her a gentle kiss as you withdraw. She looks back at you with lidded eyes, seeming to have regained some of her courage.

"Thanks, Taylor," she breathes. You nod, and she gives you a flirtatious grin. "You're not going to take a better look?" she asks teasingly.

More seriously, you shake your head. "Not today," you tell her, and lean in to steal another kiss. "Another day, yeah, but I don't want to spoil it today by pervring on you."

Her grin is softer again this time. "You wouldn't spoil it," she protests, but you note that she does look a little relieved as she begins to pull her bra back on. "I did choose to show you, after all. You could have looked more."

You just shake your head. "Another day," you repeat.

She gives you a warm look, then clips her bra back on and pulls you over to her. You allow her to move you, although you're pretty sure that if she put any strength into it you would've been forced to go regardless. She leans down and gives you a kiss, one you eagerly return. When she parts, it's with a happy look on her face, and slightly flushed lips. She licks them before she says anything. "Well," she says huskily. "I'm busy most days, but if you ever want me to come over and give you another look, I have a standing date with Dean on Wednesdays. I'll drop it and come over to your place if you want me to."
You hum and give her another kiss, not saying anything.

You're pretty sure you'll take her up on the offer, though.

The two of you retain enough presence to not get too caught up in each other. You mess around for a little, letting her pull on her shirt and kissing her enough to smear her lipstick, but you're careful not to get drawn into it enough that you're late for your date with Madison.

At about twenty minutes to five, Victoria gives you a final kiss and pulls her head away with a regretful sigh before scooping you up into her arms. You make sure to pick up your bag, then give her directions to a street near the outdoor cinema, where she sets you down in the closest alley. She gives you one last kiss before tapping at her watch and smirking. "You have my number," she reminds you. "Call me or text me any time you want."

You wave goodbye at her, then begin trudging off to the theatre.

When you get there, two minutes before five, you find Madison already standing at the entrance, rubbing her bare arms. Her face lights up when she sees you, and she waves energetically at you.

"Hi, Taylor!" she says happily when you get close enough to hear her over the cars passing by. "You made it!"

"Of course I did." You let go of the bag with one hand, then reach over and pull her into a hug that she happily settles into. "I'm not going to miss out on a date with my Madison, am I?"

She shakes her head. "Noo," she moans a little teasingly. "Never." You tighten your hug around her, pleased that she understands, then guide her over to the entrance.

The clerk waves you through with a bored expression. It is a free showing of the movie tonight, after all- something you're pretty sure the cinema has designed to try and draw people in. It would probably help if they picked more popular movies to show, though, you conclude when you finally head in. There's only a couple of people in here alongside you, each of them sitting in their cars and more focused on the people in the cars with them than anything else around. Which is good, because it'd be hard to do what you have planned if everyone was watching you.

You lead Madison to the most secluded place you can find- an area behind a small tree, one of five that dot a line across the back of the area. Once, they might have formed an attractive decoration, but they haven't been trimmed or cut back in years. Their branches reach out, detracting from the movie theatre's appearance.

Still, it suits your purposes. You move behind it, then sit down and spread your legs. Madison goes to take her seat without prompting, but you hold up your hand, forestalling her. "Hold on," you say. "I've got something for you." She looks at you curiously, but her curiosity morphs to shock and happiness when you pull out the jacket you'd purchased earlier.

"Taylor!" she squeals happily. "You bought it!"

You nod confidently. "Of course. I told you I would, Maddie. Now, are you ready?"
She bites her lower lip, looking anxiously around the park. Then, she seems to gather her courage. "Yeah," she squeaks out, and promptly begins to take her shirt off.

Before you take your own shirt and jacket off, you reach into the bag and take the jacket out. Then you take your own jacket off, folding it neatly and placing it in the bag, and take your shirt off, doing the same with it. By the time you're done, Madison is shivering in front of you, holding her own neatly folded shirt and bra out. You take them, placing them in the bag, then spread your legs again. She quickly takes her seat, and you press a kiss against the side of her head. It's nice to feel Madison's warm back pressed against your chest.

"Okay," you murmur in her ear. You place the jacket around yourself, then run one hand down her arm, drawing a shiver out of her. "You're going to have to put your arms in the sleeves. Can you do that for me?" She nods, her eyes fluttering closed. It's surprisingly difficult for her to get both her arms through them, but she manages. The back of the jacket stretches tightly against your back. "Now, you need to do the jacket up." Again, it's surprisingly difficult to do so. The jacket is tight around you, but not so tight that you can't manoeuvre your arms around if you want. She manages it, though.

Her breath is coming faster. It's a little curious. You wrap your arms tightly around her stomach and whisper to her, "So this is your fantasy, huh?"

She nods, squeezing her eyes closed. "Y- yeah," she manages.

"Hm." You gently run one of your fingers down her sides. She jerks at the movement and lets out a little moan. "Well, I'm enjoying it. I'm curious, though, why this fantasy in particular?"

Madison fights off another little moan as your breath tickles her ear. "I just-" She swallows. "I just like, um, being close to you. Feeling like, um. We're connected, physically. Like I..." She trails off into a hiss, her eyes dazed for a moment before regaining some clarity. "Like I can't... get away from you. Like-"

You move your head down and quickly kiss her neck, just beneath her ear. She trails off into another audible moan. Geez, she's even getting off on telling you about why she's getting off. "Go on," you prompt her after a few moments, when her breathing has eased some.

"Ah..." She attempts to lean back further into you, but there's no room for her to move further back. She's pressed as tightly against you as she possibly can be right now. "I, ah, I like feeling like, like you've trapped me." She reaches down and grabs your hands through the jacket. You can't feel it, but you think she's drawing some comfort from the make-do hand-holding. Or maybe she's just getting off on that, too. It's hard to tell when her cheeks are this flushed and her breathing is ragged. "It's so... so sexy to feel like you're h-holding on to me, like I couldn't g-get away, even if I wanted to. Which I d-don't. B-but it feels so good to feel like y-you're h-holding me down. M-making me yours." She's panting so hard by the end that you're actually a little worried. Admitting this aloud, to your face, is doing a lot for her.

You don't say anything for a few moments, just stroke her sides and give her the chance to calm down a bit before you respond. You wait for her breathing to settle some, until you're no longer half-afraid that she's going to twist herself until she can just start grinding on your knee right here, then you speak into her ear. "But you are mine," you murmur, and lean down to kiss her neck.

"I know." She screws her eyes closed even tighter. "I know. But I like feeling it."
"Okay. Okay." You kiss her neck again. "I'm glad I can do that for you, then."

She nods. Her eyes flutter open for a moment, and she turns her head almost ninety degrees. A soft whine escapes her when she can't turn her head far enough to kiss you, so you oblige yourself, shifting as far to the side as you can so you can try and meet her in a kiss. It's messy and awkward, and you bash your teeth and noses together twice. But eventually your mouths meet, and you're glad that you're sitting down, because you're pretty sure that the needy moan that escapes her at the kiss would make you go weak at the knees with desire.

It's a nice feeling, to kiss Madison when you can still taste Victoria on your lips. Madison doesn't seem to mind the taste, if the way she sucks on your upper lip is any indication. There's no way she can mistake the taste for being you. You don't taste like cherry, like Victoria does. She's settling in, then. Going on this date with her, right after declaring that you would, must have done a lot to settle her nerves about her role as one of your girlfriends.

It's uncomfortable for the both of you to keep your heads twisted like that, so you break the kiss off soon, nudging her until she's looking towards the screen. Then, you slip your hands up her chest and cup her breasts, playing with them—only lightly. You don't want to reduce her to a moaning, squirming mess again just yet; you just want keep her nice and wet for you for when you return home.

The movie has a runtime of a little over an hour and a half, giving you plenty of time to play with her. It's hard to resist pushing her a little, but honestly, you almost think that you could just leave your hands by your sides and she'd still be ready for you by the time you get home. Almost. Madison isn't the only person who finds the concept of owning her to be erotic, though.

You don't even know what the movie about. Honestly, you kind of doubt Madison watched a single minute of it either.

So when it ends, the both of you are surprised. You try to jerk away, but all you end up doing is dragging Madison backwards a little, causing her to shiver again and then let out an awkward laugh. You pinch her nipple reprovingly, then settle down.

"Undo the zipper." You whisper the order from behind her, punctuating it with a kiss to the back of her head. She does so eagerly, allowing you to slip the jacket awkwardly over you and settle over Madison's back, leaving you naked from the waist up to anyone who looks. You shiver a little and hurriedly pull the first shirt you find out—Madison's—and pull it on. It's a bit small for you, but it'll do. You don't really want to strip down again when any of the other people here could turn around and see you—and besides, your girl is looking at you with smoky eyes. It looks like she enjoys it when you wear her clothes.

You do her zipper up for her, then pull her to her feet and give her a quick kiss. "Come on," you murmur. "It's time to go home."

She trails along behind you, clutching tightly to your hand. There's a bus stop only a couple of stops away—you've made sure to check in case Victoria would be busy today.

She doesn't protest when you pay for her ticket, just cuddles up to you on the bus seat. You let her lean into you, gently stroking her hair as she stares adoringly up at you from her position resting her head on your shoulder.

Neither of you comment about Madison tasting Victoria on your lips. If she wants to bring it up,
you'll tell her, but you're not sure it's a good idea for you to just casually bring her up just before having sex with your girl. You settle for just massaging her scalp and humming to yourself.

It's getting close to half past seven when the bus pulls up near your home. You get up, trying to stretch your shoulders as best you can in the limited bus space, then pull your girl up with you, disembark from the bus, and head home.

You pull her against you for a moment once you're inside, giving her another kiss on the top of her head. "Okay. We should eat before we start anything. Is there anything you'd like?"

"Oh!" She spins around, looking at you. "Um, I'll cook if you like. Any time, really."

"That's okay." You give her an easy smile. "You can help me if you want, but we don't have very much, so it shouldn't be complicated. I was thinking just spaghetti and some vegetables, if you're okay with that? I think we have some pasta sauce, too. No mince, though, so we'll be eating vegetarian tonight."

Madison stares at you for a moment. You can't tell whether she looks concerned, stricken or happy. "Um, that sounds okay," she says. "I'll help you if that's okay."

You shrug. "Okay."

Honestly, it's not too difficult. You don't have very many vegetables in the fridge- half a capsicum, some broccoli, an unopened packet of green beans and half a packet of carrots- so it's not like you're overwhelmed with choice. The two of you get to work, and within half an hour, it's all done and ready to eat. Hopefully Dad goes shopping before he comes home tomorrow, this is sad even for you.

Once you've placed your bowl on the table and cracked a little pepper over it, you sit down in your chair. Madison sits down opposite you, looking a little nervous.

"Okay," you say, stabbing your fork into your spaghetti. "We should probably talk about this before we do it."

"Talk?" Madison shrinks down into her chair. "What do you mean?"

You spin your spaghetti around on your fork, but don't eat it just yet. "I want to have sex tonight," you say frankly. "With you. But I don't want to do it if it'll make you uncomfortable." Then, you finally eat the spaghetti on your fork. It's bland. Damn it.

She shakes her head frantically once you've finished explaining. "No, that's good!" she practically yells. "That doesn't make me uncomfortable. I- I really want that, actually." She trails off, blushing as she pokes at her spaghetti.

You quickly chew and swallow your food, then begin wrapping more spaghetti around your fork. "Okay. I'm glad to hear that." You set your fork down on the side of your bowl. "But we do need to talk about it then, Madison."

She swallows nervously. "Um, why? Can't we just..." Her face turns redder, and she trails off.

"No," you say calmly. "You can have casual sex, but when it's between two people who care about each other, sex is a very emotional thing." At least, you have to imagine so. Given the feelings that
are stirred in you when you're just playing around, you can't imagine just fucking her and being done with it. "And it's easy to hurt each other or push one of us too far if we get into it." Again, you have to imagine so. It's not like you've done it before, you've just spent way too much time reading up on it. "So before we do anything, we should set boundaries and make sure we know how to take care of each other."

She stares at you for a moment, then gently lowers her fork down. "Okay." There's a quaver in her voice, but she sounds a lot more confident than you'd actually expected her to. "I don't really know where to start. Could you...?"

You nod firmly. "Okay. Before we do, Madison, you have to answer me honestly. Okay? Don't be scared or worried that you'll disappoint me or anything like that. If you don't think you'll enjoy something, then tell me, and if you want to try something, then tell me that too. Okay?"

Her lip trembles a little, but she nods seriously.

"Good." You lean forwards. "Is there anything you'd like me to do after we finish tonight?"

She looks down at the table for a moment. "Um, what do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know what you like." You drum your fingers on the table. "You might like to sleep alone, so if you don't want me to cuddle you when we're done, you should tell me now. Or if you want to take a shower after we're done, or if you don't. That kind of thing."

She trembles a little. "Um, I don't know," she admits, her voice small. "I haven't... done this before. But, please don't leave me alone?"

You nod. "I can do that," you assure her. "I'll stay near you, I promise. Is there anything else?"

She jerkily shakes her head. "I can't think of anything," she says. "Just, maybe you can check when we're done? I might know then..."

You nod, accepting that. "We'll see how it goes," you smile at her. "That's okay, Madison. If you don't know, you don't know. We'll figure it out together." She gives you a tentative smile. "Now, the sex itself. Um. We should figure out a safeword." At her questioning look, you explain; "It's a word you can say during sex to get me to stop whatever I'm doing right away. You can use it if you're feeling uncomfortable, or if I hurt you, or for whatever reason."

She tilts her head. "Can't I just say no?" she asks. "Or stop?"

"No," you reply. "There might be times when you say no for some other reason, or ask me to stop without meaning for me to stop everything I'm doing. It's important that you have a way to stop me if I go further than you're comfortable with, and that I have a way to stop you if you go further than I'm comfortable with."

"Okay." Madison chews her lip a little. "My safe word will be November, then."

"No," you say gently. "It should be something meaningful to you, Madison. If you've ever had a really good masturbation session-" She chokes a little, and you fight back a grin- "then you know that it can leave you feeling a bit light-headed. Imagine that, but worse. It can make it difficult to think clearly and remember things. It's important that you choose a word that means something to you."
"Okay." Chewing on her lip anxiously, she stares down at the table for long moments. You wait patiently for her to think it through. It takes her over a minute to look up and reply, and when she does, it's with a pained little look. "My safe word will be, um, unwanted. Is that-"

"It's not up to me," you tell her gently. "If you think you'll remember it, then it's good." She nods unhappily. "Okay. My safe word is cancer." She blinks twice, but you don't give her time to think the implications through. "Alright. So, we should talk about fetishes."

Over the next half an hour, you're able to determine these things:

Madison, unsurprisingly, loves the idea of submission and you dominating her. Every time you try to figure out where her limits lied, she seems to be fine with it. It's only when you got into more extreme territory, like chaining her hands and feet up and making her clean your house with her mouth, that she gets hesitant, and even that's more because she's not sure if she could physically do it. Honestly, you're the limiting factor there; you're the one who's not comfortable with dominating her to quite that extent. You love the idea of her doing your cooking and cleaning nude, but that's as far as you really want to push her.

She's fine with some of your other kinks. Bondage isn't something she's really interested in the way you are, but if you want to tie her up for a while, she thinks she might enjoy some light handcuffing. She's not into exhibitionism at all- "My body is for you," she says firmly- but she enjoys the idea of public sex, as long as nobody can really see you, which is fine- you're a bit of a voyeur, but you're also rather possessive and don't like other people looking at your girls. She doesn't mind the idea of toys, but affirms that she really enjoys being able to touch you, and that she'd prefer you use your fingers and mouth when you can.

She tells you that she'd prefer to avoid what she calls "butt stuff", so you mentally cross anal off the list. It's not your biggest kink anyway, although you're not against it if your partner wants it, so that's fine. She's also not really into dirty talk- "It makes me feel ashamed," she admits, "and I don't like feeling ashamed." That one's a bit disappointing, but you'll live. She also doesn't like incest, which disappoints you for a second until you remember she doesn't even have any female siblings, and you don't think you'd enjoy seeing Madison fuck her mother in anything but a fit of revenge.

Neither of the two of you enjoy the thought of causing or receiving pain, which is a bit of a relief. You can't imagine ever wanting to hurt one of your girls. You might enjoy some light slapping if it's Emma, or some light spanking for sexy purposes, but that's as far as it goes. Neither of you is into watersports or scat, which is a huge relief- that's a line you'd really prefer to never have to cross.

And... that's where your list of kinks ends.

You're pretty sure there's more, a lot more, but you haven't encountered them. You can't discuss them with Madison if you don't know they exist. Honestly, you're pretty inexperienced still.

It's not a very sexy talk, but it's a necessary one. Just imagining not knowing where Madison's limits lie and accidentally pushing her too far makes you feel a bit queasy. You don't know her well enough to recognize the signs that she's uncomfortable during sex yet.

And as much as the idea once appealed to you, you don't think you could just use her for sex any more. You couldn't do that to her.

While the two of you were talking, you each slowly finished off your dinner. Now that the talk has concluded, you pick up your bowls and take them over to the sink, rinsing them off and placing them...
on the rack to dry up. Then, you take Madison's hand and draw her slowly up, leading her to your room, where you sit down on your bed and draw her over to you.

Then, you let go of her hand and slide your arms around her, just holding her for a while and occasionally giving her a small kiss on the top of her head. She looks and feels uncomfortable after your talk. You don't want to push her right now. Plus, what is that rule- half an hour after eating before exercise? As unsexy as that talk might have been, you're pretty sure that getting a stomach cramp in the middle of fingering her would be even less sexy.

So you're patient. You just sit there on your bed, revelling in the feel of her in your arms, the smell of her hair, and the warmth of her body.

It takes a while for her to relax, but she slowly does. When she's relaxed enough that you think she's receptive, you quietly move your hand up to the zipper of the jacket she's still wearing and gently pull it down. She looks up at you with lidded eyes; you lean down and press a kiss on each of her eyelids, then slide back so she can lie down on your bed. She holds her arms up, allowing you to tug the jacket off her, incidentally leaving her completely topless.

Then you slide off the bed, roughly tossing the jacket aside, and kneel on the floor beside where she's lying on the bed. She goes to turn over and look at you, but you press a firm hand to her collarbone, preventing her from moving; then, you lean over the bed and kiss her warmly, moving your hand down to rest on her stomach. She smiles into the kiss.

For a good few minutes, you let her just lay there, peppering kisses over her lips. Then you begin moving down, pressing soft kisses down her jaw- tracing your tongue over her jawline, and listening to her giggles at the tickling sensation- and down her neck. You pause, there, and press a long kiss to it. A gasp escapes her when you gently bite on it, then turns into a louder moan when you suck the skin. For a minute or two, you sit there, alternating between biting her and sucking on her neck, until you're sure a large bruise will develop there. See if anyone misses that.

Only once you're content with your marking do you continue down, tracing soft kisses along her collarbone and listening to her soft panting. She has a sharp, defined collarbone, usually hidden beneath a shirt. Now that you have free rein to play with it, you spend a few minutes licking your way along it, leaving a trail of wet saliva across her neck and collar.

She's biting back erotic groans when you finally begin kissing your way down her chest. You tease her by kissing your way around her breast first, then licking the swell beneath, and running your tongue down her stomach. She gives a disappointed whimper, but only clutches at your bedspread; she doesn't complain at all. Good. You lick down further, until you reach the edge of her skirt, then you begin licking your way back up, pausing at her bellybutton for a moment. Her groans grow louder as you dip your tongue into it and swirl it around quickly, and don't fade when you move on and move back up, not pausing in your quest to reach her breasts again.

It's all about the tease, the build-up. Your power swells at the back of your mind, begging for you to use it. You do- but only to feel her, not to touch her, not to control her. As your fingers slip beneath her skirt, touching the elastic line of her panties, you're able to feel her emotions swell- her lust, her submission, but more than anything, that warm feeling of her caring and devotion and affection and love. It's a heady sensation, knowing that you're the cause of this, that the reason Madison is squirming and whimpering on your bed is because of you.

You taunt her, slipping your fingers in and out of her panties without ever touching her where she needs to be touched. You can feel her emotions ebbing and flowing beneath you. You can't stop
yourself from clambering onto the bed beside her, resting on the bed beside her as you yank off her skirt and her panties and toss them aside. Her heaving breasts make a soft pillow as you lay beside her, eyes closed as you immerse yourself in her emotions. Above, her voice is chanting softly- "Taylor, Taylor, Taylor, Taylor" - but you're listening for something stronger, something deeper. Soon, you're hearing it, the soft *thrum-thrum* of her fluttering heartbeat, and that's where you rest your head, where you focus your attention.

For a while, you lay there like that, skimming your fingers over her bare pussy and daringly dipping a finger inside her for brief seconds before pulling out, leaving her aching, unfulfilled. You can feel what you're doing her, how wet she's getting, how her heart thunders in her chest, but you don't stop. Occasionally, you move your head just far enough that you can bite her breasts a little, before you retreat back. Her voice is breaking, now- soft moans of "No, please, no, Taylor, keep going, please-" but you don't care. She's not quite there yet.

There's a sexual element to your power. Well, obviously, but you mean, beyond the obvious. When you can literally feel someone's emotions, when you can *feel* how pleasurable they're feeling, there's almost no need for you to actually be touched. You can just lay down, revelling in the pleasure you're causing to course through Madison's body.

When you judge that she's wet enough, wanting it enough, you slip up her body a bit until you're lying fully alongside her, one hand still down between her legs. She spasms, letting out a long and loud groan as you lean in and kiss the mark you'd put on her neck earlier. Her groan soon turns into soft whimpers as you just gently lick it, then tilt your head up to give her a wet kiss.

You're tempted to push it, push her, into a frenzy of sexual energy. To whisper in her ear about how you're marking her, to tease her and torture her until she begs for you to let her come, until she gets on her hands and knees and offers herself to you to satisfy your perverse desires. But tonight isn't about that kind of thing, not really.

Instead, you spend a few more moments teasing her, then watch her face as you slowly slip a finger inside her. Her eyes flutter closed as a gasp escapes her, turning into a loud groan as you work a second finger inside. That's it- she's too tight for a third. Even you have to fight down a shiver as the sensations flood back into you.

It's fascinating to watch her as you begin pumping your fingers into her. Her eyes dart all over the place, unfocused as though she doesn't know where to look, roaming hungrily over your face, down your shirt and over your room. Her cries are too broken and incoherent for you to tell what she's trying to say, now; there's a lot of cries of "Tay" and "Yes" in there, but that's all you can make out between the whimpers and moans. She doesn't know what to do with her hands, alternating between clenching them on the bedspread and running them up over her stomach and breasts.

Then her pleasure peaks, and she spasms and cries loudly, coating your hand liberally with her juices. Your vision swims for a moment as her orgasm washes back to you, causing an intense wash of pleasure to run through your body; you can't help but let out your own moan to match her cry. You don't let up, though, and soon add your thumb to the mix as you begin to roughly rub her clit, causing her body to jerk again in your hand. Your body is almost shaking too badly for you to bring your free hand up to her mouth, where you cover it before her cries- almost screams- of pleasure can come forth loudly enough for your neighbours to hear. Somehow, though, you manage it, even managing to bring yourself up to your knees so you can angle your fingers deeper into her.

She's coming again, soon, your furious assault pushing her through her first orgasm and into her second. You can't help that your fingers slip out of her several times as you fight through your own
orgasm to continue fucking her. Her pleasure has almost overwhelmed her, now- you can feel it, feel her trembling at your hands- and then it peaks again, you peak again, and you collapse atop her, mouth pressing furiously against hers as the two of you tremble in your third orgasm tonight.

And only then, thoroughly spent, do you collapse beside her, still fully dressed. She's gasping so hard for breath that you have to slip the hand that had been covering her mouth before you'd kissed her beneath her and raise her chest a little, allowing her to breathe in deeply before she passes out.

You let Madison come down gently after that, careful not to interrupt her too much. She shivers every time you move, the slight movements of your fingers inside her still sending little aftershocks through her. You try not to move that hand too much, knowing how sensitive she still is, and instead just rub your other hand over her stomach comfortingly. Just... letting her know you're still here. Her breaths are still shuddering, but they're not great heaving gulps now. She probably won't pass out if she keeps recovering like this. Still, you don't move, just keep lightly stroking her stomach. You're not the one setting the pace here.

It takes about ten minutes before you feel confident that you can take your fingers out of her. She lets out a soft sigh, but you just press your other hand against her stomach and she quiets again. Her eyes are glassy and unfocused as she stares at the wall of your bedroom.

Soft shivers begin to wrack her frame soon after. It doesn't feel that cold to you, but then, Madison was the one who was moving around and coming intensely. You imagine that burned a lot of energy. When you pushed yourself too far running on Wednesday morning, you'd felt colder than normal- it's part of why you'd luxuriated in your shower so much. If Madison had burned even more energy than that- and you had strung her along for quite some time- then you imagine she really could be feeling pretty cold.

It doesn't feel right to just wrap her up in your blankets or throw her in the shower and call it a day, though.

Instead, you slowly sit up, keeping your hand on Madison's stomach in an attempt to be reassuring as you draw her up. It feels wrong to take her out of your bed so quickly after claiming her in it, but it feels a lot worse to imagine leaving her alone right now, even temporarily. So you tenderly draw her up into a sitting position, then slowly draw her over to the side of the bed, where she absently follows you as you stand. For the first time in about half an hour, you take her hand in yours and let go of her stomach with your other hand.

She sways alarmingly when she makes it to her feet, as though she's not quite sure where her body is at. Instinctively, you lean in and let go of her hand to wrap your arm around her shoulders. She leans in, murmuring incoherently as she wraps her arms around your own waist and holds herself against you. It makes things a bit awkward as you walk over to your dresser and take out the largest jacket you own, but you don't mind- if this is what she needs, then this is what she needs.

At least she doesn't seem to mind you putting the jacket on her, despite you needing to lift her arms away from your waist to do so. You keep one hand on her hip to steady her and gently tug the jacket over first one arm, then the other. It covers a surprising amount of her body- you really are taller than she is. A silly smile spreads over her face as you zip the jacket up, and she steps unsteadily closer to you again. You just pull her into a hug, then settle your arm around her shoulders again as you carefully walk her out to the kitchen.

There, you sit her down at the table in the chair facing the little kitchen before you move over to get her a drink of water. She takes it with still-trembling hands when you get it, and you have to hastily
take it back and drink some yourself so that she can hold it without spilling it. She greedily gulps it down, then lowers the glass to the table, panting again. Hydration is very important, you conclude.

You give her a few minutes to recover some more, just sitting beside her and letting her clutch your hands with her own, before you stand and encourage her to her feet again. She's steadier, this time, not swaying quite so badly. She still leans into you for support, though, and you're happy to oblige as you move her back towards your room.

"Do you want to take a bath now?" you ask her softly. She shakes her head in response and clings tighter to you. "I can jump in with you," you offer, but she still shakes her head, not saying anything. Well, it's not like you've never been tempted to just fall asleep post-orgasm. You usually end up feeling really gross the next day, but- if it's what she wants.

You just lead her gently back to your room, where you're quite happy to unzip the jacket back off her. She gives you a wobbly smile as you walk her back to your bed, nude, and then gently tugs at your shirt. You give her a nod and an encouraging smile before you quickly take your own- well, Madison's- shirt off, following it with your pants and panties, and climb in the bed behind her, tugging the covers over the two of you as you go.

The two of you are asleep in minutes.

The first thing you see when you wake up is Madison's cute face, pressed up close to your own. You don't have a very large bed, only a double, so she was forced to snuggle up close to you during her sleep last night. Her legs are wrapped around your own, and her breasts are smooshed up against your flat chest. Her breath washes across your neck every time you exhale.

It's probably the best sight you've ever woken up to.

You're careful not to move. You don't want to disturb her. Instead, you just gently cuddle up to her, encouraging her sleeping body to lie against your own so you can lie comfortably down on the bed again and just... think about your plans for tomorrow.

Not today, because you know exactly what you're going to be spending today doing: cuddling up with Madison and watching movies until she's forced to go home, then doing that Chemistry work you'd promised Sophia you'd do.

You're not really sure how your relationship with Madison is going to progress now. She's opened herself up to you completely, and you- well, you don't think you did anything to hurt her in the aftermath, at least. You'll have to watch how that progresses, but you're pretty sure that at the least, she's- she's yours now. You'll have to find some way to make that clear to her, to everyone. Maybe you can buy her a choker, or a collar. Something solid, physical, that won't heal over time like a bruise on her neck will.

Madison isn't your only priority, though- just your top one, right at this moment. You do have other girls at school, after all. Your arrangement with Sophia is still going on, and now you might be able to call Victoria over on weekdays, too. And you have your job, and your work at the clinic, and Amy, and you have to find more out about this situation with Rune, and deal with Emma, and wow. Your time is really getting booked out. Nothing you can do about it yet, but- soon, maybe. At least you'll be able to give Madison your number when she wakes up. Being able to reach her constantly will do something for you.
For now, though, you just lay there enjoying the feeling of cuddling Madison nude while you plan the next couple of days out.
Sunday goes by very peacefully. Neither you nor Madison feel like doing much after last night; it's hard for you to even work up the energy to head down to the kitchen and make a simple breakfast for the two of you, just scrambled eggs on toast and a glass of milk. You can't even be bothered to put any pepper on your eggs. Okay, you can be bothered. Eggs without pepper are weird.

The two of you end up just lazing around your house for most of the day, cuddling on the couch and watching movies you've already seen three times, or just curling up towards each other and giggling about nothing in particular. Occasionally, the two of you share a long, lazy kiss, but it doesn't go further than that. There's an unspoken agreement between the two of you- today is for recovery and coming down. Madison is still not quite steady on her feet again.

Unfortunately, all good things do have to come to an end. You get in as much cuddling time as you can, even causing Madison to shriek when you ambush her with another hug as she's leaving the house, but when Rick is standing right there waiting for her to get in the car, it feels pretty uncomfortable to try and hold on to her for too long.

You end up seeing her off with a big wave, then letting out a big sigh. There's always next time, you suppose. Still, it's disappointing that you can't have more time with her. A full day just... isn't enough. At least you have one of her shirts now, and she has one of yours.

Those kind of thoughts swim through your head as you trudge back to your bedroom. You recognize these kind of thoughts- it's your possessiveness swimming up again. It's not the kind of thing you should be indulging in, you do know that. They're just- natural thoughts, you think. Wouldn't anyone want more time with their Madison if they had one?

It's not worth thinking about. You shake your head, trying to clear it of those kind of thoughts. It'd be good to have Madison with you all the time, but she's not some kind of... pocket hug-and-sex doll. She has her own family to go back to, and her own hobbies to attend to, and probably even her own homework to struggle through.

But as much as you shake your head, the thoughts don't disappear. You harrumph, alone in the house where nobody can see it, and head over to your desk.

Madison might have her own homework to struggle through, but you definitely do have an assessment you need to finish up. And while Madison won't give you a disappointed look if you don't finish it, Sophia probably will, and that would be just as depressing.

Besides, you conclude as you sit down at your desk and pull your Chemistry textbook over to you, at least this might give you something to distract yourself with.

Dad ends up getting home close to eight that night. Still some time before you head to bed, but later than you'd expected him to get back. You go out and get yourself a drink so that you can at least nod 'hello' at him, but that's all either of the two of you say before you slink back to your room and finish up the assessment.

Your pillow still smells of Madison when you climb in bed. It's faint, but it's there.

It's a good note to fall asleep on.
School the next day wouldn't be too bad, except that you have to wake up early- again- to go to your job. It's going to take you some time to get used to that, you realize glumly. You might have to actually start heading to bed earlier on Sundays and Thursdays so you can get an extra hour's sleep, or something.

At least the jog to school afterwards refreshes you a little. It's not far enough to get you all sweaty, just far enough for the cold air to slap you awake some.

You have your Chemistry work in your bag as you head to to your locker, where Madison is, as usual, waiting for you. There's a faint flush to her cheeks when you call cheerfully out to her, but she greets you happily enough, and doesn't shrink back out of embarassment like you'd been half-afraid she would. Indeed, she doesn't even hesitate to step into a quick hug, although you're self-consciously forced to end it early so that you don't risk drawing any undue attention.

"Hi," you say with a small smile.

She looks up at you happily, a larger smile adorning her face. "Hi," she says cheerily. "Did you sleep well after I left?"

You shrug, dropping your voice. "Not as well as I did while you were over, but well enough," you reply. "How about you?"

Instead of responding, she leers at you a little bit half-hopefully. "I slept really good," she says in what you think is her attempt at a seductive purr. It's more cute than seductive, but you're willing to play along. "I was nice and tired by the time I fell asleep, hehe." Her voice may not have sounded very seductive, but you'll be damned if the perverted little chuckle she lets out at the end of her sentence doesn't do some interesting things to you- as does the red that steals up her cheeks when her words catch up with her.

You just raise your eyebrows at her, though, conscious of the potential audience around you. "Well, I'm glad to hear it," you say mildly. She flushes harder, looking very hard down at the floor. "We should probably get to class, though."

"Yeah," she mumbles, looking up and giving you an embarassed grin. You give her a reassuring grin of your own, and hers becomes softer somehow, more happy than embarassed.

It's hard to focus in class with Madison right beside you, not that you mind very much. You spend most of your time holding her hand beneath the desk while you lean over, trying to explain the lessons to her while you resist the urge to feel her up beneath the desk. It's really- it's actually quite distracting. You're constantly aware of her now, of how warm she feels, of her soft skin is. All you want to do is take her hand and lead her away, but you can't, you're in the middle of class.

The bell thankfully- disappointingly- rings around the point your thoughts begin swinging in that direction. You're distracted enough that most of the class packs up and begins moving out before you've even finished packing up.

This is driving you insane. Not in a bad way, but you can't- you have to keep yourself distracted. But how? You've already done your homework, and even your Chemistry work has been finished. You could work on an extracurricular project, but...
Well, there is one thing you've been putting off.

Honestly, you've been trying to avoid using your power on random people at school. It makes you feel... obliged, kind of. When you use your powers on someone, you're learning how they feel. That's knowing someone on a pretty intimate level, and you've never been able to turn yourself away from someone you've come to know.

There's a reason you're still so hung up over Emma. You're self-aware enough to know that.

You make your way into the halls and settle down in your second class, letting out a long exhale. It might make you feel obliged, but, well, you've been planning on doing something about Rune for a while now. What does it really matter if you make that goal feel a little more urgent? (It matters a lot. You just can't turn away from the thought now you've acknowledged it.)

And really, you do need to figure out the limits to your power. Not just so you know what your limits are, but because it would be really bad if you ever thought you could do something when you needed to, but you couldn't.

You grimace and pull your notebook out. You have experimented with your powers a bit before, and learned some things. That'd be a good place to start, right?

When you'd first obtained your powers, you'd spent some time experimenting with them. You feel a little bit bad about that now, but there's... there's a heady rush when you use your power.

Some people might try and judge you for what you'd done, but until they've gone through what you'd gone through- until they've felt that helpless, that exposed, that useless- they don't have the right to judge you. They can't judge you until they've felt like that, until they've found themselves searching for some way, any way to make themselves feel not completely worthless-

- you shake your head for the second time that day. Going back down that path won't help anyone.

When you'd first obtained your powers, you'd spent some time experimenting with them. You'd quickly learned a few things.

The best way you've been able to conceptualize your power is by describing it as feeling and 'pulling' on someone's emotions, but that doesn't quite capture it. People's emotions are very complex creatures, and it's not easy to affect them.

Emotions aren't like a chart, where you can look and see that a given person is currently feeling a lot of anger and a smaller amount of restraint. Emotions are more like... a fine dish (and isn't that just an uncomfortable analogy). You can take a brief glimpse and see that they're feeling a lot of anger and restraint, but other emotions are threaded subtly through them, and it takes time to sort through them. Even then, just like in a meal, you're not always able to tell what's actually in their heads. You can just get a vague impression of what it's like. You can feel that an emotion is somehow related to anger, the same way that you can tell a given herb is spicy. That doesn't tell you what the emotion is- all you can do is make your best guess.

You close your eyes, focusing on your power, and extend it around you.

Some emotions are more readily accessible than others. You can feel the lust of the women around
you, for instance- it's a warm, thrumming feeling, contentment and excitement shot through with spikes of arousal. That's really the best way you can conceptualize it.

It's harder for you to "feel out" other emotions. When you try to grab the anger of the boy in front of you, it... resists you, for lack of a better word. The "mental grip" of your power squeezes around their anger, but every time you try to pull on it, it- it doesn't pull back, not really, but it becomes more real, or maybe the mental grip of your power becomes less real. Either way, the result is the same; you're only able to make minor adjustments before your "mental grip" snaps back, and you have to quickly shove your hand in your mouth to stifle the groan of pain you'd otherwise let echo across the classroom.

Right, well. Mental note to self (and one day, you should really start trying to remember these): don't try and pull on emotions you can't get a good grip on. It doesn't end well.

It's hard to tell, at least without doing some experimentation you're pretty sure you're literally never going to want to do, but you think that that particular effect is caused because you're not feeling particularly angry at the moment. The more you're feeling something, the easier it is to feel that emotion in other people, and the less resistance their emotions offer you.

That's just a theory, though. You're not going to go and deliberately make yourself feel depressed so that you can test whether it's easier to make other people feel depressed while you do. It would just explain a lot of things, like why you're functionally unable to feel out lust in men, and why you've never really been able to make other people feel cheerful.

The bell rings suddenly, jarring you out of your thoughts. You look blearily around at the other students, some of whom are giving you odd looks. You- huh.

Has it really been almost an hour already? Wow. It's really easy to lose track of time while you're experimenting with your powers.

You try and keep a better track of the time as you walk to your next class and sit down.

You've experimented a lot with your emotional manipulation powers before, but that's not the only aspect to your power. You can manipulate other people, yeah, but you can also feel them out. And-

Honestly, you're pretty sure that you're never, ever going to tell anyone about your emotional manipulation power. You can't even imagine telling Madison, and you're pretty sure that she would take that secret to the grave. The implicit admission that you're able to manipulate their emotions... Who could trust you after that? Even though you might never intend to use it on them again, that thought would always lurk in their minds. It'd destroy the foundations of their trust in you. Perhaps deservedly, but even so.

But if you're going to do something about Rune, you're going to need help. Your powers aren't very useful in combat, and if you try to get in a fight with the girl, she'll probably kick your ass. You're not going to be able to do it alone, and that means asking for help- and that means admitting that you have powers yourself, if you're going to get anyone to actually listen to you.

And if you're going to tell someone that you have powers, you'd rather admit that you can feel someone's emotions than that you can manipulate them.

You're pretty sure that you spend most of the rest of the day wandering around in a daze as you
focus on your powers. You know that you do cut your powers off at one point during lunch, as you wander around the school looking for a safe place where you might be able to pull Emma aside, but- no such luck. It seems like everywhere you go, people are milling around.

You don't let up, though. Bouncing between a few uses of your power, you're able to determine the following things:

First, your power doesn't really have a "range", as far as you're able to tell. Rather, it just becomes increasingly difficult for you to stretch your power out as you move away from yourself. It's... similar to mental strain, the kind you feel when you accidentally overwork yourself. You're able to stretch it all over the school without issue, and you don't even feel unduly strained when you try to push it across the road from the school, but the further you go, the worse off you feel. You end up stop trying before you manage to make it to the nearest store, a bit over half a mile away. You could probably make it that far, but you're pretty sure the headache you'd get from it would put you out of commission within minutes.

Second, you're not restricted to sensing people you're able to see, but it does get harder when you don't know where they are. Or, more correctly, when you know where someone is, they feel... sharper, somehow. Like with sight. When you know where someone is, you're able to 'visualize' someone better. Otherwise, it's like you're seeing them through your peripheral vision. You know they're there, and you have a general impression of what is, but you can't really make out details without being able to 'see' them.

It's odd, but maybe you're becoming more used to feeling out Madison and Sophia, because even when you don't know where they are, you're able to feel them much... much better than you can the people around them, for lack of a better way to put it.

And honestly, if nothing else, the realization that you can feel Madison and Sophia at school even when they're not next to you- that's worth it all on its own.

Third; you realize this was a terrible idea.

Or, well. It was actually a fantastic idea, but using your power actively like this does have a downside that makes itself known well before you even manage to head to the library to tutor Madison: the enormous and painful headaches that come with using it.

You already knew about it, of course, but you didn't really understand what triggers it before now. Now you do, or you think you do, although you wish you'd managed to figure it out in a rather less painful way.

You're fairly certain that it's a combination of the complexity of the emotions you're trying to sense, the number of people you're trying to track, and the distance that the person is for you.

It feels... honestly, you could barely feel any strain while you were feeling the emotions of the guy sitting in front of you at class. Mostly, he was feeling boredom and irritation, both relatively simple emotions. You could keep that up for, probably, a few hours before the pain gets bad enough to make you stop.

On the other hand, you'd felt the strain developing quickly when you'd tried to feel the emotions of your entire class. It hadn't been so quick that you'd immediately stopped, but you doubt you could keep that kind of effort up for more than an hour or so. And when you'd tried to stretch yourself out further than that- well, you'd stopped as soon as you'd tried to feel out the next class, too. The
combination of the physical distance and the added numbers, it'd added up fast.

It's not simple enough that you can try and assign numbers to it, or anything. But as a general rule, you're pretty sure that your power works best when you're not trying to do anything too complex with it, when you're not trying to sense too many people at a time, and when you're not trying to sense what people are feeling half a city away.

At least, that's what you've been able to figure out so far. You might be drawing erroneous conclusions, or missing something. But until you're able to test this much more extensively, these are the assumptions you're going to have to work under.

[Tuesday Planning]

The rest of the week is going to be fairly important, you know that. You're not even close to being able to actually approach doing anything about Rune and her influence at school- hell, your headache is still throbbing away, and you've already determined that you're not going to touch your power until the weekend. But- you can't help but remember what it felt like to extend your power over everyone at school. It didn't feel miserable, not exactly, but it did feel... hopeless. Like nobody here really expects to get out.

You can't do anything big now. You're still an unknown face at Winslow, and most of the people who do know your face, you wish they didn't. You can't even dedicate all your time to doing things to help them; even as you consider the thought, your stomach twists unpleasantly, and you shake your head instinctively. No, your girls are going to be your priority, that's a given.

But... you do need to start. And that's going to start today.

So, what exactly are you going to do for the rest of the week?
The door swings open easily as she pushes it. There's no trace of the creak that had been evident the last time she'd been here. Somebody must have oiled the hinges.

Inside, she calmly closes the door behind her and walks over to the small steel table in the middle of the room, where her client is waiting for her. He's tracking her as he moves, his beady eyes watching her fearfully as she approaches. His skin is pockmarked and sallow, and his eyes are bloodshot. He twitches as she approaches.

"You don't need to worry," she says coolly. She meant it to sound reassuring. Then again, she had never been very good about sounding reassuring.

She places her briefcase on the table and slides the latches open. They make a loud snap as they flip up, the sound inordinately loud in the small room. Her papers are laid out neatly within it. She takes the left stack- the stack containing her information on her client- and closes her briefcase again, setting it down on the ground beside the other unoccupied in the chair as she moves to sit in it.

"My name is Carol Dallon." She extends her hand out towards him, but isn't terribly surprised when he doesn't take it. After a moment, she withdraws her hand back to her side. "Now, mister Meiers- is there a name you would prefer I call you by?"

The man starts, then jerkily shakes his head at her. Internally, she frowns. She still has further to go to work on her personable demeanour, it appears. "Marlon," he says roughly. "My name's Marlon."

She nods. "Okay." She spreads her papers out in front of her, but doesn't glance down at them. She doesn't need to; her secretary has already gone all the relevant information with her. "Mister Marlon, as the police have no doubt already gone over with you, all citizens in the United States have the right to an attorney when they have been charged with a crime. My firm would like to represent you."

"You don't look like one of them lawyers that helped me last time," he says suspiciously. "You look like you got money, and I don't got much of that. Got one of them public lawyers coming anyway."

She waits a moment for him to subside. "Money isn't a concern," she replies calmly, once it is clear he has nothing more to say. "My firm will represent you pro bono- without expectation of receiving any money," she clarifies when he just gives her a blank look. "My firm has a vested interest in helping you, and people like you."

"People like me?" He gives her a suspicious look. "What, accused drug dealers?"

"No." Her voice remains perfectly even. "People who, like you, have made bad decisions in their life, and deserve the chance to make something of themselves."

He glares up at her, hands running frantically over his clothes as though looking for something. "I didn't do nothin' they accused me of," he protests. His hands scrabble harder for a moment, before he seems to give up on finding whatever he's looking for. His shoulders sag.

She gives him a patient smile at that. "Of course not," she agrees politely. "Nevertheless, you have
been accused by the police, and you are facing charges. This means that my firm has an interest in representing you."

Marlon's already shaking his head. "Seems real suspicious," he says frankly. "You comin' in here, offering to help me for free and all. Being honest, I think I'd prefer to take my chances with a public lawyer."

"That would be your choice." She doesn't even blink.

He studies her for a moment, seeming to unconsciously glare at her. "Why do you even care?" he asks.

She looks down at the papers in her hand for a moment, her memories whirling. Then she responds, her voice as steady as ever. "Let's say that I've had a lot of experience with people who made some bad choices along the way."

Silence stretches between the two as Marlon examines her, taking in her appearance, her clothes- and then, it clicks. He sits back, ramrod-straight, as he eyes her in a new light, but can't help the way he slumps back a few moments later, his hands opening and closing on his lap. "Wait, you're that New Age girl!"

"New Wave," she corrects him patiently. "And yes, I am affiliated with the New Wave movement. You may know me publicly as Brandish, although I have stated on public record that my name is Carol Dallon."

His expression wavers, caught somewhere between fear, disbelief and hope. "You're a cape," he says, wondering and excited and fearful all at once. "A hero, even. You help take people like me in, not help us- hell, your glowy sister is the one that took Lenny in!"

She tries to smile calmly at him. It probably comes out more like a grimace. "We have assisted the Brockton Bay Police Department in several arrests over the years, yes. I am sorry to hear that a friend of yours was involved."

"Nah, Lenny wasn't a friend of mine." There's a disbelieving shake of his head. "Shit," he whispers. "Why would a cape want to help me now, huh?"

"The New Wave movement has a vested interest in helping-"

"In helping people like me, yeah yeah," he cuts her off. "Trust me, everyone on the streets knows your spiel, lady. I ain't asking what you have printed on your business cards, I wanna know why you'd want to help me."

She stares at him for a moment. Beneath the table, where he can't see, her hands clench into fists. "We firmly believe that all citizens of Brockton Bay deserve-"

He cuts her off with a disgusted scoff. "Yeah, didn't think so," he spits out. "Nah, I ain't interested in being helped by someone who ain't even being honest with me. Think I'll wait for that public lawyer."

Her fists clench tighter in her lap, tight enough that she's mildly worried her fingernails might actually cut her. She tries to loosen them somewhat. Then, in a mild tone, she asks; "Have you ever heard of Marquis, mister Meiers?"
"Marquis?" Marlon looks confused at the sudden shift in the topic. "Yeah, kinda. He was one of the capes active back, like, ten years ago or something, wasn't he? Took down Allfather. Yeah, everyone knows who he was. Don't see what he has to do with anything, but."

Her answering smile is a little more strained this time. "It was not Marquis alone who faced down the Allfather," she corrects him stiffly. "It was a joint operation between Marquis and the New Wave movement, known then as the Brockton Bay Brigade."

"Huh." Marlon sits back at that, a thoughtful look on his face as he ponders that. "Don't hear about the heroes and the villains teaming up that much," he says eventually. "Why'd you do it?"

She attempts to fight back the memories. "Desperate times call for desperate measures," she says slowly. "Marquis had come into information regarding a brewing conflict in Brockton Bay at the time. He sought our help in dealing with it."

Her client nods thoughtfully. "But he was killed," he notes.

A stilted nod is her only answer for a moment. Then, as if the answer is being dragged through her reluctant lips, "He was. It was a terrible situation, and one I wish every day I could have done more to avert."

A slow nod greets her. "An' so you feel guilty," he finishes for her. She doesn't correct him. "Couldn't help him, so you wanna help me, is that right?"

She acquiesces with a nod. "Indeed." The lie slips out easily. "I hope we can count you amongst our clients, mister Meiers."

There's more to the story, of course, but she's fought too hard to keep it secret to let it slip for just any man. She's not going to risk her daughters, either of them, no matter how much it would help her case if she explained- explained about Marquis' fears for his daughters' safety, about how he'd fought hard and long to protect his Amelia, about how he'd reached out in a moment of desperation in his desire to keep his daughter safe from the Empire.

Marquis may not have been a good man, but in the end, he had done the right thing. And that counted for a lot, with her.

He looks her over again, a considering look. Then he shrugs. "Sure. Think you can do much to help me?"

She lifts her briefcase off the floor and places it upon the table again, smiling faintly at him. "You would be surprised at how many favours someone who has been an attorney for as long as I have can call in," she says. "I am sure we will be able to find a satisfactory resolution to your case. You should be aware, however, that my firm's help is not unconditional."

He stares at her, then rolls his eyes. "Of course it fucking isn't," he mutters. "Fine. What d'you want me to do in exchange?"

"Nothing that should cause you any distress," she replies placatingly, and begins to pull the second stack of papers from within her briefcase, arraying them in front of him. "Our aim is to help you, mister Meiers. This is merely another way we will attempt to do so. Firstly, we would like you to agree to attend regular meetings with a psychologist..."
Nearly two hours later, Carol strides out of the interview room, her briefcase held securely in her hands. She gives the officers who meet her eyes a tight smile as she leaves, but most of them keep their gazes focused on their desks. Intimidated by her still, despite her attempts at being friendly.

She checks her watch as she walks outside the building. It's nearly six. Her official hours were ten to five. Another hour she wouldn't be marking down on her timesheets, then.

For a moment, she considers going back to the office and doing her filing now. She's let it slip for several weeks, in the wake of the frenzy of work that had come about as a result of the civil suit against the singer. The longer she puts it off, the more there's going to be, and she hates pushing her filing off on the firm's interns. Few of them ever understands her filing system, and none of them enjoy working beneath her once the novelty of working with a cape wears off.

But as soon as she considers the idea, she dismisses it. It's a fifteen-minute drive back to her firm. By the time she gets there, there won't be much time for her to do her filing anyway. She'll do it tomorrow. Hopefully. Assuming that Chief Sanders actually schedules her meeting for tomorrow, at any rate, and she doesn't have to spend half the day trying to get him in again.

And she has more important things to do than her filing.

She drives unhurriedly over to the clinic Amy is working in tonight. The route is slowly becoming more familiar to her, which is good. She doesn't spend as much time in this area of town as she should.

It's twenty past six when she arrives. Forty minutes early. She considers for a moment whether it's worth leaving and buying some coffee for the two of them, but- maybe if it was Sarah. That kind of gesture always makes the atmosphere feel too intimate. Besides, Amy hasn't been sleeping well for the past few months. More caffeine probably isn't a great idea.

Instead, she lifts her chin up high and climbs out of her car, locking it behind her as she heads into the clinic, attempting to walk confidently. She doesn't feel half as confident as she tries to make herself look, but nobody can ever tell the difference.

Once she's in there, she heads straight for Kirk's office, not pausing to greet any of the hospital's workers or clients along the way- although she does give a small nod to Neville, the only one of the PRT troopers assigned to the hospital that she actually knows. She knocks on Kirk's door, almost able to hear his exasperated sigh from here, and waits patiently. He's long since gotten used to her showing up half an hour or more before Amy is due to finish for the day.

There's the rattling of the doorknob, and it swings open, revealing Kirk standing there, giving her a look. "Brandish," he sighs tiredly. "Come in."

She nods and follows him into his office, where she sits in the comfortable armchair he has waiting for visitors. He sits down in his own, a rather less comfortable office chair, and turns to his computer.

Silence stretches for a few minutes, the only sound in the office the sound of Kirk's typing. She waits until the silence becomes uncomfortable- for her, it has long since become uncomfortable for him- before she says anything.

"How is she doing?" she asks quietly.
His fingers stop moving on the keyboard, and he turns his head to look at her. "You could ask her yourself, you know," he says mildly. At her reproving glare, he gives her a half-hearted smile before it drops from his face. "Honestly, I'm not sure. The nurses are still too in awe of her to talk to her personally, and I've had to reprimand several of the volunteers for crowding her."

Her face twists into a sour expression. "Damn," she mutters.

He gives her a small smile. "She's making friends with a couple of the volunteers, at least," he informs her. "Bernadette tells me that she doesn't mind Oliver's presence, and she seems to be on good terms with Taylor."

Carol frowns. "I thought she- never mind." She's not sure how she feels about her daughter befriendng two men away from her supervision, but- that was part of why she had organised for Amy to come here, wasn't it? She can't complain about Amy making friends after she'd told her to make friends.

Kirk smiles at her. "Don't worry," he says, seemingly reading her thoughts. Oh- yes, that's right. Kirk does have a child of his own. And grandchildren. "They're both good people. Oliver is studying medicine himself, and Taylor is still in high school, but she has a good work ethic." ... Oh, yes, Taylor can be a woman's name, as well. She's suddenly glad she hadn't said anything.

She just shrugs half-heartedly in response. "It's good she's making friends," she says eventually. After Arcadia- well, she'd been worried.

Kirk waits, but when she doesn't say anything further, eventually goes back to typing up whatever he's typing up. His quarterly report, she assumes; it's nearly time for the next one.

Actually- she pulls out her phone for a moment and opens her calendar. She should make sure to note that down.

Time passes in idle silence as she scrolls through her calendar, occasionally pausing to add a new entry in there, reminding her of one event or another. She should really hire a personal assistant for this kind of thing, but she dislikes handing her phone over to people she doesn't trust.

Finally, enough time passes that her phone ticks over to six-forty. She stands, stretching, then gestures for Kirk to rise. He does, looking at her with a questioning look; she responds by giving him a tired and hopeful smile. "Could you show me to Amy?" she asks weakly.

He sighs, but pulls himself to his feet. "Sure." He sweeps out of his office, holding the door open magnanimously for her, then sweeps ahead to lead her confidently through the clinic. "She normally finishes up with her patients around four, so she spends the rest of her time doing the schoolwork you've assigned her," he confides in her. "There have been a few times where patients have come in later, though."

She just nods in response. She'd assumed that Amy got some of her English and Maths work done while at the hospital; she never seemed to do it at home.

He leads her to the clinic's break room. One day, she should figure out how to navigate this clinic; then she won't have to rely on Kirk and Amy to lead her through it. She can't even tell it's the break room until the door swings open on silent hinges.
The two of them pause as it swings open. Kirk begins to retreat awkwardly, but Carol doesn't.

Amy is sitting on a chair beside a table, with a girl laying splayed awkwardly across two other chairs beside her. Taylor, if she had to guess. Taylor lays there, head on Amy's lap, giggling at something Amy had said before they entered the room. Amy has her hands resting on Taylor's head, gently massaging her temples- Carol glances, and yes, there's a small bottle of pills on the table. Likely painkillers. Codeine, if the girl's tired and slightly loopy laughter is anything to go by. Neither of the two look up at her approach.

Amy is smiling.

It's been a long time since she saw Amy smile when Victoria isn't nearby.

Carol retreats out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Kirk takes one look at her stoic and forbidding face. "It- that probably wasn't what it seemed," he begins. "There could be-" She holds up a hand, and he falls silent.

"I don't care," she says. He shuts up, searching her face for something. Whatever he finds, it's to his satisfaction; he nods.

Honestly, she does care. Not about the tender scene between the two girls- she wouldn't be a very good person if she let something as simple as her daughter's sexual orientation affect her opinion of her. She's just happy- no, not happy. She's just satisfied that there's someone her daughter feels comfortable around again. After the hounding Amy had received at Arcadia, she'd been scared that her daughter would retreat completely into herself.

She leans against the wall beside the door, and doesn't say anything as Kirk beats a retreat back to his office. She notes the time- six fifty-one- then ignores it, sweeping her calendar app closed and opening her e-mail program. She mostly ignored the Guild's e-mails, given their irrelevance to her family's mission in the city and how stretched New Wave already is, but she had definitely seen a request for New Wave to hold a fundraiser to raise awareness for LGBT issues recently.

She finds it, buried deep in page 4 of her e-mails, those from yesterday. She should organise her e-mails, too. Another thing she should get an assistant for. Another thing she won't get an assistant for.

While waiting, she idly taps out a response to the e-mail-

*Narwhal,*

*We would be happy to host such a fundraiser. Please forward me all relevant details at your earliest convenience.*

*Regards,*

*Brandish.*

Even if she's reading the situation wrong, it's still a good thing to do.

Then she waits, staring at her phone's clock. The minutes tick by slowly, but she can be patient.

At ten past seven, she stands, brushing the dust off her jacket from where she'd been leaning against
the wall. She has given Amy as much time as she can- she does have an image of her own to maintain.

When the door swings open, she's not sure if she feels relieved or disappointed to find the two girls have separated. Taylor, if it is Taylor, is already standing, a backpack slung over her shoulder- had she come here straight after school?

Amy looks up, seeing her enter this time. The smile on her face slides immediately off.

"Mom," she says neutrally. Carol nods at her, but doesn't say anything. Taylor pauses, looking over at her. No recognition shows on her face. Unsurprising- she is open about her identity as Brandish, but it's always hard to connect a mild-mannered lawyer with the tough superhero portrayed on TV. Carol spares the girl one glance, then turns her attention back to her daughter. She's acutely aware of the girl's presence as she lingers awkwardly at the door, twisting the door's handle anxiously- squeak squeak squeak- before opening it and walking out.

"Are you ready to go?" she asks finally. Amy nods unhappily.

"Yeah, I have my stuff," she responds. That's all she says. Carol frowns internally as she waits for Amy to move over and pick her bag up from where she'd placed it beside the break room's coffee machine.

"Have you finished your homework?" Carol tries again.

Amy nods. "Yeah, it's all done. Don't worry."

Slightly frustrated, Carol tries to think it through. What else can she say? If she asks who the other girl was, Amy is likely to take it wrong, and she doesn't want to break up their budding... whatever it is. If she asks how her day was, it's going to sound like an interrogation.

In the end, she settles for saying nothing. She just keeps her face deliberately neutral, trying not to let her frustration at herself leak through, fully cognizant of Amy's unhappy expression behind her back.

Neither of them says anything as she unlocks her car's doors and climbs in.

She closes her eyes briefly as Amy walks around the car to the passenger's side door. A sigh nearly escapes her.

One of these days, she's going to figure out how to talk to her daughter.

Apparently, not today.
Your headache isn't better come Wednesday morning, precisely, but it's not as bad after your experiment on Monday, or even yesterday. You're not sure if the codeine is finally kicking in or if it's just your headache fading over time, but either way, you're feeling a lot better. It's surprisingly hard to focus when you have a headache that bad.

Or, well, not really that surprising. It's hard to ignore a headache. It's like a constant distraction, something trying to tug your attention away from whatever you're trying to pay attention to. You'd even found it hard to pay attention to Madison, although you'd definitely tried your best.

Either way, your headache has faded into something more manageable. It's more of a dull throb now than a sharp, stabbing pain, although you wince, and immediately regret testing it; yes, it still definitely hurts to move your head too fast. You're definitely not going for a run today.

Your movements are slow and cautious as you amble over to your dresser and get out your clothes from your dresser. Nothing fancy, again- not that you really own fancy clothes anyway, you're not really sure why you constantly expect to find them in here. The few pieces of fancy clothing you own are tucked securely away in Dad's room, where you know they won't get messed up.

It's a relief to step into the shower, once you've made your way out of your room and to the bathroom. The shock of the cold water hitting your skin makes your eyes snap open, but it soon turns to a nice warm spray, and you spend a good amount of time just luxuriating in the warmth as you wash yourself and carefully shampoo your hair.

Stepping out of a warm shower always does funny things to a headache. It dulls the pain, kind of—except it's more like the dull throbbing is just spread over your entire head, rather than emanating from somewhere around the back of your head. It makes it more tolerable, somehow, but it also makes you feel a little light-headed. It's a confusing feeling.

You unhurriedly get dressed and make your way out to the kitchen, where Dad's already waiting. He gives you a concerned look when you clutch at your head at a sudden spike of pain—god, that sun shining through the window is bright—but you wave his concern off and turn the coffee maker on. Then, you heave out a great sigh when you realize you left Amy's painkillers in your room. At least the coffee maker has finished bubbling away by the time you come back out. Surprising, until you suddenly realize that Dad probably made one while you were in the shower. Then you just feel a little silly.

It's a little relaxing to not go running and just relax inside. The extra sleep helps— you'd even fallen asleep early last night, nearly collapsing atop Victoria's books when the codeine had fully kicked in. You do kind of miss the feeling of losing yourself in the motion, but taking a break from it for a few days isn't so bad.

You sip slowly at your coffee, moving over to where you'd left your phone on charge on the counter. Unfortunately, you only have the one power outlet in your room, and you need it for a desk lamp so you don't have to leave your bedroom light on all night. You don't like leaving your phone out where people can see it, but it's only Dad, so you should be fine. He won't violate your privacy by reading any of your texts, you're pretty sure.

Madison has sent you a text- a cheery "Good morning!!!! <3". There's a little box beside it, which
you're pretty sure is meant to have one of those little pictures in it. Unfortunately, your phone isn't fancy enough to display them. You send her a text back- "Good morning, Madison. See you at school!" - and fire off one to Victoria as well- "Morning, Victoria! Hope you're having a good day!". Your phone chimes quickly after that, another text from Madison showing a handful of little empty boxes in it. Damn. You'll have to ask her what she was sending you at school.

It takes Victoria a while longer to text you back- she's probably in the shower, or maybe heading to school- but when she does, your eyes narrow at the content of the text. "i am. u?"

You dart your fingers over your phone, trying your best to send a message back as quickly as you can while sipping at your coffee. "I'm not doing much. Just trying to figure out how to punish a girl who won't text me properly." Once you've finished sending the text, you reluctantly pull two pills out of the pill bottle and tuck the bottle away in your pocket afterwards.

Two pills and half a cup of coffee later, your phone buzzes again. "have u considered spanking her?"

And, well. Isn't that a pleasant image. If only. You tap out another response before heading to your room to get your schoolbag- "Somehow, I don't think that will have much effect." - and don't have time to look at your phone again until you're rushing out the front door, just as you hear the shower shut off. You glance down at your phone, noting the text Victoria has replied with.

"  

You scowl down at it. Damn it, she shouldn't tease you just because she's got an invulnerable forcefield. Although, actually- come to think of it, how does her forcefield even work? She's clearly able to feel it when you fondle her, and she does seem to get hot and cold, so it's not like she can't feel anything, but she isn't hurt at all when people shoot her or try to stab her. Maybe she can control it? Honestly, you don't know. Damn. It's actually kind of a shame, because the idea of spanking someone that much stronger than you really appeals to you, too. Or, no. The idea of someone as strong as Victoria submitting to you to the extent that they will just lie down and take whatever punishment you dole out to them, that appeals to you.

And you really need to stop thinking about this now. The bus is approaching, and you don't want to work yourself up into a state before you even get to school. Normally, you prefer actually having one of your girls in your arms before you get yourself wet. But damn, that image is a really nice mental image.

Instead, you try to distract yourself.

Honestly, using your power on Monday hadn't affected you as badly as you'd kind of feared it might. Most of the time, when you use your power on someone like that, you can't help but come to care about them, at least a little- you're not sure it's possible to come to know someone intimately and not care about them at least a little. But using your power on that many people, so many times, that shallowly- you don't think you could pull any one particular person out, from memory.

No, what you'd felt was something more general than that. All you'd really been able to feel was the air of hopelessness, of frustration and low-burning despair, that runs through Winslow. It's not something you can ignore, not by any means, but it doesn't exactly fill you with a deep-seated desire to right any wrongs.

And maybe it makes you a bad person, but you're a little bit glad about that. It's exhausting to invest yourself in so many things. You're already trying to keep your own mood up, to make Madison as
happy as she can get, to keep Sophia intrigued by you, to keep Victoria excited, to deal with Emma, to go to the clinic, to get up early enough to go to your job. All of it is voluntary, but at the same time, it's stuff you actually care about. Does it make you a bad person to not want to feel obligated to save Winslow?

Objectively, probably yes. You can't bring yourself to feel bad about it, though.

You can't pretend you want to turn a blind eye to it all, though. Which is a confusing feeling. You don't feel obligated to help Winslow, which makes you want to do something about it. Feelings are weird.

You pass time by thinking about the situation there, and very deliberately not about punishing a red-faced Victoria for her grammatical missteps. It turns out to be surprisingly easy to distract yourself from the topic, anyway.

Most of the roads in Brockton Bay aren't of very high quality- the town is a lot bigger than it seems, and there's a lot of roads in it. Over the years, few people have given it much thought- there are issues that are so much bigger, so much more important than the state of the roads around. The 'important' roads, the ones tourists travel down- so, mostly the Downtown roads, and those directly around the Leviathan memorial and leading from it- are consistently maintained, but the ones around your house pretty much only get repaired when the potholes get large enough to cause actual safety hazards.

The bus bounces as it heads to school. Ordinarily you just ignore it- you've had fifteen years to get used to the roads, after all- but it's harder when you already have a headache pounding away in your skull. Every time the bus dips and sways as its goes over a pothole, you have to close your eyes to fight back a soft throb of pain.

It feels a little odd to welcome the sight of Winslow, but as terrible as your school is, at least it's not a vehicle travelling on the streets of Brockton Bay.

Not that it's much better for your headache inside the school. The low but omnipresent sound of students chattering brings the pounding back to the forefront of your mind, and students jostling you in the halls is, unsurprisingly, even more unpleasant now. At least the sight of Madison standing by your locker, waiting for you, brings you some relief. There's no better cure for a headache than some time with your girls, in your opinion.

School on Wednesday passes by in a soft and frustrating mix of this constant soft pounding in your head and the warm, sweet presences of Madison and Sophia. It leaves you with mixed feelings when the bell rings after the last period for the day.

It wasn't a particularly productive Wednesday, unless you count huddling against Madison during lunch as being productive (which honestly it kind of is, if you squint really hard and ignore what the word 'productive' actually means), but you did at least get Sophia's number today. You feel kind of bad for forgetting on Monday and Tuesday, but you see her a lot less than you do Madison, and in your defence, you do have a headache. After you'd managed to wheedle Amy's number out of her- well, that's four numbers, now.

You're feeling kind of miserable by the time you eventually get home. Once you trudge inside, you move to the kitchen and turn the coffee maker on again, setting your bag down on the counter and
taking the bottle of pills Amy had given you out so you can stare morosely at them. Honestly, do these do anything at all?

You feel a little better once you have some coffee in you, or maybe it's just that things aren't so noisy in here. Either way, you consider beating a retreat back to your room for a moment, then decide against it. Honestly, you're not really in the mood for studying or anything. You're pretty sure you could legitimately skip studying for the rest of the year and not miss anything- well, okay, that's maybe a bit arrogant, but you're months ahead of class. You can skip a day.

Instead, you head to your room and grab Victoria's books and a blanket, then head back out to the living room and switch the TV on. The volume is already low, since Dad tends to keep it low, but you turn it down a little lower as you climb on the couch beside Dad's armchair, arrange a cushion behind your head, and get to reading.

The books aren't... really the greatest, but they're not the worst, either. You can't say that you lose yourself in them, but it's not an unpleasant way to pass your time. And you can be pretty confident in saying that you think you prefer Victoria's taste in books to Madison's, anyway. Not that you're impinging on Madison's tastes, or anything- Victoria's just align with yours better.

You idly consider asking Amy for a recommendation. You've had a couple of talks with her about literature now, and she's proven to know a lot about the topic, more than even Victoria. Maybe she could recommend you something worth reading. And it'd give you extra teasing material, pretty much no matter what she picks.

At one point, you have to get up to turn the living room light on as the sky outside darkens, not long after you get home. The light from the TV isn't consistent enough for you to read with, and you're pretty sure that you shouldn't be straining your eyes anyway. You already need glasses. What are you going to do if you damage your eyes further?

Things go along pleasantly enough until Dad gets home, a little after six thirty. You absently note the sound of the front door opening and closing, then the sound of footsteps trudging through the house until they get to the living room, where they pause. You don't look up- you're fairly sure that if whoever it was had any malicious intent, your power would tell you, even if it makes your headache worse.

"Taylor?" He walks into the room, allowing you to see him without having to sit up. "Are you feeling okay?"

You half-shrug, buried in your cocoon of a blanket. "I'm fine, Dad." You meant that to sound persuasive, but it comes out more pathetic than anything. "Just a bit of a headache."

"You had a headache this morning too, didn't you? And yesterday." He moves close to the lounge and bends down to examine you. "Did it bother you during school?"

You shake your head. "No, it was fine," you lie. If you tell him yes, you're pretty sure you won't be going into school tomorrow- and as bad as your headache is, you do have things you need to do there. And besides, it's slowly getting better, so that's fine, isn't it? "I just didn't really feel up to studying after tutoring Madison today. It's pretty loud at school recently."

He nods slowly, giving you another worried look. "Okay," he says after a long moment. "But look, why don't you let me handle dinner tonight? I think I have some aspirin in my room, too-"
"I have some painkillers already." You cut him off, giving him a weak smile. "Amy gave me some stronger ones while I was at the clinic yesterday, but they're making me feel a little bit tired. You don't need to worry about it."

"I always need to worry when you're not feeling well, Taylor." He reaches forward with his hand, as though to ruffle your hair, but quickly reconsiders. Probably for the better. "You just get some rest. If the noise at school keeps being this bad, let me know and I'll go speak to the principal. Okay?"

You nod weakly. A part of you rebels, but you're too tired to try to argue with him at the moment. "Yeah, okay, Dad," you agree instead. "Thanks."

He smiles. "Any time, Taylor."

At some point after that, you must have drifted off, because you wake up the next day by unceremoniously falling off the couch onto your face. Ow. It's not the most pleasant way to start the day. It does help you figure out that your headache... had probably faded somewhat before you fell on your face, though, so there's that.

You sit up on your knees, pouting blearily at nothing in particular. At least nobody is around to see your undignified crash to the ground.

You're not sure how long you would have sat there feeling sorry for yourself if you didn't happen to catch a glimpse of a bowl of soup on the coffee table in front of you, a steel-handled spoon sticking out of it. Your stomach rumbles loudly at the sight, so you move over and try to take a bite, and-yeah, okay, you must have been asleep for a while, because this is stone cold.

As you pick it up and get up to head off towards the kitchen, you grab your cellphone in your other hand. The brightness of the screen illuminates your way as you make your way through the house at-huh, twenty to six in the morning. You're not sure what time you must have fallen asleep last night, but you feel refreshed. Probably before seven thirty, if Dad hadn't even finished cooking dinner. It's been a while since you slept for that long.

Some people complain about how loud hallways squeak at night, but nobody ever talks about how loud the buttons of a microwave sound as you press them. It's loud enough to make you wince, and you don't dare try to walk away as the bowl spins around within it. You pull it out a couple of seconds early so that it doesn't wake the whole neighbourhood up, then begin eating it.

Another lazy morning, then. You're not going to complain. You take your time getting ready for school- showering, getting your clothing together, and all that stuff.

By the time eight o'clock rolls around and it's about time for you to head off to school, your headache has started to fade again. It's still not gone, and it's still a distraction, but it's not so... so pressing, now. You're not sure if the codeine is actually helping, but you're also not sure it's not.

You've never had a headache this bad, and certainly not one caused by overextending a superpower. Do they always fade this slowly, or this this quickly for a headache this bad? You don't recall Dad's headaches ever lasting this long, but different causes might lead to different symptoms.

You do make sure to send Victoria an apology for not asking her to come over yesterday, though. You're disappointed that you couldn't, but there's no way you would have been a good host- and you're pretty sure that dropping a date with her boyfriend to come be your pillow would have been a bad idea, no matter how sweet you think the idea is.
The bus trundles through the streets, seemingly going out of its way to hit every pothole in the street. By the time it actually arrives at school, your head is pulsing again— not as badly as it was yesterday, but worse than it has been all morning. Damn it.

Your headache continues through the first half of school. First period isn't too bad, because you have Madison sitting beside you— and while she can't cure your headache, she can at least provide you with hugs— but the next three periods seem to drag on. You find yourself wishing that you have Chemistry on Thursdays, but sadly, no. Thursday is double English instead.

By the time fourth period is over, your headache has become bad enough again that rather than head straight off to meet up with Madison, you make a little side-trip off to the bathroom so Madison can't see you taking your painkillers out of your bag. You're still not sure if they're actually helping.

Almost as soon as you step into the bathroom, you come to a stop as you see Emma standing in there ahead of you, eyes squeezed closed as she clutches at the sides of the bathroom sink.

For a moment, you're seriously tempted to just turn around and walk back out, screw the pills. Your headache is bad enough already. You don't need to deal with Emma on top of it. But then you ball your hands into fists at your side for a moment, and you let out a silent sigh. Okay, that's a bit of a lie. You do need to deal with Emma. It's just that you'd prefer to do that when you're not already trying to ward off an enormous headache.

But now that the opportunity has presented itself, you shouldn't walk away from it. It's- it's not a good habit for you to get in. If you walk away now, who knows when you'll be able to actually work up the nerve to talk to her?

You step further into the bathroom, allowing the door to close behind you with a loud squeal. Emma's eyes snap open immediately, darting to look at you as she opens her mouth. When she sees you, her jaw snaps shut, and she whirls to look at you.

"Taylor," she says. You don't even need to hear the tone of her voice to know how surprised she is.

"Emma," you reply neutrally. You avoid her attempts to catch your gaze as you move over to one of the other sinks in the bathroom and lift your bag up onto the counter. From the corner of your eye, you can see her stiffen when you pull the bottle of pills out. She doesn't say anything, though, which you're grateful for. It does look kind of suspicious, though. "... They're just painkillers." After you tap two of the pills out onto your palm, you slide the bottle over to her, allowing her to read the label.

You hear the rattle of pills as she lifts it up. Then, "Oh. Are you hurt?"

You shake your head and ignore the feeling of light-headedness that comes with the movement as you hold your hand out. "Just a headache." She places the bottle back in your hand, and you tuck it back in the front compartment of your bag, where you zip it back up.

She studies you. You can see her out of the corner of her eye. "Is there anything wrong?" she asks eventually. You scoff, and she makes a funny movement with her mouth, more a grimace than a smirk. "Yeah. Sorry. Stupid question. Is there- sorry."

Waving your hand in her direction, you hesitate. Then, eventually, you turn to look at her fully.

She's- well. You wish you could say she's a wreck (and doesn't that statement make you feel shitty),
but she doesn't. She looks as impeccable as ever, with her luxurious hair and her subtle eye shadow and her stupidly kissable lips that you definitely do not look at at all, no sirree.

That doesn't mean she's looking fine, though. Probably nobody else could see it, but she's wearing too much makeup. Emma's never been the kind of girl to wear a lot of makeup- she doesn't really need to. The last time she'd worn this much makeup, it'd been the one-month anniversary of Mom's death.

Silence hangs between the two of you for a short while. You're tempted to leave- and you do need to leave, Madison is waiting for you- but you kind of don't want to. This is... this isn't nice, really, but it's the nicest moment you've had with Emma in a long while.

If this headache is good for one thing, it's that your head hurts too much for you to really focus on how much seeing Emma hurts.

You brush your fingers against your phone in your pocket, idly feeling it for a moment. There's a text from Victoria waiting for you there, but you can get to that soon.

Before you can think better of it, you pull your phone out and shove it across the counter to Emma. She blinks at it, looking down, then gives you a confused look.

"Put your number in it," you say quietly, very deliberately looking away from Emma down towards the bench. "I'll send you mine."

There's silence for a moment. Then, "Taylor-"

You still don't look up at her. "No more than two texts a day, Emma," you tell her. You're not sure if you sound commanding or pleading, but either way, she doesn't say anything, and a couple of seconds later you can see her hand reach down and grab your phone. It doesn't take long for her to enter her number into it, and soon she's reaching over and placing your phone in front of you.

"Thank you." Her voice is steady, but you can hear a faint tremor in it. You don't reply. You just pick up your phone, turn around, and walk out, clutching your phone tightly in your hand.

It's easier to communicate with Emma by text, but that doesn't mean it's easy. When she texts you first thing on Friday morning- well, first thing for her, you're already heading to work by the time she sends you a text- you feel a sharp stab of anxiety. It takes you five minutes just to open the text and read the simple "Good morning, Taylor. I hope you slept well" that she sent you, and another three minutes beyond that to send her a simple "Good morning. I slept fine. Hope you slept well." back.

It's frustrating that you even struggle with this at all, but- progress is progress. Any communication with Emma, however stilted, has the potential to lead to more. Slowly, yes, but slow is fine.

Also, it gives you something to think about during the day when you're not around Madison. Your headache has faded enough that work isn't any more unpleasant than it has been any other day- not gone entirely, but it's faded enough that you don't feel light-headed every time you move- so you actually can focus on other things.

There's not much you can really do for most of the day, though. It's tempting to pick up a hobby, like writing or drawing, just so you have something to do during those classes where you've already
covered the material and you end up sitting bored and listless for the next hour. You can occupy yourself during the first period by rubbing little shapes over Madison's stomach- the teacher seems to be too tired to even shake his head when he walks around to find you with your arm wrapped around your girl- and fourth period has Sophia to distract you, but during the rest of the day, there's absolutely nothing to do.

Which is why it's a relief when the bell finally rings, and you're able to go to the library. You might have learned all this stuff already, but Madison is still struggling with it, and helping your girl to improve her grades is always a worthwhile endeavour.

Then you're on home, where you're greeted with another pleasant sight you'd almost managed to forget; Sophia is sitting on your front doorstep, tapping her foot impatiently.

"Wow, Hebert," she lightly mocks you as you jog up to her. "Took your time, didn't you?"

You shrug at her as you step past her, taking your keys out of your pocket. "I was tutoring Madison," you say by way of apology. "You could have texted me if you were wondering where I was."

She shrugs. "Could have," she half-agrees. "Got out of the track meeting a bit early, but I haven't been waiting too long." She unconsciously shivers as you lead her into your house.

For a moment, you scrabble for something to talk about as you lead her to your kitchen so you can get a cup of coffee to wash your painkillers down with. You can't think of anything, until words leave your mouth unbidden. "Hey, Sophia, who would I talk to at school if I wanted to know who's in the gangs at school?"

She gives you a strange look. "Why d'you want to know?"

You shrug. At least it's an easy one to make an excuse for, considering- "Dad's in the Dockworker's Union. I just want to get an idea of who he shouldn't look at hiring if they come to him."

Sophia can probably tell it's a bullshit excuse, but after a moment of staring at you with a knitted brow, she lets it pass. "Whatever," she says, with a roll of her eyes. "Be careful who you ask that kind of thing around, Hebert. Some people might take it wrong. Don't ask around the upperclassmen. Try the newer kids. You got the Jewish thing going on, you might be able to ask some of the first-years and pass it off."

"Hey, I'm not Jewish," you protest. She raises her eyebrow at you, and you let out a small huff as her lip curls. You pout at her.

"Whatever you say," she remarks in a teasing tone. "Just try and avoid getting beaten up. I can't babysit you all day, and I'd hate to have to find a new tutor."

"You don't babysit me," you whine a little. She just smirks in response.

All in all, it turns out to be a pretty good Friday. Not good enough to make up for the rest of the shitty week, but at least you had one good day this week- and now you know the limits of your power. Maybe. Kind of. You have a better idea of them, anyway.
And you're in contact with Emma again, if stiffly and remotely. That's... something.

Regardless, the week is over now. You just have to plan out your weekend.

So what are you going to do during it?
Saturday morning arrives with little more fanfare than the trilling of your alarm clock. You reach over and quickly press the alarm off, giving your clock a bleary and irritated glare as you do. Why do alarm clocks have such an annoying noise programmed into them, anyway?

Grumbling silently to yourself, you roughly toss your covers back, immediately regretting it when you're hit with a sudden blast of cold. Trying to ignore the goosebumps rising on your skin, you quickly climb out of bed and scurry over to your dresser, where you draw your clothing for the day out- a plain blue long-sleeved shirt and a pair of warm but ratty pants you'd be ashamed to be seen in outside. Luckily, you're not planning to go outside today, so that's fine. You set those clothes out on your bed, then pull out another set of clothing- this time tighter pants and a regular t-shirt- and make your way outside.

Your headache has nearly entirely faded now. You still feel a soft ache deep in the back of your head, but it's not sending out pulses of pain any more. It probably wouldn't be a good idea to tempt it to come back out- yeah, no, definitely not- but it's nearly gone.

Outside, you set yourself to running for a few minutes, until you find that your breath is starting to come more harshly. You slow down then, but the quick bit of running has done its job; you're no longer freezing your ass off. Absently, you can still feel the cold breeze blowing against your skin, but it won't take long for you to begin to sweat now.

You're out there for a bit under an hour and a half, running loops around your block, before you begin to feel your legs burning, and your breaths are coming short and rapidly. It's not the best exercise you've had, but it feels good to get your body moving. It helps... clear your head, kind of. Regardless, you slowly make your way back home, arriving back a little after eight thirty, and head straight to the shower.

The initial cold spray of the water in the shower causes you to begin shivering violently, even given the elevated temperatures caused by your run, but the shivers fade quickly as the water warms up. Soon, you're luxuriating beneath the warm water. It's tempting to stay in here for a while longer and let the warm water wash away the tight knots in your muscles, but you can't- literally, you can't, you're going to run out of hot water soon.

You shut off the spray of water, quickly towelling off and throwing your dirty clothes into the washing basket. Then you stick your head out of the bathroom door, turning your gaze suspiciously down each hall to make sure the path is clear before you dart back to your room and pull your clothes on. Not that you think Dad wants to peek, or anything, it would just be really embarassing if he saw you running around naked.

Once you're dressed, you make your way out to the kitchen and pull your phone over to you, absently checking your texts. There's a text from Victoria wishing you a good morning, two from Madison- one of which is just comprised of a series of weird text icons forming the shape of a text-man stretching his arms out for a hug- and a well-wishes text from Emma. You amble around the kitchen answering them as you make yourself some toast for breakfast.

Oh, Dad bought some raspberry jam. A smile crosses unbidden over your face. Raspberry and apricot jams are your favourites. You pull them out, and when your toast pops out of the toaster, you begin spreading jam over them.
Then, a few moments later, you make a disgusted face when you finally begin eating the toast. Okay, the jams might be nice on their own, but as it turns out, raspberry and apricot jams do not go together. You make sure to text Madison and let her know, just in case, then turn back to your jams, pouting at them as you begin to scrape the jam off each of them and layer them thickly with just raspberry jam.

Your phone buzzes after that, a reply from Madison- "A lot of jams don't go well together. You should try apricot jam and Gran Queso instead, I'll make you some on Monday". You smile softly as you text back, a simple "Thanks". You cast about for a few minutes, looking around your kitchen, then- oh! You bend your head back over your phone, texting her back again.

"Spending the weekend with Dad. I'm sorry you can't come over again "

She replies back a couple of minutes later. "Aw And I just bought some new lingerie last night, too " You debate for a few moments over how to respond to that, when your phone buzzes again, a second text from Madison arriving. "Want me to show you? "

You can't text Yes back fast enough as you sip at your coffee. She doesn't reply for a few minutes, and anxieties begin to rise in your head- is she upset that you're asking her for pictures of herself in her underwear? - before you can quell them.

Then, your phone buzzes, twice. You open the text, and a download bar appears across the top of your screen. You take another sip of your coffee as you wait, impatiently waiting for the bar to finish. Then it does, crossing 100% less than two minutes after you first opened it, and you quickly tap the images to open them.

They're simple images- Madison standing in her bathroom in front of a full-length mirror, holding her phone up to the side of her head- but that doesn't make them any less sexy. There's an embarassed flush to her face, strong enough that you can see even her shoulders are faintly red, but she's smiling happily in them, as though pleased to be doing this for you.

In the first image, she's wearing nothing but a set of dark black lingerie. The lingerie itself is nothing special, just an ordinary lacy bra-and-panties set, but it looks delicious on Madison. The material is dark, and it contrasts extraordinarily well with Madison's pale, creamy skin, coloured even paler than normal by the stark white light of her bathroom. Idly, you wish you could get Madison and Sophia alone together in their underwear. You can't decide which you like better- dark lingerie on Madison's white skin, or white lingerie on Sophia's dark skin.

The second image is much the same, except that instead of wearing the bra and panties, she's only wearing the bra. She's holding her panties in her free hand, off to the side. She'd sent you a text with the pictures- "Sorry, I forgot you don't like it when I wear panties ;3"

You shoot back two texts in response- a simple "Good girl." first, then "You're always my gorgeous girl, but you look even better than usual when you wear that." Then, while you're waiting for a response- which turns out to be another little text face, this one blushing and smiling- you save the images to your phone, specifically to Madison's gallery.

After that, you get up. Dad still isn't awake, which is unusual- usually he's up by this late on a Saturday- but you don't want to go and wake him up. He deserves to sleep in a little.

Instead, you send off another text to Madison- "You should wear that for me on Monday!"- and a
different, unfortunately less sexy text to Amy- "Will you be at the clinic on Monday?" - then begin wandering around the house, taking in its state with a critical eye. With all your newfound responsibilities, you've been letting the housework go slack. Dad does it where he can, but he's busy as well. The house isn't in the greatest condition.

Well- Dad did take care of you over the week, even if he didn't really know what was going on. It would be unfair of you to just force him to take over the housework again when you're not doing anything today.

While you wait for Dad to wake up, you wander around the house, casually cleaning things. There's not really that much to clean, since neither you or Dad have many possessions to throw around, but there's more to cleaning a house than just picking up stuff scattered over the floors. You dust some of the cabinets around the house, wipe down the stove, and you're starting a load of washing by the time Dad finally comes out of his bedroom.

You see him pause as he walks past, taking in your efforts. He steps in, looking curiously around, then gives you a questioning look. "You didn't need to do that," he says. "I would have done the washing later today."

Shrugging, you give him an embarrassed smile. "It's okay," you say. "I don't mind. You took care of me during the week, so this is the least I could do."

He frowns, and your smile immediately melts away. When he sees that, he frowns even more. "No, that's not- you don't need to repay me, Taylor. I'm your father. It's my job to take care of you."

"But-" You try to protest, but it's hard to think up an argument to that that doesn't go back to the same issue. He seems to sense your struggle, because his frown melts, replaced with a small but genuine smile.

"No, it's fine, Taylor," he says, stepping forward and pulling you into a hug. "This isn't something you need to repay me for." He can see you're still unhappy with that, though, so he continues, "If you really feel like you need to, we still have that bookcase down in the basement. I don't think I need to spend the day doing housework, so we could spend some time fixing it up?" He gives you an uncertain smile, which you return as you lean into the hug.

The bookcase is a broken-down monstrosity the two of you had salvaged from a garage sale a while back. Its previous owner had apparently bought a new one after their children had damaged this one. Dad had bought it off him for a mere five dollars, but you're not sure it's even worth that much. Three of its four shelves are either missing or damaged, the paint is scratched and peeled off all over the place, and its legs are half-rotted and need to be replaced. The two of you have been intending to fix it up for a while now, but then work had gotten busier for Dad, and you'd started devising this plan, and it just fell by the wayside. One of a few projects like that. It's cheaper that way.

"Sure, Dad," you say quietly. "I'd like that." His smile becomes more genuine, and you feel your own doing the same.

As you follow him down to the basement, you surreptitiously check your phone. Sure enough, Madison had responded to you almost immediately- "Sure!! I'll wear it any time you want me to, just tell me when!!" - and Amy responded to you about ten minutes after that- "No, not on Monday. I'll be in on Tuesday and Thursday. Why?"

You're forced to look away to watch your step as you descend down the basement stairs, ignoring their creaky groan and the scent of moisture that washes over you as you go down. Dad has flicked
the light on, which lets you see where you're going, but also throws the basement's chipped brick walls and ugly concrete floor into sharp relief. You're not here to remodel the basement, though, so you don't care too much; instead, you just go back to your phone and type out some responses.

To Amy, you send a simple text; "I'm just trying to decide when to head in. I'll see you on Tuesday then ". Meanwhile, to Madison, you send a slightly more frisky text; "You're very eager to wear it for me. Maybe I should take you out to buy some more ".

You receive responses back almost immediately. A simple "Cool, see you then, Taylor." from Amy, and a- a very enthusiastic "Yes please!!" followed shortly by another, "I have some money you can use. Please take me and buy clothes for me!!"

You raise your eyebrows at Madison's response. That's- a lot more enthusiasm than you'd thought the idea would get, and you hadn't exactly thought she would be unexcited by the idea. As Dad moves over to the bookcase and begins laying it flat on the floor, you reply to her text. "Okay, maybe on Monday. So you like the idea of me buying clothes for you?"

Her reply comes almost alarmingly quickly. "I like it when you tell me what to do, and I want to look sexy for you "

Which, okay, makes perfect sense. You feel a little silly for not connecting those dots earlier.

"Taylor." Dad's words draw your attention over to him. "Are you ready to start?" You nod in response, your thoughts still on something a little sexier than this bookcase.

Over the next few hours, you idly text your girls- mostly Madison and Victoria, but occasionally Sophia too- as you and Dad work on restoring the bookcase.

It's not easy to restore furniture, you soon find. Three of the bookcase's shelves are either rotted away, or otherwise damaged enough to be unusable. Luckily, Dad has brought home plenty of wood from the Docks over the months, so you have plenty to build replacements for them with- but the wood you end up building replacements out of doesn't match with the fourth shelf, each being substantially thicker than the wood the bookcase was made out of, so you have to tear it out and replace it, too. Then the two of you have to sand it down- by hand, since Dad doesn't own an electric sander- and revarnish and repaint the entire thing. You end up just tearing the legs off entirely- it can rest on its base.

It would almost have been easier to build a bookcase from scratch, you think. But then you look at the end product, and you can't help but feel proud. It's showing signs of wear and tear, the shelves don't quite match the decor, and neither of you are professional painters. But you love it, despite all the splinters you got while cutting out the shelves and how sore your arms are from sanding it.

"Alright," Dad says with some satisfaction, dusting his hands off. You look down as the sawdust puffs from his hands in small clouds and sinks to the floor. There's... a lot of sawdust on the ground. You'll have to come back down here later and sweep it all up. "It'll take a while to dry, I'll set the fan up down here to help it along. We'll have to keep the basement door open for a few days to let it air out. Tomorrow, we'll bring it up to your room. Okay?"

You nod your head enthusiastically. "Okay!" you exclaim brightly. You don't really have enough books to fill your bookcase, but one day you will. It's better to have too much empty bookcase space than it is to have too many books without anywhere to place them.
Before you leave, you linger down here for a few moments. Hm. The basement down here is a lot bigger than you remember it being, and since Mom- well, since she's gone now, there isn't very much down here after you and Dad took her stuff up to the attic. It's a lot bigger than your room. A lot drearier, too, but that's nothing you couldn't solve with enough carpet and wallpaper. It probably wouldn't be as easy as you think it could be, but- you want a room that's bigger than your current one. And preferably one not so close to Dad's room.

Maybe... But on the other hand, the sex dungeon jokes practically write themselves. Then again, that's because it's kind of accurate...

Ah, you can't think on it too much now anyway. You have precisely fifty-two dollars and thirty-one cents in your bank account. You're pretty sure that wouldn't buy enough carpet to cover even half the basement floor, let alone paint or wallpaper, or furniture. Still, something to consider for the future. Maybe. If you can ever think of a way to explain it to Dad without saying to him, "I want a sex dungeon, can I remodel the basement?".

You shake your head. Your thoughts go to some really weird places at times. Dismissing them, you wander up out of the basement and out to the kitchen, where you set about preparing dinner and finally replying to the texts you've been neglecting since you began painting the bookcase.

You wake up the next morning in one of the most pleasant moods you've had in a long while. Things are actually going quite nicely at the moment. Aside from Emma, you're in a good place with all your girls, you actually have a job that pays you money, and you just spent most of a day working in companionable silence with Dad. What's not to enjoy?

Your jog today is quicker than yesterday's, and you're back in less than an hour. You eye yourself off critically in the mirror, trying to determine if the jogging is helping you physically as well as mentally. You... think it might be? It's hard to tell, without having pictures of you without clothes from a month or so ago to compare against. There's no podge on your stomach, at least, and when you poke at your legs, you feel muscles there. There's still no real muscles in your stomach, though, and your chest is as flat as ever. A sigh escapes you as you climb into the shower. Damn it.

After you wash yourself, dry off and get dressed, you wander out to the kitchen. Dad's already sitting out there, holding a copy of the newspaper- wait, you don't have a subscription to the newspaper. You eye him suspiciously as you walk over to the coffee machine and turn it on.

He notices your gaze and looks down. "Deborah loaned it to me," he says, shaking off a handful of crumbs of toast that had fallen on it at some point. "Her son is an officer in the PRT, and he's been credited with the arrest of one of the members of the Teeth. Uh, Spree."

"Huh." You notice that the coffee machine has dinged, and begin to pour yourself a cup. "Does it say how he did that?"

He skims the article quickly. "There was a fight," he says slowly. "Spree and... Hemmorhagia fought Fenja and Menja. Hemmorhagia got away, but the PRT troopers were quick to respond, and managed to contain Spree." He seems to be quoting the newspaper.

"Cool." You take a long sip of the coffee, savouring the taste. It's good to be talking to Dad again, even if it's just about inane things. And- oh! Speaking of talking to Dad- "I'm going to my book club again at eleven," you inform him. "I should be back by six."
"Okay." Dad nods, accepting that. "There's money for the bus fare in the change jar. Make sure you don't go anywhere dangerous, okay?"

You give him a smile. "I won't," you promise him. At least, not today.

It's not perfect communication, but it's more than the two of you have had for the past couple of weeks. You're not- you're not going to talk about anything heavy, preferably ever if you have anything to say about it, but you don't feel like you need to hide from him now.

Things proceed as usual after that. You have your breakfast, take your time getting dressed, and eventually, it hits eleven o'clock. This time, Victoria even knows you're coming, not that it makes any difference; she greets you as soon as you walk in the door, the same as usual. You spend the next couple of hours playing with Victoria beneath the desk, until eventually the clock hits two, and the two of you head off to your alley. Just like usual. You're going to have to find a way to spice it up. Or not, because it is a public space. Hm.

Either way, the two of you make it to your alleyway, where Victoria sets you gently to your feet. You lean over to her and place a quick kiss on her lips, then back away when she tries to deepen it, giving her a cheeky grin. "Come on," you tell her. "Let's get inside."

She gives you a dirty look, but you just hum to yourself as the two of you head on in to the library. You find a seat up the back, in the most secluded area you can find- not that you're planning any hanky-panky in here- and gesture for her to sit across from you. Then you pull her copy of her Harry Potter books out of your bag.

"I had a headache, so I didn't get as much reading done as I wanted," you warn her. "I did finish the first book, though, and I'm most of the way through the second one. Don't spoil me."

She plucks the first book from your hands, then reaches into her own bag and pulls out two more books- the next two in the series. The third one is around the same size as the other two, but the fourth- wow, that is thick compared to the other books in the series so far.

"I brought these in for you," she says. "Thanks for not ruining my books like Crystal would. These are actually pretty expensive."

You nod. "Of course not. I wouldn't damage anything you gave me," you vow. She snorts at some joke you don't understand, but there's a pleased look on her face anyway, so you let it go. "There's a few things I don't understand about the books, though..."

The discussion gets fairly involved. There's actually quite a lot of things you don't understand about these books, and while a lot of them ends with Victoria just shrugging her shoulders and saying "It's a plot point", there's a fair few where Victoria is just completely unable to answer your questions. It doesn't leave you feeling very satisfied, but the few instances where she is able to give you a concrete answer- "No, Dumbledore is not secretly Voldemort in disguise"- do alleviate that somewhat.

You're deep in a discussion over the author's writing style- Victoria is of the opinion that the author doesn't describe the characters enough for her to visualize them, while you think the author did a fine job considering the viewpoint character is an eleven-year-old boy- when Victoria's phone rings. She blinks down at it, then looks up at you.
"Uh, I have to take this," she says quickly. "It shouldn't take long, hold that thought." She stands up quickly, sending her chair skittering backwards, then moves away from you, holding her phone up so she can swipe her finger across the screen- she has a modern smartphone, you're jealous. "Yes, hi, Amy," you hear her saying.

You wait a couple of minutes, but when she's still deep in whatever discussion she's having, you wave for her attention and gesture over to the stacks. Victoria gives you a thumbs up, which you take as approval for you to wander over to them for a moment.

The two of you have already gone through the fantasy section, so you don't bother trying to find anything worth reading in there. You need something to distract you in class when the teacher's covering material you've already read, so- maybe not anything fictional, then. You twitch away from the crime section, over to the non-fiction section, and spend a few minutes browsing there.

There aren't a lot of topics you find interesting, but one book does catch your attention. "How to run a successful small business", by Marcus Rhodes. You think about it for a moment. If you're going to be managing a team of heroes- well, is it really that different from running a business? There are probably legal and statutory differences, but it will all involve money and management. Well, it can't hurt. You grab that book, and then after a moment's consideration, a couple of others like it, and head off to the loans desk to borrow them.

When you return to the table, Victoria still hasn't got off the phone. She rolls her eyes at you as you return, lifting her hand and making a gesture meant to imply that whoever is on the phone is talking too much. You wait patiently for a few minutes, before eventually she gets off it and moves back over.

"Ugh, sorry," she says, moving her chair back over to the table and sitting back down in it. "My cousin's been on my ass ever since I accidentally broke her car. She keeps calling me up and yelling at me, like it's my fault her insurance company took this long to compensate her."

You shrug. "It's fine," you say. "Why is she badgering you over that, though?"

"Crystal just likes yelling at me, I think," she complains. "She does it all the time." Her voice changes, goes higher-pitched, as though she's mimicking someone else's voice. "Victoria, you didn't do the dishes. Victoria, you didn't clean your room like Mom asked you to. Victoria, you drank from the milk carton again! Gah, like anyone actually bothers to go get a glass just to get a drink of milk when it's right there." She slumps down in her chair, staring glumly at the table.

You take her hand, rubbing small circles over the back of it. "Aw, poor Victoria," you coo. "That's gross, though, don't drink straight from the carton."

"Aw man, you too?" She throws her head back with a disgusted sigh. "Yeah, 'coz you of all should be complaining about me drinking from a bottle."

You flush. "That's a fair point," you squeak out. It doesn't really make much sense for you to tell her not to drink straight from the bottle when you spend what feels like half the time you have with her with your tongue in her mouth. What's the use of complaining about germs at that point? "Unless you kiss your mother like you do me, though, you shouldn't do that at home."

She waggles her eyebrows at you. "How do you know I don't?" she asks salaciously.

You stall for a moment, a small "eep" the only sound you're able to make. Your thoughts take an
You're abruptly dragged out of your fantasies when Victoria snaps her fingers in front of your face. She gives you an amused look as you blink at her, startled, your blush only growing worse. "Didn't mean for you to take that seriously," she says, a teasing tone to her voice that fades into something more serious. "I don't actually kiss Mom like that, only you. And D- my boyfriend. I'd tell you if there was anyone else."

"Uh." Squeezing your eyes closed, you try to banish the haze of lust now hanging heavy over your thoughts. You're not very successful. "Uh, sorry, I'm still hung up on the image of you kissing your Mom," you admit.

She gives you an odd grin. "Your list of turn-ons just keeps growing, huh."

"Yeah, sorry." You shake your head, but don't have very much more success than you did last time. "That one's a big one. And I don't hear you denying it yourself."

Chuckling, Victoria leans forward. "You can have whatever kinks you like, Taylor," she says warmly. "I'm not going to act disgusted because you like the thought of me kissing Mom. Mom's hot, it's true. I've thought about it myself a few times, although I'd never actually do it."

And you stall again. Okay, that's just not fair. She shouldn't be allowed to say these things.

"Come on." She pats your cheeks, giving you a gentle grin. You try to shake it off again, and have some moderate success this time as you stare at her face, although you're pretty sure your face is the reddest it's ever been right now. "There we go. Come on. We should go and talk about this." She takes your hand, and you follow her up in a daze, barely conscious of Victoria tucking your bag over her shoulder and leading you out of the library.

She leads you over to your alleyway, checking casually to make sure nobody else is in there. Then, she bodily picks you up, ignoring your annoyed grunt, and places on the top of a dumpster marked Recycling. Both of you ignore the sound of several pieces of paper flying away. You're taller than her, from up here, but only for a moment- she cheats and flies up a short distance, bringing herself to a height she can meet your eyes at.

Before you can start talking, she gives you a soft kiss. You return it, and don't try to deepen it at all, just luxuriating in the softness of Victoria's lips. You part from her soon, not letting it last too long, and look into her lidded eyes. "Okay," you say quietly, regaining your bearings somewhat. "What did you want to talk about?"

She doesn't say anything, instead running her hands through your hair. It feels nice, but a little bit weird, too. You tug her hands away from your hair, puffing your cheeks out a little and letting out an aggrieved noise. She just snickers and pats you on the head again, just once.

"Relax," she finally says, releasing your hair. You hurriedly reach up and run your fingers through your hair where you're pretty sure she just tangled it all together. "I just didn't want to have that kind of talk in the middle of a library."

"Oh." You pout at her as you tug at your hair, trying to smooth it all out. "What kind of talk?"
She pinches your hip, causing you to jerk back with a yelp, which only grows worse when you bash the back of your heel against the metal dumpster. She smirks at you. "You know what I'm talking about," she chides you.

"Fine, fine." You turn your ankle as much as you can so that the sore part of it isn't touching the dumpster. Seriously, that actually hurt. You rotate it a couple of times, trying to find the most comfortable position for it you can.

"Come on." Victoria rubs the spot on your hip that she'd just pinched, frowning lightly at you. "Stop it, Taylor. This isn't a bad talk, but I need you to be serious for a little bit."

"I know, I know." You find a comfortable spot and let your ankle rest there, angled towards your other foot. "Sorry." Giving her a contrite look, you reach over and take her hand, lifting it into your lap. You don't do anything with it, just hold it. "Start talking, I'm listening."

She nods, but gives you a firm glare before she starts saying anything. "It's not a long talk or anything," she begins. "I just wanted to take you out here so I could assure you that I'm not going to laugh at you or make you feel bad for your kinks without anyone listening in. It doesn't bother me if you fantasize about Mom and I."

You nod. "You could have just told me in there, you know," you point out, but she's shaking her head even before you finish your sentence.

"I'm a public figure," she replies. "I'm no movie star, but a lot of people in Brockton Bay know my name and face. If I talk about this kind of stuff in public, there's a good chance somebody might hear it and spread it around."

"... But you already did talk about it in public, just before," you remind her.

She huffs a little laugh. "Yeah, well," she says wryly, "you have a way of making me forget a lot of things I really should remember." She pokes you in the stomach with her free hand as she says that. You squirm, pouting at her. "If you hear me talking about that kind of thing in public again, you should really remind me. It won't go well for either of us if this gets out."

You frown glumly. "Yeah, okay," you assure her. "I don't want you to get in any trouble because of me."

She pokes you in the stomach again. "You're nothing but trouble," she teases you. You give her a mock-offended look, and she gives you a wide, proud grin at her own faux-cleverness. "But I don't mind your kind of trouble, as long as it doesn't get me in trouble with Mom and Dad."

You smile winsomely at her. "Do I look like the kind of girl who would get you in trouble with your parents?"

"Yes." She doesn't even hesitate with the response. You rock back, actually a little shocked, but playing it up for humour value. "But that's okay. I have a bit of a thing for nerdy bad girls with awesome hair." Before you can react to that, her hand is tousling up your hair again. Knowing it's useless, you don't fight it, but you do scrunch your nose up at her to convey your displeasure.

"Know a lot of girls like that, do you?" you ask her. She pauses, assessing you, before smirking again.
"No," she replies simply. "Just you." And she grabs a fistful of your hair, causing you to let out a little shriek that turns into a moan as she crashes her lips against yours.

Once you've overcome the initial wave of pleasure, you tug reprovingly at her lower lip with your teeth a few times. She smiles against your mouth, and you can't help but smile back as you run your tongue against her lip in apology. It's hard to stay mad right now.

You're just starting to really get into it when you feel a strong tug at the back of your shirt. Stiffening, you immediately pull back, dropping your arms from where they'd circled around Victoria's waist to hold her arms in place.

She gives you a look of confusion and disappointment as the kiss ends, but she doesn't say anything, just stares at you. You stare back at her, eyes wide- shit, maybe that was too abrupt a gesture.

"Uh, sorry." She drops her hands from your shirt, but doesn't back away from you at all. You're surprised at how much of a relief that is- even when she's not kissing you, you like feeling her warmth around you. "I just wanted to see- but yeah, I should have asked first. Sorry." She unwraps her arms around from you entirely, and begins to float away. You panic a little, wrapping your hands back around her waist, and she stops as soon as she notices that she's dragging you to the edge of the dumpster. After a moment, she floats back in, and you scramble back up to your previous comfortable position.

You're not sure why your reaction was so severe- okay, that's a lie. You know exactly why.

You don't say that, though, instead exhaling slightly in a weird half-sigh. "Sorry," you breathe. "I shouldn't have done that. You can take it off if you want."

She shakes her head slowly, staring at your face. "I'm not sure that's a good idea," she murmurs. "Why did you stop me, Taylor?"

"It's nothing. It was stupid. Forget it." You try to tug her closer to you, but all you succeed in doing is pulling yourself forward again, forcing you to have to scramble back up for a second time.

"No, tell me," she insists. "Or don't, it's your choice. I'm not going to try taking your shirt off when you're obviously uncomfortable with it, though."

This time, you're the one shaking your head. You don't say anything, though, just try to lean up for a kiss. Victoria just backs away a little, leaning her head back to prevent you from reaching her, and you subside after a moment.

"Really?" you grumble. When she doesn't say anything more for a moment, you let out an aggravated sigh. "Look, it's really nothing. I was just being silly." She still doesn't say anything, just gives you that concerned look, and you're forced to screw your brow up in irritation as you let out a frustrated groan. "Argh, okay, fine! I just, I don't like it when people see my chest, okay?"

She floats forward again, but just places one hand on your thigh, making little rubbing motions on it. "Why?" She sounds curious and concerned, but mostly concerned.

Everybody wants to talk about their feelings lately. Argh. It's getting pretty annoying.

"It's n-" You cut yourself off before you can tell her it's nothing again. She obviously knows it's not true, and what's the point in lying when you both know you're doing it? Besides- there's something
about Victoria, something about her genuine concern and her insistence on stopping as soon as she notes your discomfort- that makes you want to tell her. "It's silly," you tell her instead. "I'm just, I don't, I don't really have any boobs, and it makes me feel a bit insecure when people see my chest."

"Hm," she says noncommittally. There's silence for a few moments, then she says in a low voice, "You know, I'm not very confident in my body, either."

You look at her. There's a denial on your lips, but something, some part of you, clamps down on it before you can say anything, and you consider it for a moment. Victoria had seemed pretty nervous when she'd taken her shirt off for you last week. You'd pinned it on her being nervous about showing herself off to someone new, but- if she doesn't feel confident in her body, that could explain it too.

But at the same time, Victoria is a gorgeous girl, and you're... you. It's not really fair to compare the two of you.

You don't say that, either.

When you don't say anything for a few moments, she licks her lips and continues. "I know that a lot of people think I'm pretty, but a lot of that isn't me." She taps her chest with her hand. "Aunty Sarah taught me a lot about makeup, and I use it a lot more than people realize. If you use it right, people don't even realize it's there, you know?"

You can't say that you do, but that's just another thing you're not saying at the moment. Instead, you swallow, trying to wet your suddenly dry mouth before you say anything. You reach up, cupping her cheeks. "I don't even look at your face enough to tell when you're wearing makeup," you say inanely.

She bursts out into startled laughter for a moment, subsiding quickly. Her grin is unusually wide as she says, "Not usually what a girl wants to hear, Taylor." Despite that, her grin doesn't fade, and you're pretty sure she isn't faking it. "I'm not looking for your sympathy here, Taylor. I just wanted you to know that I do understand not wanting people to look at you."

You nod, but you're careful not to speak immediately. You're not good with emotions, you're self-aware enough to know that. But even you can recognize that that was a bit more than just Victoria's attempt to empathize with you, and you don't want to ruin that with an inappropriate response.

So you're entirely serious when you lean up and kiss her- just one brief and gentle kiss, no hot-and-heavy make-out session. Then you sit back, taking your hands off her cheeks to clutch awkwardly at the edges of your shirt, and take a deep breath. "... Could you come over to my house on Wednesday?"

She considers you for a moment, looking very cautiously at you. "If you want me to," she says simply.

You nod. "I don't think I can do this here," you admit. Victoria nods, accepting that at face value. "And, um. I don't think Dad needs to know that." You cut yourself off before you phrase that too badly, and think through what you're saying carefully. "I don't think we need Dad to know that you're Glory Girl," you settle for saying. "So you should, um. You should come as you. And I think that I would like to see you without makeup on." You're fumbling your words, but you don't care.

She studies you for a few long moments, searching your eyes for something. You look back at her,
trying to be as open as you can for her. Evidently, it works, because she settles somehow, even though she wasn't moving. "Yeah. Okay. I can do that. Only at your house, though. I'll bring my makeup with me. Maybe I could even teach you how to use it."

"I'd like that." You give her a small smile. And it's true. Maybe with makeup, you could even make yourself feel a bit more feminine. Or maybe not, but- you think that with Victoria there to help you, you might feel confident enough to try.

You don't end up resuming your make-out session, which lives you with mixed feelings. You're a bit disappointed, because seriously, but at the same time, you're left with a strange feeling of giddy anticipation and nervousness rolling in your stomach. She flies you home shortly after your conversation, dropping you a couple of streets over- you make sure to give her directions to your house so that she knows how to get there- and flying off again, claiming something about having to go meet up with Crystal. You're pretty sure she just wanted to get away from the heavy conversation, but you don't complain.

You find it difficult to fall asleep that night. Victoria on Wednesday, Sophia on Friday, and Madison five days a week- that's a lot of things for you to look forward to.

At least she's coming over to yours, so you won't have to spend hours making plans to get wherever you're going. It shouldn't eat up too much of your time.

You find yourself drifting off to sleep as your plans finalize in your head. You're planning to...
It’s not quite as cold on Monday morning as you’ve come to expect it to be. It’s not a reasonable temperature by any means, but you’re only half-expecting to lift your blanket and step out onto a puddle of ice today.

You head over to your dresser and get out your clothes for the day, then pull on some of your other clothes to go jogging in. It’s probably going to be colder outside, so you make sure the clothes you choose aren’t too thin. Then you head out, trying to focus on your breathing.

An hour later, you head back to the house and head straight for the bathroom, where you undress and step into the glorious warm spray of water. You stay in there for as long as you reasonably can, and only step out when the water begins to run lukewarm.

After you’re dressed, you head out to the kitchen to a nice surprise; Dad’s sitting at the kitchen table already, with two mugs of coffee sitting in front of him, steam still billowing out of them. He looks up as you approach, giving you a small smile, and pushes one of the cups over to the other side of the table.

“Good morning,” he says. “Did you sleep well?”

You nod, returning the smile. “Yeah.” Picking up the coffee he’d slid over, you take a sip and try to hide the grimace that spreads over your face. He’d forgotten to put any sugar in it. Ew. You valiantly take another mouthful anyway, trying to hide how bad the taste is.

It’s a wasted effort, though; he just gives you an amused grin. “You don’t have to drink it,” he observes. “I guess I made it wrong?”

You put the cup down with an embarrassed smile and nod. “Yeah,” you reply. “You didn’t put any sugar in it. Sorry.”

He shakes his head, his smile fading a little. “You don’t have to be sorry. Pass it here, I’ll make you another one.” He doesn’t even let you pass it to him, though; he just reaches over and takes it. Rude, but you’ll let it slide.

The coffee machine is merrily boiling away again a few moments later, and Dad is chatting animatedly away in the kitchen. He’s talking about something at work, you’re not really sure what—something about the mayor approving funds for the hiring of machinery, or something. You just nod along, making vague “uh-huh” and “okay” sounds at what you think are appropriate intervals.

Then—oh. You wait for there to be a pause in the conversation, then, “I’m going to be home late today.” He looks up at your interruption, but he doesn’t look as confused as you expect him to.

“You heard the voicemail,” he says. He doesn’t sound judgemental that you didn’t tell him about your job, which you are glad about, but you’re a little annoyed that he doesn’t even sound surprised. “Do you need me to take you there?”

You shake your head. “I’m going shopping with Madison,” you reveal. You feel a little vindicated when his eyebrows do lift in surprise this time, but he schools his expression back down to calm neutrality very quickly.
“What are you going out for?” he asks.

Shrugging, you look off to the side, trying to fight down a blush before it can form. You’re moderately successful. “Just some clothes shopping for Madison,” you say. “She wants me to go with her so she has someone to give her a second opinion on what she plans on buying.”

He raises his eyebrows at that, giving you a quick once-over. You’re not sure what he’s implying, but you feel indignation rising in your gut anyway. He must see that, because he quickly gives you a charming smile and hurries over with a fresh cup of coffee. You make sure to scowl at him anyway as you take a sip of the coffee, just so he doesn’t think he got away with it. At least he remembered the sugar.

“Alright, well,” he says once you’ve visibly calmed down a little. “Will you need any money? I don’t have very much, but I have a little bit set aside in case you wanted to go out with friends.”

For a moment, you consider it. Madison would probably pay for her lingerie herself, but it would be pretty mean of you to make her pay for everything when the two of you went out. “Maybe just a little?” you ask hesitantly. “I won’t have much time for dinner between this and work, so we might just get some while we’re out.”

He shakes his head, but pulls his wallet out from his pocket anyway. “Don’t worry about dinner,” he replies, handing you a twenty. “Get you and Madison something small while you’re out. What time do you think the two of you will finish?”

You shrug. “Fiiiive-ish?” you hazard. “Or maybe five thirty? We have to head there after school, but that shouldn’t take too long. Yeah, five thirty.” That should give you just long enough to take a bus home, shower, and head off to work.

Dad nods. “I’ll pick you up after work, then,” he declares. “I should finish a little after five today, so I’ll pick you up around then. We’ll get some dinner on the way. How does that sound?”

“Do we have the money for that?” you ask, a little startled. You didn’t think you would- you’ve been running short, and even though you’ve been dropping small bits of change in the change jar, you don’t think it’s been helping very much. “Don’t worry about it.” He gives you a cheesy grin and a thumbs-up with both his hands. “It won’t be much, but we can pick up a burger or something.”

“Okay!” If he says he has enough money, you’ll trust him on that. He’s the one who handles the finances, after all. “Thanks, Dad,” you make sure to say to him.

He walks over to your side and pulls you into a one-armed hug, squishing your head against his chest. “Don’t thank me,” he says. “It’s not a hassle.”

The two of you end up idly chatting for a while. As it winds closer to the time you leave, you head into your room and get your bag, then head back out and snag your phone- you’re pretty sure Dad sees it, but he doesn’t say anything- and what you think is a granola bar from the cupboard. It’s not the greatest breakfast you’ve ever had, but it’s something.

Eventually, it’s time for you to leave. You give Dad a quick hug before you run out the door, swinging your bag over your shoulders as you go.
Miracle of miracles, the bus is still on schedule. You’re not sure exactly what has led them to getting to school on time, but you’re not going to complain- not if it means you can see Madison before the bell rings. You do spend the time the bus spends winding around the city streets replying to your good morning texts from your girls. Even Amy has sent you one today, although hers is appended by a note asking about your headache- you make sure to assure her that it’s gone, and to thank her for the painkillers again. You sent her several texts last week doing so, even though you’re pretty sure they didn’t help at all.

Today, you interrupt her as she’s stealthily sliding your locker door open- the broken lock makes a squeaking sound as it swings open, masking your footsteps. Remembering what happened the last time you surprised her, you wait until she’s put your lunch in your locker before you step forwards and slip your arms around her and pull her into a hug.

“Hello, Maddie,” you purr into her ear. She squeaks, her cheeks reddening a little.

“H-hello, Taylor,” she stammers. She doesn’t even look at you, which sends a little thrill through you. She knows your voice well enough that she doesn’t even have to verify that it’s you. “Um, sorry I didn’t reply to your text yet. I was going to, but-“

You hug her tighter for a brief moment, then step away, allowing her to turn around. She reaches for your hand, and you let her take it. “It’s fine,” you say soothingly. “It’s only been ten minutes anyway. Come on, let’s go to class.”

The bell hasn’t quite rung when the two of you arrive at the classroom. Only one other person is here- that girl who’d been sitting next to Madison a while ago, Charlotte. You ignore her presence, turning back to Madison.

For the few minutes before class, the two of you sit around, going over her notes from Friday. She’s doing better in class these days- much better, she tells you with a proud and thankful little grin- but she still has a ways to go before she’s doing as well as she’d like to.

Then the bell rings, and the two of you file into the classroom. You lead her to your seats, then release her hand, choosing to slip your arm around her waist instead.

It’s not a very exciting class, and the noise level is high enough that you don’t think anyone is going to be able to overhear you, so when the teacher finally assigns you to a task- a full fifteen minutes after the bell rang- you gently pull on Madison’s sleeve until she looks over at you.

“We’re not going to tutoring today,” you murmur to her. “We’ll go shopping for those new clothes for you instead. Can you call your dad and let him know, or would you like to borrow my phone?”

“I can call him and let him know,” she says with a little grin. “I left my purse at home, but I can get him to bring it over after school is over. He’ll drive us there if you want.”

You consider it for a moment. “Yeah, that’d be good,” you murmur. “We’ll get something to drink afterwards. I have to be at work by six thirty, but we’ve got some time.”

She twitches towards you briefly, but restrains herself. Her hand, resting on your leg, does rub it a little- a little gesture of appreciation- and she flashes you a warm smile. “I’d like that.”

You rub her hip gently, then nudge her back towards her schoolwork. She pouts slightly, but turns back to it without much reluctance.
It’s harder to keep yourself interested come second period, when you don’t have Madison beside you. Luckily, you do have the books on business you borrowed from the library, so you’re not left completely and utterly bored, but… honestly, you’re growing a little spoiled. You have Madison in first class, and Sophia with you in Chemistry. Why can’t you have someone with you all the time?

Without turning your head, you know that Sophia and Emma are both in your class now. Maybe you could get Sophia to sit next to you- but then you’d be leaving Emma alone.

And you’re not sure it’s a good idea to leave Emma alone right now.

You’ll just have to keep finding new textbooks to keep you interested during class, then. Texting helps, too, but it’s hard to do that without the teachers noticing.

Still, reading through your textbooks keeps you occupied, at least until lunch. There, you send Madison a quick apology text- “Going to be a bit late to lunch today, sorry”- and head off around school.

Sophia had recommended that you talk to the newer kids, and while you’re not sure if she would actually have the best idea of the situation at school, she certainly has a much better idea of what the “factions” in the school are like than you do. You had briefly considered asking Madison, but even if she’d know, she’d want to know why you asked, and you’d feel bad if you had to lie to her. Emma might know, but, well. That mess.

The problem you quickly encounter is that there isn’t precisely one unified group of students you could call the “new kids”. As you walk around the school, you quickly find that you can’t even tell many of the groups of students apart by age. Which does make sense, you suppose- a lot of these people would probably know each other outside of school.

It’s annoying, though.

After a good five minutes, you despair of finding a group that’s even remotely approachable. A couple of times, you almost think that you could approach one of the smaller groups of men sitting around and laughing to each other over their lunches, but no matter what some people might think, you’re not actually naïve enough to believe that you can walk up to just anyone and get information about the gangs from them. You wouldn’t get anything if you approached it like that.

No, you’re looking for something a bit less suspicious; someone you can set your hooks into, and might be able to provide you with the information you’re looking for.

And- eight minutes past the lunch bell, by your watch- you stumble across gold.

It’s a small group, only six people by your count. Five of them are gathered on the chairs of one of the outdoor tables in the quad, and sitting cross-legged on top of the table is a girl making- okay, those are very crude gestures. You grimace and attempt to forget you ever saw them.

Your attention is drawn immediately to her. And not just because of her fiendishly good looks, although you’re not ashamed to admit that she is hot. You’re a sucker for girls with dark skin- well, you’re a sucker for girls with any colour skin, but you really like seeing the contrast of your pale skin against girls like this one and Sophia. She’s pretty, too. Not the same kind of pretty as Emma, or even Madison, but she’s still very pretty.
You’re not even drawn to her because of how trashy she looks. It’s like she’s deliberately gone out of her way to make herself look as trashy as she can. Her jeans are somehow both tight and torn, in what you’re pretty sure is a deliberate fashion statement. She’s wearing a full-length shirt, but has it tied up beneath her breasts, emphasizing them and enhancing the already potent effect of how low-cut her shirt is. Even her hair hasn’t been left untouched; she’s bleached a long stripe of it, a large strip of which is coloured purple. You don’t like being judgemental, but she really does look trashy.

No, your attention isn’t drawn to her because of how she looks. Your attention is drawn to her because she’s broadcasting her emotions loudly enough that your power reaches out to her as you walk past, almost without your consent.

She’s not the only girl in school like this- you usually have to keep your power lightly restrained as you walk through the school, because there’s about a dozen girls you pass by most days who broadcast their emotions stronger than most people do, most notably Madison. Probably more that you just never walk past.

This is the first girl you’ve met, however, who you think might actually know something about the gangs at school- if only because two of the boys trying to stare up her shirt are bearing what you recognize as ABB tattoos- and who feels particularly susceptible to your power. It’s the perfect combination.

Glancing at your watch, only nine minutes has passed of your forty-minute lunch period. Good.

You turn and head towards a nearby unoccupied table, where you set your bag on the table and rummage through it for your phone. As you do, you reach out with your power, searching adroitly for the girl’s emotions.

Her emotions aren’t tangled so much as they run deep, mixing and blending in to each other. Resting on the surface, most easily accessible, is some kind of happiness. That disappears quickly as you delve deeper in, though- surface happiness often does that. The happiness doesn’t disappear entirely as you go down, not quite, but it’s tinged by an oily grimness that grows stronger as you move down. You’ve felt that before, but not often. Mostly in Sophia, although hers is less oily and more just… there, omnipresent through her. To a lesser extent in Emma, too.

You pull your textbook out and sit in the chair, pretending to flip slowly through the book as though you’re looking for information in it. Meanwhile, you delve deeper into this girl’s head.

Beneath the grim happiness is a kind of sharp determination, something that bites deep and hurts her as much as it helps. Resting around that is a desire for- you’re not sure. You’ve felt something like this in Emma, and in Madison, but you’ve never been able to put a name to it. A yearning for attention, maybe? A desire to be noticed? That doesn’t feel quite right, but it’s not far off. Good enough for now.

Over at the table, there’s a sudden burst of laughter. You flinch, looking over as the girl’s voice rises- “bet you’d like to stick it up there, John!”- and the table laughs even louder for a moment before quieting back down.

It takes a fair bit of digging around, to the tune of two minutes, before you’re able to finally find the faint threads of her loyalty. Surprisingly, for a girl with such a trashy appearance, you hadn’t been able to find any strong traces of lust in her. Maybe later.

You keep an eye on your watch, trying to guess when you might have the right balance down. Five
minutes pass as you tug gently on her loyalty, then ten. At the fifteen minute mark, you stop, drawing your power back into you, then quickly let it spread out in a blanket- and, yes. Okay.

It’s weak, but you can feel her presence through the haze of emotions hanging heavy over the school. She feels like Charlotte does, weaker than Madison or even Emma, but with enough of your hooks in her that you can… not quite feel her emotions without deliberately touching them, but you can at least place her in the school.

Really, that’s all you can expect for now. Later, when you have more time, you might be able to influence her to the point she’ll give you the information you need, but for now this will have to do.

You’ll have to think of a way to get closer to her. If she comes here every day, then maybe you can find a place to have lunch with Madison around here. Or… well, you’re sure there’s a way.

Either way, you stand and tuck your textbook back in your bag, then hurry off. Madison’s been waiting for nearly half an hour now.

It’s hard to focus on trying to read through your books through fifth and sixth period, you soon find. Your thoughts keep drifting off to your upcoming shopping trip, and imagining how Madison is going to look in her new lingerie. A little shudder runs through your body. Hm, maybe Madison’s parents are going to be out this weekend. Or maybe you should more seriously consider asking Dad about that basement.

You watch the clock tick down to half past three with growing impatience. When the bell finally rings, you get up as fast as you can without drawing attention to yourself, and hurriedly throw your books in your bag.

Despite your rushing, Madison still beats you outside, greeting you near the school’s parking lot with a small but eager smile and a larger but no less eager hug. You return it for a moment, but hastily drop it when you see people passing you by and giving you annoyed looks. She pouts, but after looking around for a moment, doesn’t seem any more eager than you are to start again.

Rick takes a few minutes to arrive. In the meantime, you and Madison engross yourselves in talking about her family. “Terry’s been playing this same racing game for two weeks now,” she tells you with wide eyes, “he’s obsessed with it.”

You chuckle fondly, remembering how enthusiastic the energetic kid had been about his games the last time you’d been over to Madison’s house. “He’s pretty good at those games, huh,” you reply.

She nods, her enthusiasm dampening a little. “Yeah,” she says. “He’s actually grounded from his PlayStation because he wouldn’t do his homework last night. I feel a little bad for him, but he keeps coming into my room and talking about these dumb comics of his. It’s really frustrating.”

“Can’t get enough alone time?” You give her a lecherous grin as you speak. She blushes lightly and bumps your hip with hers, but after a moment, looks down at the ground and nods. “Aw, poor Madison,” you coo. “You’ll have to get a lock for your door, then.”

“That sounds like- wait, there’s Dad.” She points towards the parking lot, where you can see Rick just pulling in to the entrance. He’s stymied momentarily by the three cars in front of him, so the two of you hurry over, pulling the back doors of the car open and piling in with loud giggles before the car has even stopped. Rick turns his head back to look at the two of you, giving you an unimpressed look.
“I’m not a chauffeur,” he complains. His complaint doesn’t last long when Madison pouts at him, though, clutching forlornly at your hand. A heavy sigh escapes him, and he turns back just in time to witness the cars in front of him driving forwards. “Fine, stay back there, but you’re doing the dishes tonight.”

“Okay!” Madison exclaims brightly. She shifts over to the middle seat and does up the buckle there so she can rest her head on your shoulder as he drives. “Did you bring my purse?”

“Yeah, it’s just here.” He pats the console of the car, just next to the handbrake. Madison reaches over and grabs it, then opens it and quickly counts what’s in there as she lays her head back on your shoulder.

You roll your eyes and pat her affectionately. “Thanks for driving us,” you say loudly. Madison gives you a guilty glance, then echoes your thanks. Rick just chuckles.

Once you actually get out of the car lot, it’s a quick drive to the mall, much quicker than you’ve become accustomed to on the bus. You spend the idle time of the trip giving Madison some quick instructions as to what pages of her textbooks she should go through tonight. You don’t need to actually tell her that there’s a reward in it for her if she does- by the smile she gives you, she understands.

Rick pulls up in the mall’s car lot less than fifteen minutes after picking the two of you up. Before the two of you can clamber out, however, he turns back and gives the two of you a dry look. “Do you need anything?” he asks his daughter. Madison shakes her head, and he nods, as though expecting that. “Okay. Do you need me to drive you home, Taylor?”

Shaking your head, you reply, “No. Dad’s going to pick me up around five thirty, so I should be good.”

“And that answers my second question,” he says, smiling. “Is there anything else you’re going to do in town, Madison, or do you want me to pick you up at five thirty too?”

“Five thirty is fine,” she says. “Thank you, Dad.”

He shakes his head fondly. “That’s alright,” he replies. “I’ll see you then, then.”

The two of you climb out of the car and wave at him as he peels off, giving the two of you a jaunty salute. Then, finally freed of parental supervision, you take Madison’s hand and lead her into the mall.

Just before you make it in, though, Madison tugs at your hand, bringing you to a stop. “Um,” she says hesitantly, “I, um, have some extra money saved up from my birthday. Would it be okay if we went and bought some other clothes while we’re here, too?”

“Like what?” you ask casually. You don’t have any intentions to deny her, but you’re going to need to rearrange your plans if she wants to spend much time elsewhere.

She just shrugs and slips her purse into her pocket. “Whatever you want,” she says. Her gaze is focused on your face, and she’s not even concerned that other people are within earshot when she continues, “I just want you to pick out clothes for me to wear.”
The request doesn’t come completely as a surprise. “Okay,” you reply. “We’ll head out after we visit the lingerie store and see what the clothing stores around have.”

A smile spreads across her face. “Thank you,” she says contentedly. Now that she’s said her piece, she allows you to lead her into the mall and towards the little boutique you’d wanted to take her to a while.

The boutique itself is a small and demure little storefront. Two glass windows dominate the storefront to each side of the door, each showcasing a mannequin wearing some rather comfortable-looking lingerie. Above the store is a sign bearing a name you can’t actually read, as loopy and curving as it is- you can pick out the word ‘Parian’ in the name, but it seems like whoever made the sign focused a little too much on being artistic and not quite enough on making it readable.

It’s a lot larger inside than it seems from the outside, though. It widens up some as you head inside, and it’s a good distance long. There’s a desk off to the side with a bored-looking woman standing behind it, her skin dark- Middle Eastern, if you had to guess. Beyond that stretches several comfortable-looking chairs, and then, set against the walls, displays of lingerie.

Madison’s eyes are wide when you turn to look at her. You can’t help but smirk a little.

“It’s going to take forever to look through all this,” she whispers.

You squeeze her hand gently. “It’s fine,” you tell her gently. “We’ll ask one of the store clerks to help us out. Do you have your measurements?”

“Yes,” she says after a moment’s thought. “I got measured when I bought that lingerie on Friday.”

Nodding, you assess the store. You begin to step forwards to the clerk behind the desk, but before you can, a heavyset woman with graying hair steps past from behind you and begins to head towards her. Even from here, you can feel the flash of boredom and irritation that emanates from the clerk when she sees the woman approaching. Wow, she must really hate her job.

Looking deeper into the store, you can see another clerk standing in front of a shelf, carefully attaching something to a mannequin. You pull Madison down towards her, then quickly push her so she’s standing slightly in front of you, wide-eyed in front of the clerk.

“Oh, hi,” she squeaks. “I’m, uh.” She stalls, looking back for guidance. You give her an encouraging grin, and she swallows slightly. “I… want to buy some lingerie?”

The clerk- a thin woman with long, blonde hair- looks back at her with an obviously fake smile. Well, actually, it’s a pretty good fake smile- you’re just cheating by using your power to feel how little she cares. “Okay!” she says brightly. “I’m sure we can help you find whatever you need. Do you need to be measured, or do you have your measurements already?”

The process of actually buying lingerie is a lot less exciting than you’d vaguely imagined it to be. There’s a lot of questions about style, colour, and size- and Madison can’t even try the lingerie on in the store. Which makes sense- you shudder a little imagining trying on underwear that half a dozen other people have already worn- but it’s disappointing nonetheless.

Still, Madison does keep looking to you for guidance on what to buy. As she says confidently at one point, right in front of the store clerk, she’s not buying this for herself- she’s buying this for you.
In the end, she ends up with three new sets of lingerie. Two of them are simple black sets of lacy lingerie, bras that the store clerk assure her should fit snugly over her breasts and panties that cover the sex of the mannequins nicely, not too low-cut. The third set is a little different, a dark blue set of lingerie with white ribbons that tie the bra together at the front and the panties together at the side.

It’s all tasteful lingerie, drawing your eye over it and hinting at what’s beneath it, rather than outright revealing her body. You prefer it that way, honestly. It feels… respectful, somehow. Wholesome, despite the whole idea of it being to enhance her sex appeal for you. You’ve never very much liked it when girls tried to look slutty.

You’re prepared to leave the store at quarter past four when Madison walks over from where she’s been talking to the store clerk and hands you a small bag with a shy smile. “This one is for you,” she says, flushing slightly. “I can get it in a different colour if you want.”

You stare at her. What’s the point of getting you any lingerie? You have nothing for it to enhance. Still, you draw it out of the bag, looking curiously at it. It’s… okay, you recognize the garter belt; you’ve got off on enough pictures of women wearing them to recognize them. And the long, silky stockings look scrumptious. But the bra- is that even a bra? It kind of reminds you of a sport bra, in that it looks almost completely flat. You reach up and touch the material lightly, enjoying the soft sensation of silk against your hand.

“It’s for flat-chested women.” Madison gives you an apologetic smile, but you can see the flush to her cheeks, and you’re pretty sure it’s not from embarrassment this time. “It’s not designed to flatter your breasts, but, um.” She swallows, looking down at the ground to hide her rising blush. “You look pretty all the time, but I think you’ll look even prettier in this.”

Your first instinct is to shove it back in the bag and tell her to get rid of it. A bra for flat-chested women. What a joke. You still have time! You’re only fifteen, they might still grow in!

You can’t explain why you pause, why you don’t just do it, tell her you’re not interested immediately. You can’t help but brush your fingers over it again.

… It does feel really nice. Soft and smooth.

In the end, you drop it back in the bag with a curious mix of depression, resignation, curiosity and arousal flooding through you. You’re surprised at how strong the curiosity and arousal is, and how little depression you’re feeling. It probably has something to do with how hopeful your girl looks as she watches you examining it- and the memory of her playing with your chest, running her tongue over it despite your lack of curves.

Madison can’t hide her relief as you drop the lingerie back in the bag and don’t immediately shove it towards her.

“Thanks,” you say. Your tone is a little sharp, but Madison takes it without flinching. Still, you swallow and repeat it. “Thanks.” you say more gently this time.

She shakes her head and grins widely at the same time. “I just want to see you in it,” she says naughtily.

A small grin tugs its way up your own face. “Soon,” you promise her. “Come on. We’d better go pay if we want to buy you any more clothes tonight.”
She pads along beside you, clutching your free hand with her own, carefully holding her own bag to the side. Thankfully, the woman who had pushed her way in front of you earlier has gone, although the clerk is still emanating irritation. It’s strong enough that it’s slightly rankling at your own nerves. Why is she even here, if she obviously hates her job so much?

The irritation does fade somewhat as the two of you stand in front of her and present your products, though, replaced with curiosity and a slight attentiveness as you tug Madison forwards. She hands her bag over to the clerk with a demure smile, looking up at you with a grin, and the clerk’s attentiveness shoots right up.

The price is surprisingly low- less than two hundred dollars for four full sets of lingerie made of silk and lace. The perks of being a rogue with the power to make lingerie, you guess; it must make it much easier to produce this kind of stuff quicker and cheaper than usual.

You double-take slightly when the clerk gives you a quick wink when Madison turns her head away for a second, and you can’t help but blush. Mumbling your thanks, you grab the bags and hurry out of the store, trying your best to ignore the amusement now radiating from the clerk.

“Alright,” you say slightly more loudly than you need to. “Let’s get a coffee and go buy you some clothes.”

There’s a small store that sells coffee and cakes down the ways a bit. You order, taking careful note of what Madison orders- a vanilla latte with one sugar, and a simple blueberry muffin- and order a coffee and banana-nut muffin for yourself. Madison goes to pull money out of her purse, but you put your hand on her arm and shake your head. You might not be able to afford extravagancies like that lingerie, but you can at least afford to buy her a coffee and a muffin while you’re out.

Once you’ve got your order, you wander over to the nearest clothing store. You’re pretty sure it’s a chain, but it’s not one of the really big chains. At least the prices aren’t too bad, you conclude- you only see a single shirt in there priced over forty dollars.

The two of you roam through the store, confident in the knowledge that you have an hour before you need to leave, and that Madison can actually try these clothes on before she buys them.

“So what clothes do you actually like?” she asks casually as she picks through a rack of shirts you’ve just looked through. She doesn’t even stop to look at any of them.

“Skirts,” you reply, instantly and without any hesitation. She giggles, but gestures for you to continue, so you have to actually stop to think about it a little. “Well, it can depend.” You gesture vaguely around. “Some clothes fit some girls better, you know? Some girls look really nice in dresses, while other girls look better in jeans and a t-shirt.”

She hums, looking out the corner of her eyes at you, then down at herself. You look self-consciously down at your own clothes, a simple set of denim pants and a high-necked t-shirt. “Yeah,” she says mischievously. “I can see that.”

You shrug. “It doesn’t bother me if I don’t dress very nicely,” you say. “I know I’m not very pretty, so what’s the point in dressing up?”

“You are pretty,” she replies matter-of-factly. There’s no hesitation in her words, no signs that she’s choosing her words carefully. You look disbelievingly at her, and she frowns slightly. “You really
are,” she insists. “You’re not a supermodel, but that doesn’t mean you’re not pretty.”

You just shake your head. You’ve seen yourself in the mirror- you know that she is, objectively, wrong. It’s just not worth the argument, no more than it was when Dad tried to tell you the same thing last year.

“I think you should try this on,” you say instead. She gives you an unhappy look at the sudden change in topic, but obediently turns towards the shirt you’re pointing at and takes it down. It’s just a simple button-up blouse, coloured an attractive dark grey.

You continue distracting her by pointing out clothes she should try on. Most of them trend towards being more formal than the clothes she normally wears- neat button-up blouses with upturned collars, pencil skirts, and skirts that flutter up easily in your hands. It’s an intentional distinction between the clothes she normally wears and the clothes she wears for you.

And she does look nice in them. Very nice, in fact. Dressed in a neat white button-up blouse and a simple black pencil skirt, she looks like the kind of respectable girl nobody would be ashamed to present to their parents. Nobody would ever guess the kind of things the two of you get up to when you’re alone together.

Yeah, you’re going to have to buy her that choker sooner than later. You can’t have people eyeing her off. She’s yours, even if she has weird ideas about how attractive you are.

By the heavy blush on her cheeks when she models the clothes for you, she’s obviously thinking along the same lines.

You’re forced to finish up your purchasing early so that you can make it back down to the car park before Dad gets there. The total is higher than the purchases at the lingerie store had been- nearly three hundred and fifty dollars for six complete sets of skirts and shirts, plus two sets of high-rising socks you think will compliment her legs nicely- but she doesn’t look concerned, just tucks her card away without a second thought. When you voice your concern about the price, she just shrugs and tells you, “I don’t have much to spend my pocket money on.”

She truly lives on a different financial level to you and Dad.

Dad hasn’t arrived yet by the time you get down there, so you end up leaning against a wall waiting for him. Madison joins you, relaxing into your arms with a contented sigh. Occasionally, she glances down at the bags held in her hands and gives you a big smile, but mostly she just stands there contentedly against you, smiling a small, happy smile.

When you see Dad’s car finally pull into the carpark, you give her a quick kiss on the lips before he gets close enough to see the two of you, then spin her around so you can pull her into a more proper goodnight hug.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” you promise her as Dad arrives. She repeats the sentiment back at you, squeezing you one last time, then stands back. Across the parking lot, you can just see Rick arriving, too.

You climb into the car- in the front, this time. Dad gives you a smile as you climb in.

“Did you have fun?” he asks, pulling away and beginning to drive off.
You nod vigorously. “Yeah!” you answer. You hold up the bag with a proud grin. He looks at it, and the symbol of Parian’s shop, without any signs of recognition. “Madison bought me some stuff.”

“Hm.” You’re outside of the mall now, heading in the opposite direction of home. You worry for a little, before you realize he’s just moving towards a nearby takeaway store. “That was nice of her.”

“Yeah,” you answer. You move the bag back down to your lap and look into it, a smile rising unbidden onto your face. “She’s really nice.”

There’s no answer, but when you look up at him, he’s got a soft smile on his face. Something inside you loosens, as though there was a knot of worry inside you that you hadn’t even known about.

The burgers the two of you end up getting aren’t very exciting, just plain burgers with beef patties, cheese and some basic sides. They’re made in minutes, and the two of you drive away, with a hamburger each clutched in your hands.

You have to eat it quickly so that when you arrive home, you can run inside and shower. Dad comes inside, but doesn’t sit down in the living room; when you come running out twenty minutes later with your hair still damp, he just pats you on the head and leads you back out to the car. You give him directions to the theatre, and he makes it there in plenty of time.

“What fun!” he calls out behind you.

You don’t.

It’s nothing against the theatre- it’s just not a very exciting job. Your co-worker is more than happy to leave you to the maintenance work, walking around sweeping up popcorn and taking bags of trash out to the dumpsters behind the theatre. Despite that you’re not being forced to interact with all the people who walk into the theatre, though, it’s just… it’s boring. That’s all you can say. Nothing happens, at all. The most exciting thing that happens all night is when you accidentally hit a piece of popcorn wrong and it ricochets twice off the walls and stairs, rather than just once.

By the time you get home at eleven thirty, you’re tired and thoroughly ready for bed. You collapse into it immediately, and are asleep in minutes.

You’re still groggy by the time you get to school on Tuesday. The near-freezing temperatures of your jog, the cold spray of water as you stepped into the shower, and two cups of coffee had all helped somewhat, but not enough.

You’re cheered up a little when you arrive at school to find Madison already wearing one of your shirts, at least- the least formal of all of them, a very simple red blouse with no more decorations than a shirt-pocket on her right breast. It’s hard to refrain from giving her a kiss for wearing it so promptly, but you manage.

Solidly cheered up by that, you manage to muddle through school for the day without growing too irritated. You don’t make any steps towards approaching that girl you’d sunk your hooks into yesterday, though. It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to try and manipulate her emotions while you’re this tired.

And Madison’s shirt does serve part of its intended purpose- you’re able to undo the lowest three
buttons of the shirt and rest your hands against her warm stomach as the two of you eat lunch together without half-lifting her shirt for anyone who walks past.

Afternoon classes pass quickly, now that you’re not bothering to even pretend to pay attention to what the teachers are saying. You flip open your borrowed textbooks and spend the rest of school reading through them, only stopping when the bells ring.

Madison did end up reading the sections of her textbooks you’d assigned her, and she understood them well enough that she only gets two questions wrong when you quiz her on it. As a reward, you spend a few long minutes nibbling and sucking at her neck until a large, noticeable bruise appears there. Maybe large enough that her parents will notice it, but definitely large enough that anyone checking her out will.

Okay, so maybe it’s more of a reward for you than her. She doesn’t mind, though, and you can always find a better reward for her on Saturday. It’s not like being marked by you is a turn-off for her, anyway.

The two of you part reluctantly when the clock eventually ticks over to five. For a brief moment, you consider asking her to come with you, but you quickly dismiss the idea. While you’re pretty sure Amy and Madison would get along moderately well, they don’t seem to have many similar interests, and you haven’t even told Amy that you have multiple girlfriends yet. You should probably do that soon. Maybe. Later, probably.

Doctor Fitzgerald is at least happy enough to see you, greeting you with a tired smile when you walk in. “Hello, Taylor. Back again?”

You snap off a mock salute to him, causing him to let out a huff of laughter. “Yes!” you say happily. “Do you have anything you need me to do?”

He glances around the waiting room, as though considering something. Then, “We have some extra staff in today, so I don’t need you to inventory our supplies, and Oliver is already mopping the floors,” he says slowly. “Our break room is a bit of a mess, though. Maybe you could go clean it?”

“Oh, okay.” Your answer isn’t as enthusiastic now, but you dutifully trudge off, pouting slightly at the clinic walls. Somebody else had taken over your job. Rude.

Your negative feelings melt away immediately when you open the break room and find its other inhabitant, though. Amy is sitting in here, with a clipboard sitting in front of her as she sips at a cup of coffee from the terrible coffee machine over against the wall.

Carefully and quietly, you walk over to her and lean beside her, trying to avoid standing anywhere you’ll cast a noticeable shadow over. Then, “I thought we agreed that that coffee is terrible,” you say mock-disapprovingly. She startles slightly, the remaining coffee in the cup sloshing dangerously around. “Weren’t we going to get our coffee from the cafeteria from now on?”

She turns her head to look at you, a slightly annoyed expression on her face. “It’s more expensive there,” she mutters. “And I’m trying to save my money.”

You lean against the back of her chair, moving so that your hair falls over her shoulder and into her lap. She brushes at it with an even more annoyed expression, but her attention is solely on you now, not whatever’s written on her stupid clipboard. “Ooh, saving your money?” you say brightly.
“Planning on taking a poor, innocent girl out on a date some time soon?”

She rolls her eyes. “Like anything about you is innocent,” she mutters sourly. Then she must see the growing grin on your face, because she pauses, then throws her head back with a long-suffering sigh. “Fuck,” she groans.

You don’t let the fact that she’s already realized her misstep stop you from pointing it out, though. “I never said anything about me,” you say in a sing-song voice. “I’m glad to know you’re thinking about me, though.” You tack a little giggle on at the end of your sentence just so you can watch her roll her eyes again.

“I wasn’t planning on taking you out on a date,” she says, straightening again. “Don’t try and make my words mean weird things. I’m just trying to save my money so I can go and—” She stops abruptly, and you’re pretty sure she literally bites her tongue to stop her saying anything.

You’re curious now, though. “So you can go and…?” you prompt her.

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “I was going to go and watch a movie on the weekend,” she grumbles. “Alone. I can’t afford to buy anyone else a ticket after a certain someone distracted me at work over the weekend.” She taps you meaningfully on the nose.

“Sorry,” you say immediately. “I didn’t mean to distract you at work.”

She settles back into her chair, her arms falling back beside her. “I know,” she says, giving you a small grin that’s more of a grimace. “Sorry. I’m not really angry at you. Just annoyed at some of the nurses for tattling on me.”

And now you feel bad for texting her. “Sorry,” you say again. “I didn’t realize I might get you in trouble at work. I’ll stop texting you.”

“No, don’t do that,” she protests. Reaching up, she grasps blindly for something, but whatever it is, she can’t find it. In the end, she just gestures for you to come and sit on the couch opposite her. “It’s not your fault at all, I shouldn’t have been checking my texts at work. I was just hoping that, um, never mind. Keep texting me, it’s fine.”

You move around and sit in the seat opposite her. You can see her face now, which is good- you can see the earnest look she’s giving you.

Still, you can’t help but feel bad. “Were you waiting for something important?” you ask quietly.

She shakes her head. “No. It’s silly. I was just hoping that, uh, a friend was going to ask me to watch a movie or something, but they never did.”

You frown. “Well, that’s silly of them,” you declare. “They should have asked you. They’d be lucky to get to watch a movie with you, anyone would.” You can’t keep an undercurrent of indignation out of your voice. Honestly, what kind of person would give up the chance to go out with Amy for the day?

Amy gives you a look of fond exasperation for some reason. “No, it’s fine,” she assures you. “I think I just misread some signs a little. I should have checked if that’s what they meant first.”

You nod for a moment. Then a thought abruptly occurs to you, and you smile deviously. “Well,”
you say slyly, “if your friend still doesn’t get the message by the weekend, I do happen to work in a movie theatre myself, and I happen to have a bit of a staff discount.” You reach out with your foot and nudge her leg, waggling your eyebrows.

You’re completely unprepared for her to cover her mouth with her hands and start laughing into them, her shoulders shaking with the effort of restraining her laughter. For the next few minutes, you just watch her, growing increasingly bemused, as she tries to reign herself in. Eventually, she manages to sit up from where she’d half-slumped over in her laughter, but she still has a bright grin on her face.

“So, uh, I take it that’s a no?” you ask, incredibly confused.

She shakes her head, biting her lip again for a moment as she tries to regain her breath. “No, that’s fine.” Amusement is thick in her voice. “Don’t stress over it, but sure. Send me a text on Saturday morning if you can arrange it, and I’ll make sure I’m available. If you can’t, let me know.” “Suuure,” you say, giving her a confused look. She bites her lip again, restraining a wide smile.

At least she’s happy again, you conclude, even if you have absolutely no idea what all that was about. And hey; on the upside, you have a date with Amy! Kind of. She’s agreed to go watch a movie with you if you have the time and money, at least. Maybe not romantically, but it’s a start. And you didn’t even have to use your powers to do it. You’re actually really proud of yourself for that.

With all that concluded, you do end up getting up and moving around to tidy up the break room. Amy doesn’t go back to her clipboard, though, preferring to speak with you as you do so. She assures you that she can do her work later, so- okay, if she’s sure. You’re not the boss of her, as much as you’d like to be.

Time passes quickly as the two of you chat amicably. Doctor Fitzgerald was right- the break room really is a mess. Dishes are piled three high beside the sink, and it looks like somebody exploded a packet of soup in the microwave, then cooked the resultant vegetables until the inside of it is covered in crusted broth and vegetables. Ew.

Come seven o’clock, you’re almost tempted to dart forwards and give Amy a hug before you leave. You refrain, because you don’t know her personal space limits very well. By the smile she gives you, you’re pretty sure she recognizes what your indecisive movements backwards and forwards mean, but she doesn’t step forwards, so neither do you.

You do make sure to barrage her with goodnight texts at nine, though. You don’t know when she goes to bed, but maybe seeing all these texts will help soothe the sting of not getting a text from that insensitive jerk.

For the fourth night in a row, you go to bed actually feeling quite happy about the way things are going right now. You’re pretty sure this is a new record.

As you fall asleep, you mentally compose a new list of tasks for the next few days. Before you fall completely asleep, you’ve decided to…
Wednesday morning arrives with little fanfare but the chill of the air and the sounds of your neighbours shouting at each other loud enough for you to hear them from your bed. You can’t make out what they’re saying from here, but it doesn’t sound good. Not that it’s any of your business, but you are a little curious. Not curious enough to go kneel by their fence and try to listen in or anything, but curious enough to change up your jogging route a bit that morning and try to listen in.

You can’t make out their voices through their door, which is a bit annoying. If they’re going to argue loud enough that you can hear them from your room, they should argue loud enough that you can hear them clearly. Otherwise, if they don’t want people knowing what they’re shouting about, why are they shouting loud enough that people can hear them? Some people are silly.

They’ve thankfully quieted down when you return from your jog, but you spot a lot more people out on the streets that morning than normal. One of them—Jeff, you think? That’s what Dad calls him, anyway—shoots the house a nasty glance when he walks out to get the newspaper from his front porch. Maybe they’d got even louder than before. He definitely feels angry, so you’re pretty sure you’re not misreading the situation.

It’s not important anyway. You dismiss the thoughts of their argument from your head as you enter your house and head off to the shower.

Dad’s awake by the time you step out and get dressed. When you head out to the kitchen, you casually grab your phone off the bench where it was charging and sit down across the table from him. You’re not quite confident enough to leave the phone up on the table as you reply to all your good morning texts, but he doesn’t say anything when you quietly stare at your lap and nibble at your breakfast beyond a “Good morning”.

By the time you’ve finished replying to your texts—and then replying to the replies to those texts, and then the replies to those replies—it’s time for you to head out to the bus. You impulsively give Dad a quick hug, which he reciprocates with one arm as he reads through a letter, before you run out the front door so you don’t miss the bus.

Today, traffic is heavier than usual. The bus ends up pulling into school a few minutes later than normal. It’s not late enough that you have to rush to class or anything, but it’s late enough that by the time you make it to your locker, Madison has already left. You open your locker glumly to reveal that she has at least left your lunch in the locker, along with a small card, this one soft blue and cut out in what you’re pretty sure is meant to resemble a little angel.

A warm feeling runs through you. You’ve been meeting her every morning for the past few weeks, and she had no reason to expect that would be different until you hadn’t turned up on time today. Has she been making these cards every day just in case?

You send her a thank you text, then head towards class. It might be a waste of time to bother sending the text, considering you’re going to be seeing her in a couple of minutes, but somehow it feels like you should be thanking her straight away.

The bell rings just before you get in, but Madison is already there when you arrive. She’s bent over her desk, concentrating fiercely on her phone. Watching her fingers fly over that phone screen, you’re jealous of how fast she can type. You’re lucky if you can type twenty words in a minute on
them, while she’s done in twenty seconds.

You don’t bother reading the text yet, though; she looks up when she hears the chime of your phone and gives you a brilliant smile. You give her a little wave, then make your way over and slide in the seat beside you, where she immediately grabs your hand beneath the table.

School that day is boring. You spend most of your time in class looking through your business textbooks, but you only have a small handful of them. With five hours each day to read through them, you’re starting to burn through them very quickly. But hey; at least you have those books from Victoria to read, too. You end up putting your textbooks away during fifth and sixth periods to read some more of them.

It’s a way to keep yourself occupied during classtime, at least. And it serves to largely distract you from thinking about Victoria’s visit tonight until you get home—the only time you allow yourself to think about it for more than a few seconds is when you suddenly realize that you’d never told her when to arrive, and you hurriedly have to send her a text telling her to get there around six.

That evening, when you finally get home after tutoring, you zip around the house trying to tidy it before Victoria gets here. It’s all messy—you haven’t done any dusting in what feels like a month, and Dad hasn’t done the vacuuming in at least three days. It feels like there’s a light coating of dust hanging over everything in the house, even though you know that objectively, that’s not true.

You’re still feeling a little anxious by the time it gets to five fifty-six and the doorbell rings. Dad’s barely up out of his chair when you fly past him, scraping your hair back out of your face to try to make yourself look a little more presentable when you open the door to greet Victoria.

Victoria looks—you’re hesitant to describe her as plain, because Victoria could never look plain, but she looks a little less gorgeous than usual. You can’t quite tell why, though. It’s no one thing. Her clothes don’t complement her quite as well as normal, and her skin looks a little rougher. There’s more, you’re sure of it, but you can’t tell what. She is holding a backpack in her hands, probably her schoolbag. All up, she doesn’t look very much like Glory Girl. Just your average, incredibly attractive high school girl.

“Hey, Taylor.” She sounds amused at the way you’re staring at her. You flush lightly and step back, gesturing for her to come in.

“Hi,” you reply. Then you hear a cough behind you, and you flush harder. Right. Dad. You’d forgotten about him. “Uh, hey, Dad!” you say brightly. “This is Victoria. She’s a friend of mine.”

He stares at you for a long moment, his brow knitted. For a moment, he seems like he’s about to say anything, but then he bites his tongue. You’re feeling a little nervous when he finally does speak. “Hello, Victoria. It’s nice to meet you.”

Victoria steps forward easily, taking his outstretched hand in her own and shaking it as she gives him a warm smile. “Hello, Mr Hebert. Taylor has told me a lot about you,” she lies smoothly.

He nods. “Will you be staying for dinner?” he asks. “I was just about to order something, so if you like-“

But she’s already shaking her head. “No, but thank you. I’ll be having dinner at home, around eight.” That part, she directs towards you.
You nod. “Yeah, okay,” you say agreeably. You can’t argue against her having dinner with her family, even though you want to. It’d be nice to have dinner with Victoria. Stupid complicating factors. “We should go get started, then.”

“Alright,” she agrees easily. “Lead the way, then.”

You know she’s expecting you to lead the way to your bathroom—that’s where you put makeup on, after all—but you deliberately misinterpret her words and head to your bedroom. She raises her eyebrow when she gets in, but trundles in anyway, placing her bag on top of your bed.

“Not quite what I had in mind,” she says, amusement heavy in her voice. “It might be a little hard for you to see how you look in here.”

“I know.” You give her a devious little grin. “I just wanted to get you in here for a moment.” She raises her eyebrows at you, but doesn’t look surprised. “Alright, the bathroom is this way.”

She follows you, a grin tugging at her lips to match yours, although you imagine yours probably looks a little more perverted than hers. Once the two of you get in there, she nudges you over until you’re sitting on the edge of your bathtub—a towel beneath you to make your seat slightly more comfortable—as she rummages through her bags, looking for something.

Eventually, she pulls out a long, thin plastic box wider than her handspan. Opening it, you can see it’s full of… makeup-y things. Tubes of lipstick, little brushes, those circular plastic tubs filled with colours and stuff—look, you might be a girl, but that doesn’t mean you ever paid much attention to makeup. It always seemed kind of silly to you, to focus so much attention on it.

If Victoria thinks she can make you look good with makeup, though, you’re willing to give it a try. You don’t think it’s possible to make you look less plain than you do now, but it probably can’t hurt. Unless you’re allergic to it.

God, you hope you’re not allergic to it.

“Alright!” she declares. “We’re not going to do anything complicated today, just the basics, okay?”

You nod. “What are the basics, though?”

She moves over to you, kneeling in front of you and placing the makeup on the ground beside her. “Nothing complicated,” she says easily. “Some foundation, some lipstick…” She inspects your face for a moment. “No lipliner. Some eye shadow, maybe some mascara. You don’t need that much.”

A mirthless smirk makes its way across your face. “That sounds too simple.”

Victoria just shrugs. “Trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

And you have nothing to say to that, just a quick nod.

“Ohay then.” She tilts your head downward so she can see it from her position on the floor. “I’m going to start. You might want to close your eyes.”

For what feels like the next six hours, but in reality is only fifteen minutes, Victoria labours over your face. You quickly lose track of what she’s doing- she dabs something on your face, then pulls out a brush, then what looks like a pencil, then some lipstick, and at that point you just give up trying to
follow what she’s doing and resign yourself to your fate.

Eventually, though, she makes a pleased noise. “Alright, I’m done,” she says, satisfaction thick in her tone and in her emotions. “Come on, pretty girl. Come take a look at yourself.” She cheats, floating up and just stretching her legs down. Damn it. At least she offers you a hand to help you to your feet.

Once the two of you are up, she leads you to the bathroom mirror, moving back some to allow you to stand in front of her and look at yourself. You can see her standing behind you, biting her lip, but your attention is distracted by your own reflection.

You look… different. Reaching out, you trail your hand softly over your reflection. Is that really you?

It can’t be anyone else, but that can’t be you. The person looking back is actually— actually not that bad-looking. Your mouth doesn’t look so wide, looking thinner and fuller. Your lips are darker than you remember them looking, a deeper red. Your eyes are—thinner, somehow, not quite so wide and round. They seem longer. Even your skin looks subtly different, less… it looks smoother, and darker, somehow. Not too dark, but not quite as pale.

A pair of arms circle around from behind you, and you tilt your neck to the side to let Victoria rest her head on your shoulders. “See?” she asks. “I told you you’re pretty.”

And she believes that. You can’t deny it—there’s nothing strong in her emotions right now but contentment, arousal and a lesser amount of what you think is nervousness.

“I…” You trail off.

It’s the makeup, you know it. It’s hiding your flaws, covering up everything that makes you ugly and enhancing everything that makes you not look so bad. And you’re okay with that.

It might be fake prettiness, but it’s still better than looking like you normally do.

Victoria just calmingly rubs her hands over your stomach, pleased with your response. “I’ll show you how to apply it yourself if you want,” she promises you, murmuring her words directly into your ear. “On Saturday, if you want. Or after book club on Sunday, but I want to take you shopping on Sunday.”

You tilt your head, catching her gaze in the mirror. “Why do you want to take me shopping?” you ask cautiously. “I can buy the makeup myself.”

She shakes her head and presses a quick kiss to your neck. You let her, but warningly squeeze her arms, causing her to smirk slightly for a moment before she regains a serious expression. “Makeup’s only half the job,” she replies. “You look pretty enough to eat now, but if we can get you in some better clothes, I promise, you’ll see what everyone else sees when they look at you.” She doesn’t try to kiss your neck again, but she does nuzzle it some, closing her eyes briefly. Which is good, because that way, she misses the scowl you can’t refrain from sending at her.

You want to say that you can buy clothes yourself, but— you can’t. You’re way too poor for that. Still- “I don’t want you to buy me any clothes,” you tell her firmly.

She just shakes her head, squeezing you again. “I know,” she says. She pats your stomach gently, as though trying to calm you down. The worst part is, you do feel a little calmer. Damn it. “I’m
offering. You wouldn’t be taking advantage of me, don’t worry about that.”

That isn’t what you’re thinking about, but it derails your train of thought a little. She is offering to use her own money, even if she’s also trying to push you into it. That shouldn’t change anything, but somehow, it does.

You’d like to be pampered a little.

You let out a soft groan. You can’t make this decision now. Later, when you don’t have Victoria pressed against you and your thoughts aren’t clouded by the realization that you don’t have to look like a scarecrow.

“I’ll let you know later,” you say eventually. “I’ll text you on Friday if I’m up to it.” With that, you tug impotently at her hands until she finally releases you. Unfortunately, you still can’t move until she also floats backwards, at which point you sidestep. Your breaths come easier now. “Come on.” You hold out your hand for her to take, but end up having to retract it when she instead bends down to pack up her makeup kit. Oh yeah. You forgot about that.

A couple of minutes later, she reaches for the hand you’d dropped. You reach over again, taking her hand firmly and pulling her out and back to your bedroom, ignoring the startled glance Dad gives you when you pass him in the hall. No, you can deal with him later. You make sure to close your door behind you. Dad won’t open it, you’re pretty sure.

“Your room is nice,” Victoria says, looking around. You flush. There’s not much in here, so you’re not sure if she’s making fun of you or not. If she is, she doesn’t seem to want to hurt you with her words, so you let it pass this time. “Very neat. I wish my room was half as clean as yours.”

“You could always try cleaning it,” you offer dryly. She gives you a mock-offended look, and you offer her a charming grin as you jump up on your bed. “It does tend to help.”

“It’s so much effort, though. I have other things I need to do, you know?” She floats towards you, giving you a wicked grin. Your mouth goes dry, and her grin grows more devilish. “There’s this cute girl who keeps demanding my attention. It makes it hard to focus on other things.”

You hum slightly, pretending to pout and cross your arms as she floats closer. “A cute girl, huh?” you say, mock-irritation hanging in your voice. “Should I be jealous, hm?”

Finally, she floats close enough that you could reach out and touch her. She does it before you can, though, reaching over to caress your jaw. You clench your mouth shut, waiting to see what she does. After a moment, she speaks in a low voice, “You of all people have nothing to be jealous of.”

You can’t help the shiver that runs down your spine. You struggle to find a response at first, then; “Well then,” you reply with a wicked grin of your own, “maybe you should come over and give me some of that attention.”

She pokes her tongue out at you, but finally moves close enough that you’re able to pull her up onto your bed. Or, well, try to. You’re able to prompt her into lifting herself up onto your bed and laying down, giving you a teasing look as she lays there, head resting on your pillows.

The joke is on her, though— that’s exactly where you want her. You quickly turn and clamber over to her, climbing up over her legs and settling yourself astride her waist. You look down at her with a smug look, revelling in your slight victory.
Her hands settle on your waist, her hands sliding up and down, occasionally reaching underneath your shirt. You shiver as her hands touch your bare skin, and in revenge, you slide your hands up her shirt and rest them over her sides. She looks up at you, eyes dark and lidded. Both of you wait for the other to move first.

Your lips are dry. You lick them, drawing Victoria’s attention down. The flow of lust that surges down her as her gaze rests on your mouth is strong enough that you feel it even though you’re not actively using your power right now. Still, neither of you say anything. Then, she opens her mouth.

“If you take yours off, I’ll take mine off,” she says huskily.

You consider it, then nod. Her eyes widen slightly as you reach down to the hem of your shirt, accidentally bumping her hands as you do, and draw it up over your head. By the time you’ve lifted it over your head and thrown it on the bed beside you, the surprise has faded from her expression, and her hands are moving down to her own waist, where she begins struggling to take her own shirt off. You help her out, making sure to “accidentally” brush your fingers along her sides as you go.

Disappointingly, she’s wearing a bra. Or maybe not so disappointingly— this is the first time you’ve seen her in a bra, you think. It’s a cute bra, a little frilly pink thing with small white hearts dotting it. You move your hands down as she tugs the shirt up and over her head, then begin tracing one of the little hearts when she finally gets it off and throws it off to the side.

You wait for the reprimand, for the warning not to go any further, but it doesn’t come. She just watches you trace your hands over her bra, breathing steadily through her nose as her nipples rapidly harden, visible through the material of the bra.

Briefly testing your luck, you skim your fingers around the edge of her bra, then slip your index fingers beneath it. Her only reaction is a small gasp, but you check just to be sure—and yes, she’s only restraining impatience, she’s not feeling upset. Emboldened, you slide your fingers back out and reach up to her shoulders, sliding her bra straps down and tugging the whole thing so it rests over her stomach, freeing her bare breasts for you to play with.

After a moment, you lean down, carefully balancing yourself on one arm so you still have a hand free to play with her, and claim her mouth with yours.

Things get a bit hazy after that. Lust pulses through you, your own and Victoria’s, and what awareness you manage to retain is focused on keeping yourself restrained. Several times, when you stroke down her sides and bite her lip, you’re forced to break the kiss and move down to biting her collarbone until the haze fades and you can assert enough control over yourself to stop your hands from wandering down beneath the waistband of her skirt.

The most frustrating part is, you’re pretty sure she wouldn’t stop you right now, if the strength of her lust is any indication—she’d spread her legs at the first indication that you wanted to stray down there.

She just probably wouldn’t ever come back of her own accord. And getting a cheap thrill tonight is not worth that. Could never be worth that.

So it’s with a mixture of frustration and relief that you finally wrench yourself away when Victoria’s phone beeps. She looks disbelievingly at you first, the sound not penetrating the haze surrounding her mind, then finally seems to hear it. When she glances down at it, she swears, surprisingly loudly,
“Shit.” she swears again. Her voice is surprisingly low, although maybe it’s not so surprising on reflection—arousal does that to a person. You glance down at her phone, and wow, it’s seven thirty already. She scrubs at her mouth with one hand as she pulls her bra back up with the other, quickly switching hands to pull the second strap up over her shoulder. “Shit, shit! Taylor, I have to go, I’m going to be late—“

“You have a small, half-empty box of tissues in here from the last time you’d had a cold. Picking it up, you toss it over to her, gesturing for her to use it to wipe the smeared lipstick from around her mouth, and tug your shirt back on. When she’s done with that, you take it back, intending to wipe your own mouth down. She snaps out a hand, though, and stops you.

“Don’t—just use a wet washcloth.” She scowls down at her own tissues, then raises her head, allowing you to see how she’s smeared the lipstick over her chin. “Shit, I’m going to need one too. Do you have one I can borrow really quickly?” As she talks, she scrambles over, floating slightly—god, that has to be cheating somehow, this whole flying business just makes everything look so much simpler, it’s completely unfair—to retrieve her shirt from where she’d thrown it earlier and pull it on.

You think for a moment. “Um, yes,” you say finally. You only have the two, and one’s in the wash, but that’s okay; you’ll just use the towel you used this morning to remove your lipstick. “It’s in the bathroom, I think. Hold on, I’ll go check.”

She rights herself and lands on her feet, padding out of your room and right into Dad. Shit. Why is he getting up and moving around so much tonight of all nights?!

Well, at least Victoria’s not the only one swearing internally now.

Thankfully, he just raises an eyebrow at the two of you, although you’re pretty sure he can see the smeared lipstick over both of your faces, then walks off without comment. Victoria returns your shocked and slightly guilty look as the two of you hurry off to the bathroom.

The interruption broke the tension that had started to build between the two of you, though, and by the time you reach the bathroom and find the washcloth, Victoria is already giving you instructions on how to remove the makeup. “Use baby wipes if you have any,” she informs you quickly. Her voice is muffled through the wet washcloth. “Or baby oil, if you have any of that. Try to avoid scrubbing it off if you can avoid it, it’ll irritate your skin a lot. There’s better ways, but I’m really running late, damn. Don’t forget, Taylor, text me, let me know. We’ll go over this stuff more after book club on Sunday either way.”

You nod. You think there’s some baby wipes in the living room—Dad had bought some a while ago to wipe down the TV screen with, as they’d been on special. Hopefully they’re still good enough to use on your face.

She finishes quickly, then pauses and moves over to you. For a moment, you think she’s going to lean in for one last kiss for the night, but evidently she thinks better of it and pulls you into a hug instead. Probably a good idea. It’d be a waste of time to kiss you and smear your lipstick over her again.

“I’ll see you on Saturday, hopefully,” she says, giving you a quick smile. You can only watch, a little
bemused, as she pelts out the door after that.

You catch Dad watching you several times when he thinks you’re not looking later that night. Each time, you eye him off, and he pretends to look elsewhere. You swear, this man would be whistling innocently if it wouldn’t make him look even more suspicious. Thankfully, he doesn’t say anything, at least not yet.

Honestly, you were kind of hoping you could just get away with never having the whole “Dad, I’m a lesbian” talk, but that’s looking increasingly unlikely. Ugh. At least you’re back on speaking terms with him now. You can just imagine how this would go otherwise. He’d be glancing at you out of the corner of his eyes for weeks. You’re a little bit irritated just imagining it.

Worse, your session with Victoria left you uncomfortably aroused and gave you no relief. Later that night, when you’re tucked in bed, you get yourself off—three times- but you’re still left feeling unsatisfied when you finish. The physical sensations are there, but the emotional sensations—the heady feeling of someone else’s arousal and affection—aren’t.

You fall asleep that night feeling a little grumpy. This not-getting-any thing sucks. Maybe Madison will be free on the weekend.

The next morning, Dad is waiting for you in the kitchen after you’ve returned from your jog and showered. He’s nursing a cup of coffee in his hands, and he’s looking—well, he’s just looking a bit depressed, but you can feel nervousness roiling out from him. Uh-oh. You thought you’d have more time before he tried to initiate this talk.

“Hey, Dad,” you say cautiously. Tip-toeing around him, you attempt to sneak towards your phone on the bench. It’s almost successful, until you hear Dad let out a tired sigh. Not an annoyed sigh, a tired sigh. He hasn’t been getting enough sleep lately.

There’s a cup waiting for you on the bench. It hasn’t been filled yet, but the coffee machine has freshly boiled. You start making yourself one as you wait for Dad to gather the courage to talk, which he eventually does. “Taylor,” he says, surprisingly firmly for someone feeling that nervous. “I was thinking about inviting Alan over for dinner tonight. Would that be okay with you?”

You’re caught off-guard by that. A little bit of milk sloshes out from the milk jug over your hands as you stop mid-step. It’s cold, but delicious. “That’s fine,” you reply quickly. “You and Alan will both be here? I’ll invite Emma at school if you want.”

He looks at you with a knitted brow. “Only if you’re okay with that,” he says carefully.

“Of course I am,” you say indignantly. “I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t, duh.” You finish the march over to the kitchen bench and indignantly pour your milk into your mug. Honestly, implying you’d make an offer you’re not completely sure of. Like you’d ever do that!

He blinks. “Okay,” he says cautiously. “We’re just going to have lasagne for dinner. Is that okay?”

“Lasagne?” You peer over the bench at him, raising your coffee up so you can sip at him as you narrow your eyes and stare at him. “Yes, lasagne is fine.”

“Okay then. Is there anything you want for dessert?”
You consider it for a second. “Could we get an apple pie?” you ask uncertainly. “Just a frozen one, I’ll heat it up in the oven.” Unless Emma’s tastes had changed in the past couple of years, she should enjoy that. You don’t feel mean enough to try and deny her a dessert today.

Dad nods. His emotions swell with something you’re not quite sure of—satisfaction, maybe.

He leaves soon after that, claiming he needs to get to work early. You pack for school unhurriedly and slowly make your way to the bus. The bus manages to be on time, today. Traffic must be better than it was yesterday.

During first period, after asking Madison if she’s free this weekend—she isn’t, damn it all—you pull out your phone and sent Emma a text, as casually as you can. Your phone is hidden by your textbook, but you still instinctively flinch when the teacher walks near enough that you’re half-afraid he can see it. For a moment, you think he sees it, but in the end he just looks over at you and sighs before shaking his head and walking away.

Your text is short and simple; “Come over for dinner tonight.” Her response is equally simple; “Okay, what should I wear?”

You consider it for a moment, but—yes, okay, no, it still feels really weird to think about her sexually. Or, well, to imagine her actually doing it, at least. You’ve certainly fantasized about dominating her enough that you can’t claim it feels weird to think about her sexually. In the end, you go for something simple; “Just wear whatever’s comfortable. Your dad’s coming with you.”

Your phone quickly chimes with her reply, a simple “Okay.” that leaves you clenching your teeth, although you’re not quite sure why. She’s complying with what you said. Isn’t that a good thing?

The day goes by alternately quickly and slowly, in a pattern you’re quickly becoming familiar with. Any time you have Madison or Sophia sitting beside you, the lesson seems to end in minutes, while the rest of the day seems to drag on for days. At least it gives you plenty of time to go through your textbooks.

By the time you arrive home, you’ve made it through over three quarters of your first textbook. Damn it.

As soon as you arrive home, the rich smell of a cooking lasagne drifts out at you. You pause, sniffing at the air, then call out, “Dad?” You hear a small curse, then Dad hurries out from in the kitchen.

“Taylor!” He looks at the clock, seeming to only notice the time now. You give him a dubious look, which he counters with his own. “I finished work early so I could come home and prepare dinner,” he explains.

“Alright,” you drawl. “Do you need any help?”

He shakes his head. “I just bought two frozen lasagnes,” he admits sheepishly. “They have instructions on their boxes.”

You sigh in disappointment. “It probably would have been cheaper to just buy the ingredients,” you grumble to yourself. “Alright, if you have it all in hand, I’m going to go do some homework.” Dad just waves you off, returning to the kitchen.
Emma and Alan arrive at six thirty on the dot. Dad greets Alan with an enthusiastic “Hello!” and a bump to the shoulder, while you greet Emma with a rather less enthusiastic “Hi”.

Emma looks up at you, a slight frown on her face. “Hi,” she says neutrally. She waits a second for you to say something, but you don’t, so she lifts the purse she has at her side. “I, um, brought some movies. Did you want to watch one?”

You let out a relieved breath of air, grateful that she’d broken the tension before it could really become awkward. “Sure,” you reply. Turning, you lead her to the living room. “What did you bring?”

She searches through her purse behind you. “Two movies Dad bought a couple of days ago,” she says quietly. “They’re called, um. Inception and Alice in Wonderland. Earth Aleph imports, I think.”

“Cool.” You extend your hand towards her, and after a moment, she passes one of the DVD’s over to you. Alice in Wonderland, you see. Heading over to the TV, you turn it and the DVD player on, and carefully put the movie in. Then you return to the couch, sitting at the opposite end to it, and curl up against a cushion.

Surprisingly, it doesn’t end up being that bad a night. You’re not really able to relax, but once you extend your power over her and carefully monitor her surface emotions—just a safeguard, in case she’s planning something tricky—you’re able to settle in somewhat and actually pay attention to the movies.

If only her taste in movies wasn’t so terrible, it might have even been a good night.

About halfway through the first movie- Alice in Wonderland- you can’t help but glare at the TV in disdain. You catch Emma watching you several times, a small grin on her face, although each time she sees you glancing at her, she quickly looks away. You can’t bring yourself to care, though, because you’re too busy being offended at just how badly they butchered this movie.

This is not at all how the book went!

Dad and Alan come in at one point, but they don’t stay for long. After about ten minutes of the movie, Dad gets up to go check on dinner. It’s cooked, so you happily pause the movie just before the big climactic battle sequence and head out to go eat.

Inception isn’t quite as irritating a movie, but it’s more confusing. Emma looks more puzzled by it than you do. It’s not exactly nonsensical, but-

“I think you should pick the movies next time,” Emma murmurs around eight. She’s looking deliberately at the screen, and doesn’t glance at you as she says it. You understand why. Next time? That’s a bit presumptuous.

But, somehow, you don’t mind. “Yeah,” you reply simply. You catch the small smile she gives at that, and it’s mirrored on your own face.

The movie ends around ten o’clock, having been interrupted for the duration of dinner—just in time for Alan to poke his head into the living room, eyeing the two of you off. You’re not sure what he’s expecting to see, but whatever it is, he doesn’t see it. “Alright, Emma,” he calls. “Time for us to head home.”
Emma nods, standing. Before she heads out to meet him, though, she hesitates and looks towards you. For a moment, you’re afraid she’s going to try and hug you, but she doesn’t. “Thanks,” she says. “Maybe we could—I think Dad might want to come over again.” She chickens out midway through her sentence. “He might call next week. Or the week after. Whenever’s fine with you.” She searches your eyes for a moment before looking away, frowning uneasily.

You just roll your eyes where she can’t see it. “We’ll see,” you reply neutrally. “I’ll see you at school, Emma.” And you step to the side to allow her to pass.

It’s strange, you reflect later. If it were anyone else than Emma, you’d be disappointed at how uneventful that night was. The two of you barely spoke to each other—hell, barely even looked at each other. And yet, you’re satisfied with that. Satisfied with just—being able to spend the night around her without wondering if she’s going to reverse this in some cruel prank. Satisfied with being able to sit in the same room as her without Dad’s supervision and not have her turn on you.

Sometimes, you really dislike the effects your power can have on you, but on nights like tonight, you’re really glad you have it, just for that kind of reassurance.

You tuck yourself into bed at night, feeling both agitated and weirdly content with how the night went.

The next afternoon, after another boring day at school, you arrive home to find that Dad’s left you a note on the table, informing you that he’s going to be home late—working late to catch up on the work he couldn’t do yesterday, apparently. You nod to yourself, scrunching the note up and tossing it on the table.

Then you pause. Wait, if Dad isn’t here, and isn’t going to come home for a while…

A big grin spreads over your face, and you head into the kitchen. Finally, you can do something you’ve wanted to do for a while.

The fridge is cool, and for once, nearly half-full. You look through it, searching for anything you could use for a quick snack. There’s crackers in the cupboard, and some cheese wrapped in plastic slices in the fridge. Two stalks of celery, too. That should do fine as a snack, right? Everybody likes cheese and celery.

You set about cutting the celery stalks up as efficiently as you can. You manage to get one of them cut up before the doorbell rings, and you’re forced to step aside, pouting down at the half-done job. Damn it, you’d hoped to be done before she got here.

Sure enough, it’s Sophia at the door. She greets you with a cocky grin, hefting her schoolbag up over her shoulder. “Hebert,” she says cheerfully.

You smile at her. “Hello again, Sophia,” you say happily. “Come in. Take your shoes off, they’re all muddy.” She scowls at you for a second before kicking them off, seeming to remember your deal. “Good, good. I was just making snacks. Do you want some?”

“Depends.” She follows you into the kitchen, looking around at the walls in here. “What are you making?”
You gesture at the cutting board. “We didn’t have much,” you admit. “Do cheese and celery crackers sound fine?”

She stares at you for a long moment, slowly raising her eyebrows. “Cheese and celery?” she asks, as though to clarify. You give her a cheery nod, and she smirks at you. “I don’t think they’re quite meant to go together like that, but sure.”

The crackers don’t actually turn out too bad, although Sophia is right, the celery doesn’t add very much to it. The taste of the plastic-y cheese and the celery don’t mix together very well, even when you lightly sprinkle some black pepper over the top of them.

The two of you dutifully eat the two dozen crackers you’d prepared, though. At the end of it, the two of you each make a face at the other.

“… I think I’ll get something different next week,” you conclude, heading over to the fridge to get the two of you a glass of milk.

“Mmm.” Sophia hops up onto the counter for a moment. You consider telling her to get down, but she’s still just below eye level to you, so you let it slide for today. “Try carrot instead of celery. More taste.”

“Maybe.” You pour the milk into the glasses, then hand one of them to Sophia. “Would you like that?”

She shrugs. “I won’t complain,” she replies.

“Yeah, but would you like that?” you pester her. “Or is there something else you’d prefer? I don’t have a lot of money, but I can try to get you something better.”

“Mmm.” She looks at you consideringly. “Usually, they give us fruit salad after—track meet. They don’t put anything fancy in there, apple, melon, pear, that kind of thing.”

You think about it for a moment. “I can try,” you say doubtfully. “Fruit’s kind of expensive, but I’ll give it my best shot.”

She shrugs. “It’s fine if you can’t. I don’t come here for the food anyway.”

“You should.” You pout at her. “I’m a good cook.”

“Mmm.” She doesn’t respond to that, but she doesn’t dismiss you, either. Progress. Any progress is fine.

Things proceed as usual after that, although you’re careful not to spend too much time kissing her today. From what you’ve been able to tell from her assignments in Chemistry, she’s improving, but she’s not doing as well as she could. She does actually need to study, and kissing her silly won’t help her much with that.

By the time she leaves at nine, you think she has a more solid grasp on the concepts you’ve been studying at class. Hopefully. She’s been misunderstanding some of the concepts being taught, and you think you’ve helped her get a grasp on them.

It’s kind of hard to tell, though, because she spent more of her time watching you out of the corner of
her eye than she did listening to what you were saying.

Argh. You don’t know why she’s asking for tutoring if she’s not going to listen.

You shake your head roughly, trying to put it out of your mind. Either way, your goal was a success, you think. She might not have liked the particular snack you made- and to be fair, neither did you- but she seemed to appreciate that you made it at all.

Damn it. Fruit salad is going to be expensive, though. If you want her to actually appreciate it, you might have to try and save some money to buy some fruit for her next week.

You head up to your room, trying to put it out of your mind. You have something else you need to focus on, anyway; your plans for the weekend.

What are you going to do over the weekend? So many choices, so little time.
Saturday finds you awake at seven, grumpy and cold.

The first solves itself quickly. Your jogging route is getting boring, so you range out farther than you normally do, carefully extending your power out just far enough that you can feel the emotions of everyone around you. Nobody seems to be paying any attention to you, which is good—the further away you get from your house, the worse the neighbourhood gets.

Most of the money in Brockton Bay flows in from either the Docks or Downtown. The Docks offers a huge amount of the city’s laboring jobs, either directly or indirectly, while Downtown holds a lot of the city’s more profitable jobs—lawyers, doctors, businessmen, and so on. This has led to a predictable effect; people generally want to live close to where they work, so the ‘nicer’ areas of town lie around the Downtown district.

It’s not as simple as saying that the further away from Downtown you get, the safer things are. You and Dad don’t live very close to the area, but you live in a nicer bubble, a few safer blocks centered around a well-to-do daycare. The further away from your house you go, though, the worse things get.

Dad keeps telling you not to go too far away from the house, but it just feels so constricting to always be stuck in the same few areas.

The cold, unfortunately, doesn’t go away as easily. It’s not quite as bad as it was when you got up by the time you finish your jog, but once you’re back inside and heading to the shower, you find yourself on the verge of shivering again. You make sure to grab warmer clothes out of your dresser as you pass by your room and head to the shower.

Once you’re out of the shower, you head out to the dining room and turn on the coffee machine. It won’t be long until Dad wakes up, so you set out two mugs on the bench before you grab your phone off and begin replying to your good morning texts. You texted Victoria last night, but you make sure to send her another text now, just so she knows. Then you send another text to Amy, this one with entirely too many exclamation marks in an attempt to convey your excitement, reminding her that you’re going to take her out to see a movie today.

Dad wanders out a few minutes after you finish to find a freshly-prepared cup of coffee waiting for him on the side of the kitchen bench, along with two slices of buttered toast and a slapdash arrangement of what you hope resembles poached eggs.

“Thanks,” he says warily, eyeing the breakfast. You beam at him, and his gaze seems to soften as he takes a bite of the food. He manages to get it down without visibly gagging, so you chalk it up as a success and mentally pat yourself on the back before happily settling into your own breakfast, a rather less experimental combination of toast, strawberry jam and orange slices.

You eat about half of it before setting down your breakfast and nervously touching your phone. You take a few moments to gather your courage before you say, “I’m going out this morning, Dad.”

“Oh?” He quickly sets down his knife and fork, pushing his plate away. Mentally, you give the egg a sad look—you don’t think it looks that unappetizing—before you give Dad your full attention.

“Seeing Madison again, are you?” he says in a gently teasing tone.
“Nooo.” You drag the word out for exaggerated effect. “Maybe later. Victoria wants to meet up this morning, so I’m going to meet up with her. She wants to help make me look pretty.” You give him a charming grin.

He raises his eyebrows. “Is that right,” he says carefully. You make a sound of affirmation, and he nods. “Alright then,” he says. “Be careful, okay, Taylor?”

You nod confidently. “Don’t worry, Dad, we’re going to stay in the mall the whole time. There’s no way anybody could hurt us there.”

Dad looks like he wants to say something, but instead he just settles for sighing and looking like he wants to pat you on the head. “That’s not- okay. Okay, Taylor. Do you need any money?”

“No.” Quickly taking a sip of coffee, you pick your toast sandwich back up. “I think she already has everything, so we don’t need to spend any money. She just wants to show me how to use some makeup.”

Scratching awkwardly at the back of his head, Dad gives you a serious look. “Okay, but if you ever need any, just tell me. I’ll find a way, okay?”

“Okay.” You’re never going to take him up on that, but you smile again at him anyway. It’s nice of him to make the offer.

With your serious conversation concluded, the two of you turn to talking about less important things, like the weather—apparently it’s going to rain on Monday according to the weatherman on TV, although you have your doubts. That man gets the weather wrong more often than he gets it right, so it’s usually a safe bet to assume the weather is going to be the opposite of whatever he predicts it will be.

Come nine, you make sure you have your phone, wallet and keys before you change into a nicer jacket and head out. The cold hits you again, but it’s less severe by now. Just keeping your hands in your pockets and pulling your hood over your head keeps you warm enough not to mind the temperature too much in the time it takes the bus to arrive and take you to the mall.

Once there, you send a text to Victoria letting her know you’ve arrived, then head up to into the mall. Your phone buzzes while you’re still on the escalator. It’s a simple message, letting you know that she’s waiting by the juice bar.

Sure enough, she is waiting there, dressed in civilian clothes like she was on Wednesday, although you’re pretty sure she’s wearing makeup again. You peer at her face as you walk up, trying to figure out how she looks different. Is it her eyes, or- you can tell she’s wearing foundation and lipstick, but you can’t tell what she’s actually done with them.

There’s a strange stirring in your gut, and as you wave at her, you try to place it. She waves back, a grin splitting her face, and you hurry up to her, although you don’t move in for a hug—not in public. Victoria can’t hide here; she’s too public a figure. If you do anything that could indicate your relationship with her here, there’s a good chance it could end up on camera, and neither of you would appreciate that.

“Hi,” you greet her lamely.
She pokes her tongue out at you and pats the seat beside her, which you slide into. “Hi,” she says teasingly, causing your cheeks to flush as she makes light fun of your greeting. “Do you want a drink before we get started?”

You shake your head. “No, thank you. I’m not thirsty.”

“You’re loss,” she shrugs. “I’ve ordered a blueberry smoothie, so once it gets here, we’ll head off. We’re just going to go to a local boutique, if that’s okay with you?” She waits for you to nod before she continues, “The owner there owes me a favour, so she’s agreed to let us use one of her back rooms for an hour. We’ll just have to pick you up some makeup first.”

“Wait, pick me up some?” You give her an alarmed look. “You don’t already have it? Victoria, I already feel bad enough about the clothes—“

She takes your hands firmly between her own, gently rubbing your knuckles with her own. “Hey,” she says soothingly. “It’s okay, Taylor. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it?” Your frustration must show on your face, because she frowns, but you push on before she can say anything. “How can I help but worry about it? Makeup is expensive, Vicky, there’s a reason I never bothered to learn how to apply it myself.”

Victoria nods. “It’s expensive, yeah,” she admits. “But I’ve already got a lot of money saved away. This isn’t even a quarter of my paycheque, and I want to spend some of it on you.”

“I don’t want you to, though,” you complain. “I can’t afford to pay you back.”

“Then don’t.” She shrugs. “This isn’t a loan, Taylor, it’s a gift to help my g- my friend feel better about herself. You don’t need to worry about paying me back, any more than you would if I were to pay to take you to a restaurant.”

It still rubs you the wrong way. “I should be paying for my own stuff,” you whine, pouting at her.

She shrugs. “If you can pay for it, then pay for it,” she says. “But I doubt you can afford what we need to buy, unless you have a few hundred dollars stashed away.” Your eyes bulge—she’s planning to spend hundreds of dollars here?! “If you do, then fine, you can pay for your own stuff, although I’ll still pay for mine. But if you can’t, then let me pay for it. Okay?”

It still stings. You don’t have anything you can offer in rebuttal, but you still stubbornly shake your head. Finally, she lets out an aggravated groan.

“Look,” she says, “it’s not a big deal. You can pay me back if you want.” She glances around, making sure nobody is in earshot or listening in, before leaning in to murmur into your ear, “I take payment in kisses and dinners.”

That’s just unfair, and by the naughty grin she sports as she pulls back, she knows it. You can’t stay angry at her after that.

“Fine,” you say, pouting angrily. Her grin grows wider, which makes you pout even more sulkily. Before she can say anything, though, a harried-looking attendant hurries over, bearing a large blue-purple smoothie. He hurries away without saying a word, but the interruption thoroughly spoils the moment.
“Excellent!” she says cheerfully. “Ready to go, then?”

You sulk along behind her as she leads you through the mall and over to a surprisingly large and well-decorated store. A large neon sign above reads *Bec’s Beauty Boutique* in what could have been considered an attractive font twenty years ago, but the storefront within is rather more modern, with attractive wide glass windows allowing you to peer in and a neat, orderly feel to the store.

You glance around the store as Victoria drags you in, your anger dissipating in the face of the women around here. Your face burns, and you step closer to Victoria as she talks to the boutique’s owner, ducking your face to try and hide your embarrassment. It feels like everyone is looking at you.

It’s a relief to feel Victoria pulling you into the back room, away from the stares of the other women. She pats you reassuringly on the back several times, and it does help a little, but you have to close the door to the room and flick the room’s lights on before you can really begin to settle down. She does give you a flat stare when you close the door, but after she sighs and turns some fans in the roof on, you don’t feel too bad about it.

“Alright,” she says, gesturing for you to walk over to her. You do so, and she swings around a chair, gesturing for you to sit in it. The chair is placed right in front of a mirror, but for now, she doesn’t turn your chair so you can see yourself in it. She keeps you turned towards her as she pulls over another chair, then begins riffling through an assortment of plastic tubs and tubes on the bench.

“Oh, okay,” she says eventually. “Are you ready to start?”

You nod, so she finally swings your chair around as she moves closer, allowing you to half-see your face in the mirror.

“First off is foundation,” she instructs you.

She spends the next two hours giving you a solid grounding in how to apply makeup. It’s a lot more complicated than it appears to be.

Foundation makes your skin look smoother and hides the small blemishes on your face, but getting the colour right is tricky. Apparently, your face has “pinkish undertones”, whatever that means. You’re glad that she’s the one handling this, because you’re already lost.

After that comes concealer, dabbed around your lips. It seems strange at first, but Victoria explains it simply enough; she’s concealing your natural lipline, because it makes your mouth look too wide. After it’s concealed, she traces over your lips with a lip-liner brush, slightly exaggerating your upper and lower lips while making your mouth seem narrower than it really is. When she’s done, your mouth still looks too thin and too wide, but not nearly as much as it did before.

You take careful note of what she’s doing. You can’t rely on having her around every morning to apply this for you, at least not yet, and it’d be humiliating if you had to ask someone else to do your makeup for you anyway.

Once she’s done with the lip-liner, she applies some “liquid lipstick”. By now, you’re thoroughly lost, despite keeping track of what she’s doing. There’s liquid lipstick? You apply lipstick with a brush now? What?

After that, she moves on to your eyes. She patiently explains what she’s doing here, and how it’s
helping. She paints a thin line of eyeliner around your eyes, helping them to look like they’re set deeper in your face—helping to minimize their roundness, she unhelpfully informs you. Then she moves on to eye shadow, applied over your eyelids—apparently, it helps make them look smaller somehow. Then, finally, some mascara—by making your lashes look larger, the rest of your eye looks slightly smaller.

You’re left entirely confused, but you can’t argue with the effects. Your skin looks smoother and nicer. Your mouth, usually thin and wide, is still thin and wide, but not quite as badly. Even your eyes, normally too wide for your face, look smaller somehow.

And the best part of it is, Victoria did it all slowly and simply, explaining each step as she went.

“You probably won’t get it perfect the first time, but that’s okay,” she concludes. She’s moved behind you now, peering over your shoulder into the mirror as she slips her arms around your chair and pulls you into a weird half-chair, half-Taylor hug. “You just need some practice, and you’ll be able to look like this every day. If you need more help, I can come over on Wednesday and show you how to do it again. Sounds good?”

“Yeah,” you say absently. You flick your eyes over Victoria again, trying to place why you feel so strange. Nothing comes to mind immediately, though, so you dismiss it. It doesn’t feel serious, anyway. It’s just a niggling little feeling, like something’s missing and you want it back.

“Excellent.” She sounds satisfied as she swings your chair around and offers you her hand. You take it, pulling yourself up to your feet. For a moment, your feet waver forwards as you attempt to step forwards, but then you reconsider and allow Victoria to step out first, drawing everyone’s attention and allowing you to step out almost unseen. She doesn’t seem to mind, though, and allows you to scurry out of the store.

Once you’re out of the boutique, you can breathe a bit easier. It doesn’t feel like everyone’s judging you now.

It takes a few minutes for Victoria to emerge from the store. When she does, she gives you a ghost of a smile as she steps forward, as though she knows what you’re thinking.

“Allright,” she says quietly—as quietly as she can be in the middle of a crowded mall, at least. From her side, she raises her hand and passes you a white paper bag. You look inside, peering at a variety of plastic tubes, most of which you recognize from your lesson just now. “Here’s the makeup for you. Remember, if you need any help again, just call or text me and I’ll come over Tuesday or Wednesday, okay?”

You nod. You don’t think you’ll need any help with it, although it might be a good excuse to get Victoria to come back to your house again. Her lessons were pretty clear, though—applying the makeup doesn’t seem hard, just fiddly. You might have to get up earlier to apply it for a while, or skip breakfast in the mornings until you have the hang of it.

You want to lean up and give Victoria a kiss for teaching you, but you can’t. Being in public is hard. She seems to recognize the impulse in you, though, because her faint smile turns into a grin, and she steps forward, taking your hand in hers. And that’s all that needs to be said.

It’s not quite all that needs to be said, you realize soon, but even temporary goodbyes are frustrating, and you hate giving them out. They’re the worst part of knowing people, honestly. Everyone should
just always stick around you.

But that can’t happen, not when you have a date and Victoria has to head home for the day. “Mom wants me to go on patrol,” she says with a grimace. “Crystal and Eric are getting busier now that they’re in college, so I have to take some of their shifts.”

You pat her arm in what you believe is a sympathetic. “At least you get paid for it,” you console her. And it’s true, she does—you’d learned that much earlier, when you had looked up information on New Wave. The organization was officially registered with the government, and a part of that involved giving all the people involved in its operation recompense for their time, as they didn’t meet the criteria for a not-for-profit charity.

That’s how she could afford to buy all this stuff for you so easily, if you had to guess.

She just gives you a sour look, which she quickly smooths over. You’d be offended, but you don’t feel a spike in irritation aimed at you, so you think you’re all good. But damn it, now that you’ve thought about that you actually are a little bit worried. “I guess,” she mutters. “It just sucks.” She pouts at you, and you have to once again resist the urge to lean up and kiss her. It’s not a good idea, no matter how adorable her pout is and how much you want to bite that lip.

“Well, at least it won’t take too long,” you attempt to console her. “One afternoon, and you can go home and relax. Have you picked out the book for next week’s book club?”

She perks up. “No, I haven’t!” She doesn’t smile, but she shifts slightly, her body language opening a little. “That’s a good idea. Thanks, Taylor. And I need to plan where I’m taking you tomorrow, too.” She gives you an exaggerated wink at the reminder, causing your lips to turn up in a reluctant smile.

“Yeah, fine,” you say begrudgingly. Surprisingly, it didn’t feel completely awful to have Victoria buy you something, probably because she doesn’t even mention it again. When she doesn’t try to hold it over your head, it somehow feels a bit more tolerable. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Giving you a silly little wave, she waits for you to turn around before she heads off.

As it turns out, you hadn’t thought the logistics of this through very well. If it weren’t for the fact that you work at the theater, you’d be stuck clutching a bag full of makeup in front of you when Amy finally arrives. What an awkward impression that would make on your first pseudo-date! Luckily, you do work here, and India doesn’t care enough to remind you that you shouldn’t be entering the staff common room without wearing your uniform. You drop the bag off there and head out the front to wait for her.

She arrives a little late, her hair still a little damp. She must have showered directly before coming here—either having showered specifically for the date, or more likely, having worked in the morning and showered afterwards. Her clothes are nice, though- not too formal or too fancy, but better than the casual clothes you normally see her wearing around the break room at the clinic. It makes you feel a little self-conscious, honestly. Your own clothes aren’t very fancy, because you don’t own any fancy clothes.

Her gaze darts anxiously around the cinema for a moment, her eyes skimming straight past where you’re sitting half-hidden behind a wall. You flush, realizing your mistake, and move to where she
can see you easier, giving her a little wave. Finally, she spots you. You meet her halfway, ending up standing awkwardly beside a cardboard cut-out of Alice from Alice in Wonderland.

Okay, the decorations are a bit out of date. You make a mental note to take these down and bring out some more current ones the next time you’re in.

Eventually, you speak up when the silence gets a little too awkward. “Hi,” you say lamely.

“Hi,” she says back. Her cheeks flush red for a moment in embarrassment, and she looks off to the side, scanning the cinema. You follow suit, hoping to avoid catching her gaze until you figure out something to say. Somehow, you’d hoped to avoid this happening, but all the smooth conversational topics you’d planned out in your head all fled the moment you laid eyes on her.

You scan over the building twice, but nothing leaps to mind. Finally, you clear your throat, and settle for the obvious. “Um,” you say nervously, “you look nice. I like your hair.”

She blushes prettily. It’s true, though. She’s attractive normally, if a little mousy, but dressed up in flattering clothing and with her hair done up in a neat bun, she looks really cute now. “Thanks,” she mumbles. “You look really pr—nice! You look nice. I like your makeup.”

You give her a small grin, but don’t mention that Victoria was the one who did it for you. It seems wrong to tell her that another girl did it for you when she doesn’t know—and that seems much worse now that you think about it. You should probably tell her soon. Maybe when you’re ready to ask her out on a real date. Instead, you turn away and quickly search for a change in topic. “What did you want to watch today?”

She freezes, then looks quickly up at the board above, where a screen displays today’s movies and their session times. “Avatar?” she says hesitantly. “My cousin’s said good things about it, at least, so it might be worth watching.”

You shrug half-heartedly. What you’ve seen of it while you were working hasn’t looked promising, but neither have any of the other movies on right now. “Okay,” you say, trying your best to inject some sense of happiness into your tone. She doesn’t seem to notice that you’re not particularly enthused, so mission accomplished.

Your staff discount is pretty significant, actually, at 50% off. Mr Harding had offered to give you tickets for free when you started working here, but it feels wrong to take advantage of that kind of thing when it’s for someone other than you. Besides, paying half price for tickets and snacks for the two of you isn’t too bad.

“What do you want?” you ask her lowly. To India, you say, “I want a small popcorn, a small coke, and a small chocolate ice-cream.” You turn back to Amy to explain that she can ask for anything she wants, but the words die in your mouth when you turn back to see a deep blush on her face. You ran back over what you said, but- what is she blushing about? Nothing you said is even vaguely erotic! Amy’s head must be a weird place.

“I’ll, um. I’ll have a small popcorn and a small sprite,” she says weakly, avoiding your gaze. You pout at her, but somehow, she just manages to avoid looking at you even harder. Honestly, it’s a little frustrating, not knowing what’s going on up in there. You need more teasing material, damn it!

You pay for your snacks, then lead Amy over to the theater—Theater 2, the second-largest one in here. It’s really frustrating to clean, because the seats are always sticky for some reason, and half the
time you’re in here people have thrown popcorn at the screen.

You lead her up towards the back row. The theater here isn’t big enough that you need to worry about straining your neck, and you don’t really want to be seen by all the people behind you, so it’s as good a spot as any. You still can’t figure out why Amy’s cheeks turn red again, though.

“Okay,” you say, finally claiming a seat for yourself—the two least creaky seats in the whole back row. “Take a seat.” You give her your most charming grin as she sits beside you, settling herself into the seat.

Neither of the two of you says anything for a moment, contenting yourselves with chewing on some popcorn—Amy—and opening the prepackaged ice-cream cone—yourself. You idly lick at the ice cream, looking at Amy out of the corner of your eye and wishing you could figure out why she’s still blushing. Whatever embarrassed her should have gone away already, and you’re not doing anything now except licking an ice-cream!

You go to say something—you’re not really sure what—when another couple enters the theater, talking to each other in hushed whispers. The boy says something in the girl’s ear, and she giggles as he leads them to a seat two rows in front of you. You stare down at them, and—he only bought one tub of popcorn. A giant one.

Oh wow, that’s actually a good idea. You find yourself suddenly envious of this boy and his preparation skills. Now you wish you’d done the same. It wouldn’t quite be hand-holding, but it’d be close! And you’re willing to settle for close, at least for now.

The theater slowly fills up, although it’s not exactly full—you estimate that less than a quarter of the seats in here are taken. It’s enough that the atmosphere doesn’t feel very intimate any more, though. Damn it.

Finally, the movie starts up. You give it as much of your attention as you can, but you’ve already seen enough of the movie to think that it’s boring, and it doesn’t do a good job at all of keeping your attention. Especially not when you have something—someone—so much more interesting to look at.

You try not to stare at her too much, because it feels kind of creepy to stare at her while she’s watching a movie. You can’t help but turn to look at her occasionally, though.

Amy is one of those people who has the habit of mouthing the characters’ lines. She doesn’t even seem to realize she’s doing it.

You slowly creep your hand along the armrest of your chair. Amy is clutching the edge of it, but you don’t feel quite confident enough to just reach over and take it outright. Instead, you inch your hand along, hoping against hope that she’ll notice. She doesn’t, though, until you finally reach the point that your fingers brush her hands. You almost visibly see her freeze when she looks down and notices where your hand is.

She doesn’t grab it herself, but she also doesn’t move her hand away. This time, there’s no almost about it— you can see the deep, red flush that sets in over her cheeks.

Encouraged, you slide your hand a little more, curling your fingers up. When she still doesn’t pull her hand away, and her blush only grows stronger, you finally uncurl your fingers until they rest atop Amy’s. From there, you wait—wait for two long, long minutes as Amy slowly recovers from her embarrassment before finally turning her hand over. Emboldened, you slip your hand down a little
further, then a little more, until finally, your hand is resting properly in hers.

Only then, flushed with success, do you allow yourself to settle back in your chair and revel in your victory. Amy is too busy blushing to pay attention to the movie, but you do see her casting glances at your joined hands every few minutes. Idly, you wonder what she’s thinking to make her blush that much—you’re pretty sure that most people don’t turn red quite that much just from holding hands.

She doesn’t try to pull her hand away. Small victories. Take that, popcorn guy.

After about ten minutes, the blush has faded from her face, but she’s still holding onto your hand, and occasionally squeezing it lightly, as though to assure herself she’s still touching you. Each time you do, you make sure to squeeze it back.

Eventually, the movie brings itself to a predictably action-packed ending. You wait for the flood of people to exit the theater before you lead Amy out, still holding her hand. For as long as you can, you hold onto it; you manage right up until you’re nearing the front door and a large man cuts between the two of you, forcing you to release Amy’s hand so he doesn’t send the two of you tumbling down to the floor.

“Hey!” you say indignantly, but the man doesn’t even stop to listen. Beside you, Amy lets out a low hiss of annoyance.

Now that you’ve let go of her hand, though—your hand moves slightly towards her, but then behind you somebody coughs, and Amy lets her own hand hurriedly fall down. Ouch. Your throat tightens at the move.

“So, um.” Amy chuckles nervously. “That was pretty okay, I thought.”

You shrug. “It was alright,” you concede. It’s tempting to be short and snippy with her, but you just can’t bring yourself to try. Whatever her reason for not wanting to hold your hand in public, it’s probably a good one. You hope. You can’t help but feel a little hurt, but you try to swallow it back. It does kill any immediate desire to make a flirtatious comment about watching her instead of the movie, though. “It looked really nice. The visual effects team did a really great job, I thought.”

She nods. “Earth Aleph movies always look nicer.” She looks around, scanning the room. “Mom is going to come and pick me up soon, but we have about ten minutes before she gets here. Do you want to go and sit down?”

“Sure,” you say with a shrug. You lead her over to the seats, then take a seat, Amy sitting across from you. She seems to be nervous about something, by the deep breath she takes before she talks.

“Thanks for taking me out,” she says finally. “I had a really good time today.”

Well, you didn’t exactly take her out- you just told her you’d take her if her friend dropped out again, and got lucky that her friend did. But you won’t argue! “It’s okay,” you reply, giving her a warm smile. “I had a lot of fun too. Even if you won’t let me hold your hand.” You give her a deliberately exaggerated pout.

She turns red again. “Sorry,” she mumbles. “I don’t normally, um. I don’t touch people very much.”

You instantly strike down the perverted thought that comes to mind, then the one that follows that. “Oh,” you say simply. You watch her fight down her blush for a moment, then follow that up with,
“I understand. I can keep my hands to myself if you want.”

“No, you don’t need to do that.” Amy shakes her head, then pauses and waggles her finger at you. “Well, yes, you do, but holding hands is fine. Just, um, maybe in private for now.”

“Private hand-holding?” You leer at her, wiggling your eyebrows.

She waves her hands in front of her and scowls. “Not like that!” She gives you a little glare, but you can see the mischievous glint in her eyes. “I don’t do that kind of thing on the first date.”

You pause for a second, then rush in to the opening she left you. “A date, is it?” you ask, your mouth stretching out into a wide grin unbidden.

“If you want,” she says, suddenly nervous. “If you don’t, then-“

You cut her short with another leer. “Of course I want it to be a date,” you say. “I told you already, Amy, anyone would be lucky to take you on a date.”

She snickers at something, but you’re not sure what. “Okay, Taylor. Then it’s a date.” She sounds happy about that. Good.

The two of you chat amicably for a few minutes about that, discussing the strengths and flaws of the movie. You’ve seen enough of it to bluff your way through the conversation, at least—after all, you didn’t spend much time actually watching it. Most of your comments are reserved for the acting and visual effects, the former of which you felt was weak, the latter of which you felt was amazing.

Finally, Amy stiffens, looking over your shoulder. You turn around, and your mouth goes dry.

The last time you’d met Amy’s mother, you’d barely been able to keep your eyes off her. She’s just—she’s hot, that’s the only way you can put it. She wears a very severe expression, but somehow, that only emphasizes her striking features.

And, best of all, she’s wearing a three-piece suit.

Surreptitiously, while the woman’s attention is focused on Amy, you check to make sure you’re not drooling. You’re not. Good.

“Do you need more time?” the severe-looking woman asks Amy. Amy glances towards you, but shakes her head without seeking a response from you. Ordinarily you’d consider that rude, but you understand the impulse to go with this woman. Even if she is Amy’s mother.

Meekly, you wave goodbye to Amy, afraid to open your mouth in case something stupid comes out. She gives you a glum little wave and a quiet “Bye, Taylor” back.

And then you’re left all alone.

Your mood has buoyed back up by the time you retrieve your bag of makeup and head home. Honestly, it wasn’t bad for a first date, you think. You don’t exactly have a lot of dates to compare it to, though.
Dad’s sitting down watching TV when you get back. He looks up as you pass by his couch, giving you a wave and calling out “Hello” before going back to watching whatever’s on. You’re about to pass him by when you catch a glimpse of what’s on, and you pause.

“Is that a documentary?” you ask, bewildered.

He nods. “Lacey told me about it,” he replies. “This guy has a whole series about animals. I thought I’d give it a try. Want to watch it with me?”

You hesitate. You do have classwork you could do, but then- you are finished up for the rest of the year. And that decides you. “Okay,” you say brightly. “Just let me go put this up in my room and I’ll be out in a moment.”

Once you’ve run to your room and tucked the bag away in the corner against your bookcases, you hurry back down and plonk yourself on the lounge beside him. You watch for a few moments, but before you can figure out what it’s about, the program shifts. Ad time.

Dad must sense your curiosity, though, because he looks down at you and smiles. “It’s about cheetahs today,” he informs you. You blink for a moment, taken aback, before you realize he means the animal, not your relationship with Victoria. “Did you know they’re one of the fastest land animals on the planet?”

“I think they’re the fastest,” you reply. “But there are some birds that can go faster, I think.”

The two of you end up watching two episodes of the show- David something or other. It’s actually fairly interesting, you find, although it can drag on a bit at times.

When it’s over, Dad stretches his arms out. You lean back against the couch at the same time, yawning up at the roof.

“Well,” Dad says drowsily, “that was fun. We should find the rest of the show.”

You perk up. “Yeah!” you say enthusiastically. “I think the thrift store has a new DVD section in. We could go there and check it out?”

He considers it for a moment. “It’s probably cheaper than buying it new,” he muses, “but I’ve got to go into work for a management meeting tomorrow. Maybe next weekend, we could make a trip out of it, unless something else pops up.”

“Maybe!” It’d also give you a chance to look for other presents for your girls, so you’re not going to complain. “I wonder if there are any other shows like it. That one was fun.”

Dad taps his chin thoughtfully. “I could always ask Lacey. She’s the one who knows about these shows.”

“Could you?” You can’t help but whine a little. There’s not much on TV that interests you these days. You’d like to have something you could watch with Dad. He just chuckles at your question, though.

“Sure.” He ruffles your hair, causing you to bat at his hands with a frustrated groan. Great, now you’re going to have to brush it again. “Now come on, Taylor. What do you want for dinner?”
Dinner ends up being a noisy affair, with the two of you discussing the show you’d just watched. At times, you consider bringing up the movie you’d watched with Amy, but you’re not sure how you’d explain that to him without admitting that you were on a date, or without having to bring Amy over to meet him.

The two of you aren’t quite at the ‘meet the parents’ step yet. You’d like a little longer to prepare yourself for that so you don’t make an idiot of yourself by drooling over Amy’s mom.

Your dreams that night are pleasant, although your face is still a little sore from rubbing all the makeup off. When you wake up the next morning, you can’t help but feel a little pleased that at least none of your dreams featured Amy’s mother- just Amy herself in varying levels of undress. And Madison, and Victoria. Often at the same time.

The morning passes by in a pleasant haze. Now that you’re not so constricted as to where you can run, your morning jog is a pleasant exercise in mapping out the surrounding neighbourhood with your own eyes, getting a feel for where everything around you is.

Victoria’s book club is about the same as normal, although you do notice that she’s lost any remaining hesitance she had in letting you play with her. For a few minutes, you idly stroke around her entrance, debating whether it’s worth risking slipping a finger inside her here—but no, you know it isn’t. It’s not worth risking your relationship with her for that.

Really, it’s just a normal Sunday up until two o’clock, when the book club ends—and Victoria drags you off to the mall again.

She sets down in an alley a good three blocks over from the mall. “Sorry about the walk,” she says as she puts you down, “but I tend to get mobbed if I fly down next to the mall.”

You shake your head. “No, don’t worry about it,” you say, waving her off. “I wouldn’t want you to get mobbed. You’re all mine this afternoon.”

Victoria raises an eyebrow at you, then leans in for a quick kiss. You allow her to, then sneakily slip a little tongue into it. She shivers, stepping closer for a few moments. You’re just getting into it when she pulls away, giving you a small but sinful smile.

“Turn around, Taylor,” she says. You give her an odd look, but then your mouth goes dry when you realize—she’s still in her fetish costume. If she’s taking you to a mall, then she’s going to have to change first.

You spin around, pouting angrily at the ground. “That’s mean,” you sulk. You can understand why, though. You want to see her naked, but your first time seeing her nude shouldn’t be while she’s getting changed in a dirty back alley. You want her to strip for you, and you want it to be in a classier setting than this.

“Maybe,” she replies cheerfully. You can hear cloth rustling, but as much as you’re tempted, you don’t turn around to take a peek until she finally calls out, “Okay, you can look now.” You turn to look at her, and find her giving you a warm smile.

“That was cruel,” you pout. She just smiles wider, floating over in some civilian clothes- a plain t-shirt and a pair of jeans- to give you a kiss. You allow her to, and even pull her in a little deeper so you can swirl your tongue around hers, but after a few moments you pull back.
“It was,” she says agreeably after she’s caught her breath. “But thank you for not peeking.” This time, the kiss she gives you isn’t on the mouth; she gives you a quick, soft kiss on the cheek, sending a warm feeling running down your body.

You almost prefer it to the earlier kiss.

You tug your bag over your shoulder. It’s empty today, so that whatever the two of you end up buying can just go inside it. “We should probably go inside,” you say.

Victoria nods. You take her hand, but quickly reconsider and reluctantly let go of it as you lead her out the alley and towards the mall. She passively follows you willingly enough, which brings a small smile to your face, but once the two of you make it to the mall, she steps in front of you to lead you to the store.

Thankfully, this one isn’t an expensive boutique. It’s still a specialty store, but it just specializes in clothing for women, not clothing made out of some kind of spun gold or anything. The prices are actually reasonable, if higher than you prefer.

“Right,” Victoria says, cracking her fingers. “Time to find you some clothes.”

If you’d thought that buying makeup was complicated, this is something else. At least there’d only been half a dozen kinds of makeup she’d used. For the next four hours, she runs all around the store, drawing a huge variety of clothes off the store’s racks.

The results, however, are actually quite pleasing.

You’re a lanky girl, too tall and too skinny with collarbones that are too prominent and hips that feel as flat as your chest. You almost never bother to dress up, because you’ve never been able to find clothes that flatter your frame- you’ve never had a frame to flatter, even. Victoria, however, disagrees. And she’s much better at this than you are.

There are, apparently, clothes that can flatter even a skinny girl like yourself. Some of the clothes she picks out are designed to fool people who look at you into thinking your body has more curves than it does, while some of the clothes are designed to hide your lack of curves. Empire-waist dresses are expensive, but she throws a couple on, while most of the other pants she buys are slim-cut trousers and cigarette pants. You’re pleased to discover that your legs are defined enough to pull off a midi skirt, too.

The shirts are simpler affairs. Noting your essentially complete lack of a bust, she doesn’t even bother buying anything without a high neckline. A lot of the shirts she gets have high collars or ruffled tops. There’s a lot of jackets in there, too- jackets, she tells you confidentially, give you the illusion of chunkiness.

Overall, you’re surprised at how effective it is. Looking at yourself in the mirror, you… actually don’t look terrible, especially with your makeup on. You won’t be competing with Victoria in the looks department any time soon, or even Madison, but- if you could look like this all the time, you could be content.

It’s still six o’clock by the time the two of you leave, however. The store clerks are giving the two of you dirty looks as you leave.
Victoria pats you reassuringly on the back as the two of you exit the mall. “See?” she says cheerfully. “Now you look even prettier than normal.”


She grins at you. “My pleasure,” she says. You look at her for a moment, then note that she’s looking down at your chest. You let out an exaggerated sigh, calling her attention back up to your face. You can’t hide a pleased smile, though. “I do have to go now, though, it’s getting close to dinner time. Do you want me to drop you off back home?”

You smile at her. “Please?”

Overall, you think it ended up being a pretty good weekend, all in all.

Your date with Amy went well, and you didn’t… hate going with Victoria, even if you would have preferred to have been able to buy that stuff for yourself. Plus, now you have more flattering clothes, even if they’re not the kind of clothes you can wear around Winslow.

Still, as you lean idly back against your pillows, you find yourself planning ahead for the next couple of days. You just have so many tasks you want to do, and so little time to do them in…
Omake- Comprehension

Good girl

I sucked in a sharp breath at the thought of those words and looked up from the dim glow of my computer screen to stare at the ceiling of the room, without really seeing it, as I slid down in my chair. I was shivering just a little, my whole body tense with anxiety as my fingers worried at the hem of my gray blouse. *The blouse Taylor picked out.* The shiver edged towards a shake as my thoughts darkened.

It had started earlier today, when I had decided to cancel my ride home after our tutoring session and follow Taylor for a bit instead, to see which other girls she talked to. I wasn't jealous, really not jealous, and not just I'm-in-denial-not-jealous(*and shouldn't that have been the first clue?*), but someone had taught Taylor about using make up. That really seemed like something I should thank someone for. I had tried just asking her who, but the question died in my throat. No matter how secure I felt, some questions were just too awkward. Asking my girlfriend about her other girlfriends? Just no.

So, following. It was a vaguely uncomfortable experience from the start, too reminiscent of the bad old days when the only thing Taylor was to me was... was a tar...

I squeezed my eyes shut as they watered just a little. *The bad old days before we started dating.*

The real trouble had come later. Not the feeling of disquiet at sneaking around behind Taylor, but what I had seen while doing it.

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Taylor, it turned out, was following another girl, a pretty looking but somewhat trashily dressed freshman. She wasn't anyone I knew, but I'd seen her around, especially at lunch since we had started eating in the courtyard. *Actually, was that why Taylor moved our lunch dates? To be close to this girl?*

This didn't seem likely to have been the person I was looking for. More like, this was someone Taylor was just now picking up. Even that was a little bit surprising, to be honest. Taylor had gone completely the opposite direction when picking out clothes for me to wear, so I didn't think Taylor liked the trashy look. *Or... does Taylor like fixer-uppers?* I looked down at myself, just a bit self-consciously. *Not that I mind being fixed for Taylor's sake...*

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I choked back a miserable groan at that, sitting up straighter and grasping at the armrests so tightly my fingers ached. *I wouldn't would I?*

I shook my head to clear away that thought. *Focus.* Whatever I was going to do, I needed this story
Taylor followed the girl into a fast food place, and I went around to the other side of the building to slip in through a second door. This might not have been who I was looking for, but I still might learn more about Taylor's tastes and how to make her happy. It had been hard to work up the nerve to even do this, so I didn't want it to be a total waste!

That was either the best or worst decision of my life.

Sitting in the back of the lobby, crouched down into a booth as stealthily as I was able, I watched them place orders and head to... opposite sides of the room? I frowned at that. I was sure Taylor was about to make a move on the girl, but she just settled into a booth far away and stared at her, sipping at a coffee. I glanced back and forth between them, the girl eating some fries while bobbing her head along to music from some headphones and Taylor staring a hole into the side of her head. It was a strange scene, and I didn't put it together until Taylor smiled, that wide, face-splitting, wonderful smile, and she gave a short, sharp wave. The girl caught the motion out of the corner of her eye and turned around to look, blinking in surprise as they made eye contact, but returning Taylor's smile with a mischievous-looking grin of her own. She picked up her food, pulled off her headphones, and hurried over to join Taylor, nearly throwing herself into the seat and loudly introducing herself as Aisha.

Within a few minutes they were laughing, tangled up in half a hug while they ate, and I was pretty sure some hands were under clothes. They were being subtle, but I was staring intently.

That had been fast. Taylor was appealing, I well knew. Not... pretty pretty but attractive enough, and beyond appearance, Taylor just had a sort of presence. A warmth and strength that she radiated, which was easy to miss, but impossible to ignore once it did have your attention. I was confident Taylor could have any girl she wanted if she worked at it.

But that had been fast. Too fast. Strangers didn't go from meeting to tousled groping and giggles in a few minutes. Even the meeting itself had been strange. Taylor had caught Aisha's eye and she had started going over to talk to Taylor. No 'hello' no 'come here' not even any words at all. Who would walk up to a stranger who had silently stared them down and then started grinning?

Wait no, that isn't what happened. It struck me in that moment. Taylor smiled first. That grin had appeared while Taylor was still staring at the side of the girls head. Taylor's smiles were rare things. They didn't come easy or often, and I had worked to have enjoyed as many as I had. Yet right in front of my eyes, Taylor had just smiled out of the blue before making any sort of move. Right after that, a girl Taylor had been after threw herself at Taylor without so much as a backward glance, as soon as their eyes had met. It was... was... It was unnatural.

The word was like a bolt of lightning in my head: Unnatural. But wasn't that just how my relationship with Taylor had started? I had caught her staring at me in class that day, and I was suddenly twisting in my chair and pulling at my clothes to present myself to her like it was the most natural thing in the world, feeling a pleased warmth flow through me as her eyes roamed and liked what they saw. It still felt natural, in my memory. Only seeing how strange it looked from the outside let me realize that it probably shouldn't. Even then, though, even with it staring me in the face like that, I might still have waved it off with some excuse, but Taylor had smiled first. Taylor had known what was coming before it happened.
That was the last thing I remembered clearly. The thought, the realization, broke me, and there was nothing but a blurry sense of running away in between bolting from the restaurant and being in front of my computer, not-really-looking at the PRT page for what to do if you think you've been effected by a master. The only thing it really said was that you call them and report it right away.

And I should, I thought. Masters that can bend people like this are dangerous and terrifying. I was a bit of a cape geek, but even if I hadn't been, Heartbreaker was one of the names that everyone knew. One of the real monsters. If I was in thrall to someone like that, then getting help right now may well be the only hope I had. I still couldn't will my hand to grasp my cell phone and start dialing. When I tried, a flood of tangled emotions and memories washed through me.

Gentle praises whenever I did something for her, and her easy forgiveness whenever it didn't quite work out.

Being wrapped up in warm, tender arms as Taylor hugged away the stress of dealing with mother.

Sharing lunches I had worked to make with my own two hands every day.

Seeing Taylor faintly blushing and smiling hungrily at me for stating the simple truth that the clothes I had bought to wear for her were for her.

Listening to a rushed, awkward, and incredibly passionate declaration that Taylor does consider this a serious relationship.

Sharing a jacket that pressed me so tight against Taylor's bare chest that it felt like I was sinking into her, while she whispered into my ear that I was hers.

Waking up in a tangle of limbs to the sight of a softly smiling face framed by beautiful black curls, and knowing I was exactly where I belonged.

I was left with a warm glow in my chest, an electric tingle between my legs, and an awful twisting in my gut at the idea that those feelings weren't even real. It was like being pulled in a dozen different directions at once. I let out a miserable groan, collapsing forward to rest my head against the cool wood of the table as tears blurred my vision. Turning Taylor in? Never seeing her again? Knowing she was in prison because of me? Or even in the Birdcage because of me?

I wanted to throw up. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to run to Taylor and beg her to tell me it was all a misunderstanding. I wanted to believe it was all a misunderstanding.

…Couldn't it all be a misunderstanding?

I sat up, running my arm across my bloodshot eyes to wipe away the tears, and forcing myself to take deep slow breaths to stop more from coming. I was lying to myself — I knew even as I did it — but I could check, at least.

I pushed myself up to trembling feet, turned away from the computer and phone, and stumbled to my bed. I'd been keeping a diary for years now, and I was suddenly grateful for the habit as I grabbed the most recent one from the drawer in my nightstand, and knelt to slide the box with the old ones
out from beneath the bed. I pulled them out one by one and arranged them by year on top of the
comforter before letting myself fall forward onto the bed to lie amongst them, the most recent one still
in my shaking hands.

I was going to study myself, study my past, as if it were a stranger's. If Taylor really was a cape, and
I really had been turned into someone I wasn't, then I should see that, right? First, I was going to
skim through the diaries, looking for the entries about the other crushes and relationships I had had. I
would compare them to what I had written about my relationship with Taylor. If the way I wrote
about her fit in, that would be a sign. I shivered at an icy dread crawling up my spine. If there was a
big change in what I felt and admired, that would be a sign too.

After that, I was going to read everything I had ever written about Taylor, even from before our
relationship, looking for some hint before that first day that she was special to me. Some longing I
had somehow, impossibly, forgotten that might explain why I had been so quick to bare myself to
her. It would take hours, probably until well after midnight. I would have to read nearly every entry
since high school had started to be sure I didn't miss anything, but it didn't matter in the end. I needed
to know. Missing a bit of sleep just didn't compare.

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Hours later I was in the chair at my desk again, head in my hands, crying freely. I wasn't choking
them back anymore, or trying to do anything else. Just letting them flow until my hands and face
were soaked, until tears were dripping onto all the papers on my desk, until my head pounded and
my eyes ached. I didn't care. What else was there left to do?

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My diary entries about dating Taylor had looked a lot like something the person who wrote all the
other entries might write. They went a lot further than what was written about anyone else, but then I
had gotten into a much more serious relationship with Taylor than with anyone else. There were
stories of things we did together that I wanted to remember, notes about things she liked and how she
liked me to act, fantasies about what our lives together might be like in 20 years, fantasies about
things we could hopefully do sooner than that, little doodles of her or us, a few times where I had
idly tried signing my name as Madison Hebert. The same mix of sweet, practical, and just a little
bit embarrassingly childish that I saw in older crushes and relationships, only more so. It would have
been an incredible relief if it hadn't been for one sole difference between Taylor and everyone else.

They were all boys. Everyone I had ever had a crush on, everyone I had ever considered dating,
everyone I had ever gone on a date with. The girl who had written these diaries was apparently
completely straight with a singular glaring exception.

It wasn't the first time I had noticed this issue either. That first week, in between when I had opened
myself up for Taylor's eyes and when she had invited herself to my house for the first time, had been
a confusing one. Why had a girl suddenly had that effect on me? Could I have been bi and just... not
noticed? I had been in a desperate hurry to work out what those new feelings were, even going so far
as to get a dirty magazine, just to see what it would do for me, before Taylor pulled me into her lap
and the issue was settled.

Looking back now, that story didn't quite seem right. There should have been panic. Worry at least. I
didn't have anything against bi people, but I had never suspected I was one. That should have been
one heck of a shock. Anyone would be entitled to a little freak out about a change like that. I ought
to have a little freak out about a change like that. I was self-aware enough to know I was a worrier.
Instead? I neither remembered nor read anything but curiosity and confusion. The only worry present was a need to work things out fast because I had feared Taylor might lose interest and move on. It was all the confirmation I had feared.

That's when things got bad.

Reading about the start of high school was a little nostalgic at first. Winslow was bit of a dump, but the first days in a new school had still been exciting. Starting new subjects, meeting Emma and Sophia for the first time, enjoying the teachers treating us just a little bit more like adults. Reading my excited accounts from back then brought a strained little smile to my face despite how worried I was for the present. Right up until Taylor showed up in the entries for the first time.

It was like getting punched, again and again and again. I had known, when I started, that this was going to be in here, but I hadn't known. I hadn't thought about it, hadn't wanted to think about it, beyond the most cursory footnote. I bullied Taylor, I stopped, we got together, and I was really really sorry for it. Those words didn't cover it. Didn't even begin to, really. Hadn't been meant to. They were a way to bury what I was now being forced to see as I read every line.

The thought of the relentless petty meanness which unfolded itself page after page after page happening to anyone twisted me up inside. The thought of it happening to Taylor — sweet, kind, clever, considerate, shy, awkward, lovely, wonderful Taylor, the girl who had held me tight and called me hers and led me into her bed? The thought of it happening to her at my hands? It didn't matter what I suspected her of now, I doubt there's anything that could matter enough to measure up to what I felt about that.

I abruptly stopped feeling vaguely like I wanted to throw up and started running for the bathroom with my hand clasped over my mouth. Out of my room, down the hall, left turn, then a right, and I was emptying my stomach into the sink as quietly as I could, praying that no one would wake up. I couldn't bear to be seen, couldn't possibly explain. It seemed to take forever to finally stop, to finally leave me clenching my jaw tight to hold back coughs that would surely give me away. I listened then, for the telltale sound of a door creaking open, or footsteps, but no one came.

I turned on the sink just long enough to wash what was left down the drain and groped about blindly until my hand closed on one of the wash cloths hanging over the counter. I didn't dare look up to find it and risk seeing myself in the mirror. Instead, I just tugged it down, wiped the snot and bile off my face, tossed it into the dirty bin, and trudged back to my room to collapse into my desk chair without ever looking up.

There was something really wrong with Emma. My diaries had made that clear. What I had been able to shrug off with 'Again, today? Well, alright' each day looked much more like a crazed obsession when taken all together and all at once.

What was equally clear was that I was far far worse. I don't know what Emma's issue was, but she clearly had it. Something drove her to do what she did and she got something out of it. Me? I hadn't ever cared. Bullying Taylor was something my friends did, so I did it to. My price for being in the clique, like it was some kind of fucked up chore I needed to do. A year and more of my life story written out day by day and nearly every entry had some footnote about being mean on purpose, and it was always just that. A footnote. Never scrawled with malicious good humor, never scratched into the paper with the shame it damn well deserved, never even the focus of entry at all. Just something dutifully written down because doing it had filled some of my time that day.

Emma led us on a bullying campaign more than a year long because she was nuts. I had done just as
much damage as her *because I had nothing better to do.*

I laid my head down in my hands and wept.

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Sitting curled up in my chair, staring sightlessly at the phone sitting on the table with eyes that had been cried dry, shivering in the chill caused by being soaked, I knew I had a call to make. Taylor was a Master. There was evidence and there was, I *shuddered,* more than enough motive for anyone to come seeking revenge. Why did that phone call still feel like some impossibly awful thing?

I had bullied Taylor.

She had gotten powers.

She had come back to school and proceeded to use those powers on me.

She had used them... had used them to... to...

...to date me? And then she had... helped me get my grades up? Accepted every apology I offered, indulged my wants, let me indulge hers, worked to make sure our first time together was as good as possible despite the awkwardness, comforted my insecurities, won over Dad, went out of her way to avoid making waves with Mother, been nice to my brother, spent time with me nearly every day, and just generally been the best damn girlfriend anyone could ever ask for?

I laughed. Not a strangled giggle or miserable chuckle, but a full on wildly insane cackle. I couldn't even bring myself to care if I woke anyone up. What other response was appropriate? The terrible revenge from the dreaded Master I had been twisting myself in knots over all night amounted to something out of trashy cape romance novel. I had relentlessly bullied someone for more than a year, they had gotten powers, and then they had proceeded to use them to make my life better in basically every way.

*Make my life better.* Those words finally decided me. Just *thinking* them was like a light turning on inside me, and where it shone everything else was scoured away. The ugly knot in my stomach came undone bit by bit, I slumped down deeper into the chair as my every tensed muscle relaxed, and my headache eased off from an invisible weight crushing down upon my head and neck to the simple uncomfortable pressure of having cried for far too long.

I reached out for the phone and cradled it easily in my fingers as I opened up the texting app. There was a good night text from Taylor from hours ago, another couple asking if I was OK when I hadn't replied, and a missed call. I smiled and texted back an apology and a good night wish of my own, even if it was obviously far too late for her to see it before morning.

I stood up and stretched, groaning in pleasure as the bone deep ache from having spent so long tense with nervous energy eased off, and I made my way to the dresser to change for bed. As I did, I deliberately looked into the mirror above it to reflect upon my reflection. There was no wave of self loathing or shame as I had feared when I had averted my eyes in the bathroom. Just me standing there, pajamas in hand, eyes puffy and bloodshot, hair a tangled mess, cheeks red where my hands had pressed into them as I cried, and lips curled into an exhausted smile which really didn't fit alongside everything else. Put that all together with the one or two hours of sleep I was going to get and I was probably going to look like holy hell tomorrow. That's fine. Taylor wouldn't mind; she would just ask me what was wrong, and hold me till I was better.
I changed into the pajamas and switched off the lights before sliding under my covers. I was better off with Taylor. Having her in my life gave me a sense of direction, of purpose. She made me feel happy. She made me feel *wanted.*

That's why I had decided weeks and a lifetime ago that I would be hers, for as long as she was willing to have me. If it turned out that that was just a little bit more literal than I had thought? If it turned out that she had reached out and *shaped* my mind? Well then, OK. I had tried my best to *break* her out of simple boredom. She had gotten powers and, with every reason in the world to want a terrible revenge, she had, amazingly, brought love into my life instead. Clearly, one of these two people was more fit to be making decisions about who I ought to be, and it wasn't me. Whatever shape she built out of me, I'm sure I would like it.

*Good girl,* I thought with a smile, the words sending a gentle warmth through my chest.

I snuggled deeper into the covers and fell asleep.
You wake up on Monday morning to find the temperatures hovering somewhere above freezing, for once. Well, somewhere above freezing your ass off, at least. The temperature hasn’t hit actual freezing temperatures for a while now, which is unsurprising, since winter is officially over and spring should have started a week ago.

You keep your jogging and shower short today so that you still have time to try and apply some makeup before you go to school. It’s not quite as easy for you as it seems to be when Victoria does it—you’re forced to try and rub it off so you can reapply it twice.

It’s lucky you cut your run short this morning, because by the time you get your makeup applied and rush out to drink your morning coffee, it’s time to leave for the bus. Even so, you’re nearly late—or, no. You’re not nearly late, the bus is just early for what you’re pretty sure is the first time ever.

It’s surprising how much a few minutes can throw off your schedule. You’re used to arriving and finding Madison either waiting at your locker or just putting your lunch in there. You’re definitely not used to being the one waiting for Madison.

At least you do have a way to occupy yourself, you think, as you pull out your phone and begin texting replies to all your girls.

Emma has been a good girl lately. Even after your dinner with her, she hasn’t tried to push her boundaries and send you a third text a day. It’s a good sign, you think. It might be a good test to try and lift her boundaries a little soon—see whether she falls back into old habits if you allow her to text you whenever she wants.

Amy has been texting you more often, too. Her replies are still fairly formal—“Hello, Taylor. How is your schoolwork going?” and the like—but you appreciate that she’s making the effort to keep in contact more.

You’re just about to reply to one of Sophia’s rare texts when you hear footsteps moving towards you and abruptly halting. Looking up, you see Madison staring at you with wide eyes. You can’t help but give her a wide, happy grin, which she quickly returns as she hurries over to you and throws her arms around you. She’s wearing the clothes you bought for her, the nice formal blouse and skirt. It looks odd and out of place in the school, but she’s wearing it anyway.

“Taylor!” she half-cries happily, burying her face against your collarbone. “You’re here early!”

You circle your arms around her, gently stroking her back. It feels good to have her in your arms. “Yeah,” you reply. “The bus got here early today.”

She just continues smiling, tucking herself against you. You allow yourself to lean back against your locker, ignoring the way the metal grilles dig into your shoulders as you position yourself so Madison can stand comfortably. After a couple of minutes of that, she suddenly stiffens, pulling away. You can’t help but make a little sound of loss, but you’re quickly cut off when she spins around to face you, eyes wide.

“I almost forgot!” she exclaims. “Dad was teaching me how to make cakes yesterday, so I could help him prepare some cakes for a fundraiser or something. I didn’t know what kind of cake you like, so I
made you some cupcakes!” She rummages in her bag and produces a lunchbox, larger than the usual one, and holds it out for you with a proud look on her face.

You take the lunchbox and open it, peering inside. There’s half a dozen cupcakes arranged in two neat rows. They’re not the kind of perfect cupcakes you see in the bakery- they’re all misshapen and pockmarked, and one of them has dripped down the side and cooked, resulting in a cupcake that kind of resembles a waterfall.

Atop each one is written in shaky handwriting three small letters; “I <3 U”. You’d correct her on the grammar, but even if you could bring yourself to say anything negative about the cupcakes, there’s just not enough room atop them to write the full words.

“Thanks,” you manage to bring yourself to say eventually. “They look delicious.” Madison beams up at you. And despite their weird and often misshapen appearances, they do look delicious. None of them look burned or undercooked, and you can see small blueberries in one and chocolate chips in another.

“I can make you more if you want,” she says with a self-satisfied smile. “Dad showed me how and we still have lots of ingredients left over. And he’s showing me how to make frosting this afternoon! Just tell me which one you like best and I can make you as many as you want.”

You take the box from her, freeing up her hands so you can take her now-free hands in your free hand. Looking around to make sure nobody’s around, you draw her over to you and drop some quick kisses on her face- one on her cheek first, then one on her nose, then one on her lips. You restrict yourself to that, because otherwise, you know that you’d get so drawn into her that you’d forget to keep an eye out for anyone else in the hallway.

“I usually prefer banana—oatmeal,” you say lowly, “but I’ll eat any muffin as long as it’s yours.” Her cheeks go inexplicably red at the comment, but you forge on before she can get distracted by thoughts of cookery. “I’d prefer desserts we can share together, though. You should help me taste them and find one we both enjoy.”

Her face is still red now, but her smile is even wider. “Okay!” she exclaims. “We can try them together at lunch, if you want.”

“Hm.” You crack open the lid of the lunchbox, peering inside again. Looking idly over them, you select one of them—a muffin with pale white choc chips in it and soft pink handwriting—and take it out before you turn and put the lunchbox in your locker. “Okay, but I want to try this one now.”

She looks at it, then nods decisively. “That one was tricky,” she notes. You begin to walk, and she hurries to follow you, positioning herself perfectly so she can keep holding your hand as you walk through the halls. “The chocolate kept sticking to the pan, so I wasted a lot of it.”

You hum. “Maybe it’s the wrong kind of chocolate,” you muse. “When I tried once, it all burned to the pan, but then Dad gave me some baking chocolate and it worked fine.”

“It could be,” she concedes. “Dad will tell me tomorrow. Do you like the cupcake?”

So far, you haven’t taken a bite of it, and you’re nearly at the classroom. You look down at it consideringly, then raise it up to your mouth—and lick a swipe of the frosting on top off, obliterating the left half of the heart and the U in one go. Then you give Madison a teasing smile. “It’s delicious.”
She pouts. “I meant the cupcake.” Despite her words, she’s not even looking at the cupcake, just looking longingly at your mouth.

The two of you have arrived at the classroom by now. Only one other person is here this early in the morning. Charlotte. She’s sitting against the wall opposite the two of you, her head buried in her World Issues textbook. For the moment, you ignore her, and instead slide down to the ground opposite the girl and tug on Madison’s shirt until she slides down beside you, contorting her legs awkwardly to avoid giving anyone a good view up her skirt.

You’ve teased her enough, you think. Taking a bite of the cupcake, you consider it. It’s a bit sweet, but it’s fairly nice regardless. You tell her so, adding, “Maybe a little bit less sugar?”

Madison scrunches her nose. “Hmm,” she says doubtfully. Holding out her hand, she asks, “Can I have a bit to taste?”

You consider it for a moment, then tear off a chunk of the cupcake—a piece of the bit you’d licked earlier, you note. Madison doesn’t seem to mind at all when you hold it out for her; she just leans over towards you and takes it with her mouth, briefly enveloping your fingers between her lips. You can’t hide the shiver that runs through you, and across the hall, you can see Charlotte shift uncomfortably.

You frown internally at that.

Extending your powers over to Charlotte, you quickly tear off another chunk of the cupcake, holding it out to Madison while you monitor Charlotte’s emotions. Your girl obediently moves her head to take it once she finishes the bit you’d previously fed her. As she does, you feel Charlotte’s emotions burble—an odd mix of annoyance, disdain, and faint traces of lust. Which, well. Isn’t that interesting?

Experimentally, you tear another chunk off and hold it up for Madison, holding it in the palm of your hand rather than in your outstretched fingers. This time, when she eagerly leans over and takes it, you pull lightly on Charlotte’s lust—just a small tug, an experimental pull to see how she reacts. She shifts uncomfortably again, turning her gaze back to her book momentarily. That doesn’t last long, however, and her gaze is soon drifting back to the two of you, annoyance and disdain bubbling beneath the surface, but weaker this time.

You keep this up for a few minutes, feeling Charlotte’s disdain slowly disappearing, replaced by a rising lust. Her gazes slowly become softer, less annoyed, as she watches the two of you interact.

A soft haze descends on you, and your eyes flutter closed momentarily. You draw Madison closer to you, encouraging her subtly to lean into you.

It’s a heady feeling, this—to have Madison quite literally eating from the palm of your hand, while you gently manipulate Charlotte’s mind, damping down her disgust and ratcheting up her lust. That kind of manipulation is okay, you’re pretty sure.

By the time the first of the other students in your class show up, Madison has finished the cupcake, and has moved on to sucking your fingers clean as you stroke her cheeks. Charlotte—her disgust at the two of you hasn’t disappeared, hasn’t even been overwhelmed by the lust she’s feeling—but by the red in her cheeks and the way she can’t meet either of your gazes as she hurries to her feet, she’s definitely been affected by what you’re doing.
You stand, abruptly aware of your soaked panties and the wetness on your thighs. You squirm a little as Madison rises to her feet, trying to alleviate the feeling, but it doesn’t help much. You give up soon when you realize that you’re not going to help even if you manage to get the wetness to disappear, because you’re only going to keep getting wet during class. After all, you haven’t finished with Charlotte.

A few months ago—hell, even a few weeks ago, the thought of deliberately affecting somebody’s mind like this would have horrified you. Now, it just makes you feel uncomfortable, a feeling which is easily countered by the arousal flowing through you. Charlotte hasn’t done anything to you, didn’t bully you like Madison and Sophia did, isn’t useful to your plans like Aisha is—she’s just cute, and apparently a little bit homophobic, or at least disgusted by a little harmless play between you and Madison.

It’s not like you’re forcing her to do anything, though. All you’re doing is pulling on lust that was already there, making it stronger in her mind.

Justifications set, you move over to your seat, quickly taking Madison’s hand beneath the desk in your own. She gives you another of her wide smiles, and you stroke her hand, just feeling her presence.

It’s lucky that you’re so ahead in class, you soon find out. If you weren’t, manipulating Charlotte’s emotions like this would be a lot more difficult. You spend most of the lesson watching Madison, noting the cute way she pokes her tongue out of the corner of her mouth when the questions written on the board get more difficult, and the way her nose scrunches when she gets an answer wrong. Each time the latter happens, you calmingly squeeze her hand and lean over to murmur to her where she got the answer wrong, highlighting what she needs to do to get it right next time.

As you do this, a part of your mind is focused on Charlotte’s emotions. You’re being very careful here not to extend your emotions too far—you don’t want to feel the rest of the classroom, just Charlotte—and not to affect too great a change. Just subtle pushes and pulls, ramping up her lust and loyalty slowly and incrementally.

Eventually, the bell rings. You reluctantly let go of Madison, allowing her to trail off equally reluctantly to her next class.

At least you still have Charlotte’s emotions to keep yourself occupied with.

You’re not completely effective at keeping a headache away, but by the time you get to fourth period and have to let Charlotte head off to whatever class she has now, you’re only feeling a very light strain. Not enough to impede anything, really. You probably can’t keep up that kind of manipulation every day, but for a day or two, it’s fine.

You do make sure to let yourself just rest and recover through fourth period, though, just pretending to skim through your class textbooks so the teacher doesn’t bother you. By the time lunch comes around, even most of that light strain has gone.

You make a detour, heading off to your locker so you can grab the lunchbox full of cupcakes, before heading out to your usual spot in the courtyard. Madison is already sitting down at the tree, waiting for you. She looks up at you curiously as you come to a stop before her.

“Taylor?” she inquires curiously.
In response, you hold your hand down to her. She obediently takes it, and stands when you pull her up, although she looks puzzled. “Come on,” you say. “There are too many people around. We’re going to sit somewhere more private.”

She gives you a confused look, then turns and scans the courtyard. You’re not sure what she looks at, but eventually her gaze falls somewhere to the left, and comprehension dawns on her face. Whatever she saw, it’s not the right answer, but you’re not willing to argue the point as she obediently follows along behind you. You know you don’t need an excuse, anyway. Madison will follow you wherever you lead her.

You lead her out to the courtyard where your next target is sitting, again surrounded by her friends. It feels rather less awkward to be sitting with Madison out here, rather than sitting here alone, although to be honest you just always feel less awkward when Madison is around you.

“Right,” you say determinedly. “We have some cupcakes to test.”

You ignore Madison’s slightly forlorn look that she sends at her sandwich as she places it gently back in her lunchbox, especially as it’s gone and replaced by a slight look of anticipation as you open the lunchbox containing the cupcakes.

“Let’s start with the chocolate chip muffin,” you decide.

You don’t feed it to her this time. It’s one thing to do that in front of Charlotte in an otherwise empty school hall. The risk of being caught always sends a thrill through you, but you have no desire to do it where you know for a fact that people who won’t approve of it can see and punish you for doing it.

As you break the first muffin in half and pass the bigger half to Madison, you quietly extend your power out, settling it over your target. She’s wearing those trashy clothes again, you notice. A frown steals over your face as you see one of the boys at her table looking hungrily at her while she’s not looking. No—no, he’s not allowed to do that. Nobody can look at your girls unless you want them to.

You can’t do anything about it, though, so you’re forced to sit there and stew in your annoyance at the boy.

None of your frustration shows in your face as you consider the muffin. It’s actually really nice—soft and chewy despite not still being warm from the oven. The chocolate chips are too hard, though.

Your power settles over the trashy girl’s emotions. Immediately, you’re confronted with a low wall of what feels like… muted frustration, kind of. You’re not sure what she’s frustrated with, though. Behind that wall bubbles away a merry pot of humour, sharp fumes rising above—as you watch, she directs some of it at one of the other girls sitting at the table, a barbed comment that leaves the girl blinking in mild offense and the rest of the table clutching their sides laughing.

The faint threads of her loyalty are buried away again. It takes a couple of minutes of effort to dig through her emotions and find them, then a few minutes more to begin tugging on them and bringing them high enough that you can sense them properly without having to specifically search for them.

Her lust is harder to handle. For a moment, you consider contenting yourself with just manipulating her loyalty—that’s all you technically need from her in order to get the information you need about Rune, after all. But as you contemplate it, you can feel denial rising in your gut. Giving away a
perfectly pretty girl, when you’re already manipulating her? Well, maybe, but not this one. You like this one, even if you’re not sure why.

Finding her lust is actually hard. It’s buried, and buried *deep*. You have to burrow your way through a lot of emotions in order to find it. Sharp shards of anger press in around you, quickly dissipating and replaced by sheet after sheet of dull apathy, which in turn warps and disappears into frustrated longing, and then—there. Buried *deep* in her, you finally find her lust, or at least the bits of her lust you can aim towards yourself.

This is going to be harder than you thought. You’ve never encountered someone with their lust hidden so far down in them before. Bringing it up is going to be... challenging.

All the while, you’re still splitting your attention between that and your cupcake-testing session with Madison. After sampling all five of the remaining cupcakes, the two of you sit there for a few minutes, contemplating them.

Finally, you speak first. “I actually really liked the orange and poppyseed one,” you admit. “I thought I was going to like the chocolate one best, but it was better.”

She tilts her head. “I liked the chocolate one better, but I’m a big chocolate fan,” she admits. “Do you want me to make you some more? I can if you want me to!”

You drum your fingers on the table the two of you are sitting at. “Yes,” you decide finally, “but only if you make yourself some chocolate ones, too, okay?”

“Okay!” She seems very pleased by that.

You can feel the strain in your head beginning to build ever so slightly again, so after lunch, you retreat your power into yourself, carefully monitoring it to make sure it doesn’t slip out of your control. The strain fades slowly but surely, but you make sure to keep a tight hold of it. When you wake up the next morning, you’re glad you did, because you wake up with a completely clear head—ready to do it all over again.

Well, not quite the same way. The bus isn’t early today, so you can’t manage to play around with Madison in the halls as you did yesterday. Luckily, you still have your morning classes with Charlotte, and Madison doesn’t question your decision to move your lunch out to the courtyard again.

Today, at least, you feel like you made a bit more progress with each of your new girls. Charlotte’s disgust has largely faded, and you’ve made some solid progress in bringing her lust to the forefront of her mind—she can’t look at you without blushing, now, which makes you want to grin fiercely. Your trashy girl, too, is coming easier—although easy for her is rather complex for anyone else. Her lust is buried, and buried deep. Progress just means that you can *find* her lust in less than half an hour. It doesn’t give you much time to actually play around with it.

Still, if you’re making progress, eventually you’ll make enough that you can actually step forward and introduce yourself to her. One day soon.

The one and only problem is, spending so much time around Madison and manipulating Charlotte like this is leaving you turned on basically all the time. You spend some time each night attempting to
relieve yourself, but when you’re coming in the next day and doing the exact same thing, it doesn’t help very much. It's not like you'll die if you don't get any- it's just uncomfortable, and you'd really like some at this point.

After you come down on Tuesday night, a towel beneath you to help absorb any excess moisture, you tiredly get out of bed and change into your pajamas, throwing the wet towel into the dirty clothes basket in the bathroom alongside your clothes for the day.

It’s been a busy two days, thanks to your efforts with Charlotte and—god, you still don’t know the other girl's name. You can’t keep that up for much longer, however, at least not without giving yourself another painful headache.

No, tomorrow will have to be simpler. You think you will…
With a mother working as a nurse and a grandfather working as a part-time gardener, it rarely comes as a surprise to most people that Charlotte enjoys supporting people. Nurturing them, almost. It’s a familial trait. Her grandfather nurtures plants, her mother nurtures her patients, and she nurtures her friends.

A smirk crosses her face unbidden. She probably shouldn’t tell Fern that one. He’d find it entirely too humorous.

When her grandfather had first proposed the idea of starting a tutoring group late last year, she’d been hesitant. It seemed—it still seems—like a lot of effort for something that not a lot of people would be interested in. She’d given it some consideration, though, and—it wasn’t a bad idea. If there are people willing to turn up, why shouldn’t she offer her help?

Glancing down at her watch, she lets out a sigh. It’s nearly four, and there’s still nobody here. People are supposed to be here by half past three if they want any tutoring, and while she’s been lenient enough to stick around, she’s not going to waste her time waiting until five. It’s not the first time people haven’t turned up, and it seems to be happening more and more lately.

It’s not really surprising that people don’t want to turn up. By the time five o’clock rolls around, it’s already getting dark, and there’s only a couple of buses that stop at the bus stop near Winslow that late. Unless you’re lucky enough to live on one of their routes, you have to walk home—and considering how bad the area near Winslow is, that’s really not a good idea unless you’re either supremely confident in your ability to ward off any threat or unaware of how bad things are.

That and most of the people at Winslow don’t particularly want to be here. It’s recent, but the PRT has begun offering up scholarships for people in bad financial straits or people with particularly good grades to get into private schools in the region. Charlotte had seriously considered trying for one of them, until she’d dismissed the idea. She doesn’t plan on applying to university.

With a frown, she stands and begins putting her books back in her bag. There really isn’t any point in her staying any longer.

She packs up quickly and heads to the door on the opposite side of the library. The study area at the end is fairly large, so it takes her a few moments to walk close enough that she can hear hushed voices coming from a row ahead. She perks up a little. Oh, yes—she forgets sometimes that Taylor and Madison come here to study as well. They keep to themselves all the time, although to be fair, if Charlotte had a girlfriend as cute as either of them she probably wouldn’t want to share either.

She’s about to step forwards when their low words register in her ears.

“… so cute, though.” Taylor’s voice is deeper than Charlotte is used to it sounding, huskier. She unconsciously shivers, tightening the straps of her bag around her. “Besides, it’s not like you’re doing much to stop me.”

“Of course not.” It’s Madison, this time. Her voice is breathier, and she sounds kind of like she’s—panting? Charlotte bites her lip, considering. “I’ve told you before, I’m yours. But it’s risky in here. People could see. It’d be embarrassing.”
There’s a pause before Taylor responds, as though she’s gathering her thoughts. “Okay,” she says eventually. “If you’re not comfortable with it, then I won’t ask you to do it.”

“I didn’t say that.” There’s the sound of fabric rustling over clothes, and Charlotte bites her lip. Then she hears a soft, wet sound—one she recognizes all too well as the sound of kissing—and her mind is made up.

She feels more than a little guilty, but she doesn’t indulge herself very often, and it’s even rarer than she has the chance to indulge her voyeuristic tendencies. If it wasn’t Madison and Taylor, she probably still wouldn’t be indulging them, but she’s been nursing a small crush on the two of them since they started dating, she thinks. She didn’t recognize it at first, but what else could it be?

She admires that kind of courage, the kind of courage you need to date publicly in a school like Winslow. Watching the two of them in the hallway yesterday, with Madison’s flirtatious giggles in the hallway, the lidded look in Taylor’s eyes as Madison’s tongue had trailed over her palm, the way Madison had waited eagerly on her hands for Taylor to offer her her food—it’d done something for her. She’d never walked into class with panties that wet before.

She’d felt disgusted with herself at first, intruding upon the couple’s private moment like that, but she hadn’t been able to stop herself watching. And the more she’d watched, the stronger her arousal had grown. The more she’d thought about it afterwards, the more she’d imagined the two of them together, the more turned on she’d felt. It had been a struggle to wait until she went home to deal with it, instead of locking herself in the bathroom and getting herself off then and there.

The bookshelves at Winslow are thick, heavy things. Once, they’d had thinner bookcases, but after the second time replacing them after students had monkeyed around on them, the staff had forked out for ones made of stronger metal late last year. She’s glad of that, because she’s pretty sure that if they hadn’t, they wouldn’t have metal backs supporting the lower spines of the books, and without that, Taylor and Madison would be able to see her kneeling down and gently pushing books aside so she can see the two of them.

Charlotte has to bite down on her lip when she gets her first glimpse at the two of them and finds that Madison’s shirt has been lifted up, revealing her small, pert breasts. She’s not at a very good angle, so she can’t see them very well—a sharp pang of disappointment runs through her at that—but she can see Taylor’s hand cupping it. Taylor’s other hand is wrapped possessively around Madison’s back, pulling Madison hard into her.

Madison whimpers, and Charlotte breathes in sharply as a hot flash runs down her, settling in her groin. She curls her hands around the shelf of the bookcase in front of her so she doesn’t start touching herself as she watches, enraptured.

Soon, Taylor releases Madison’s lips with a last sharp nip, letting out a soft growl Charlotte isn’t sure Taylor is even aware of. Madison takes the opportunity to bury her head in her girlfriend’s neck, giggling softly but happily.

“I wasn’t finished talking.” Madison says once her giggles have died, laying a soft kiss on Taylor’s neck before continuing and somehow managing to sound both reproving and pleading at the same time. “I’m not against it, Taylor. We already talked about it. I just don’t want anyone to see us together like that.”

And there’s the guilt again, rising in Charlotte’s gut and warring with the arousal pooling hot there. For a moment, she thinks that the guilt is going to win, but then Taylor speaks and she can’t help but
relax, the tension bleeding out of her frame.

“I know,” Taylor insists calmly. “And if it bothers you, then it’s fine. I don’t need you to do it here and now, it was just an idea.”

Madison turns her neck to look up at Taylor’s face before poking her gently in the stomach, causing a quick grin to spread over Taylor’s face for a moment before it fades. A matching one spreads over Madison’s face at the sight, this one lingering. She seems to consider something for a moment. “I don’t think there’s anyone else in here, though,” she murmurs. For a moment, neither of them speaks. Then Madison seems to gather her courage. “It’s a little bit scary,” she admits. “How about we make a deal?”

Taylor perks up a little. “A deal?”

Grinning, Madison kisses Taylor’s neck again. “It still makes me feel a little bit uncomfortable, but if you want me to do it, I’ll do it.” Her hand goes down to Taylor’s stomach again, but instead of poking her, she lifts her shirt a little so she can place her hand against the taller girl’s stomach. “But if I do, then you should do something for me, okay?”


Charlotte is dying of curiosity by this point—what are the two talking about?

“Well,” Madison says slowly, “I’ve been reading up on some, um. Well, I’ve been looking at some stuff, and some of them were talking about, um, ice cubes and wax, and I thought it sounded interesting. I don’t know how it would feel, but maybe I could come over this weekend and we could try it? Or next weekend?”

“We can do that,” Taylor agrees. “You don’t have to make it into a bargain, though. If you want to try something, just tell me, okay? I’m not going to make you eat me out just so you can try something you’re interested in.”

Another happy smile flashes across Madison’s face, only half-visible from Charlotte’s hiding spot. Charlotte barely registers it, her thoughts still whirring around the whole “eat me out” thing. “I know,” Madison says happily, “but I like being rewarded for doing what you tell me to.”

Taylor grins again, this one larger than the last. “Well then,” she says huskily, massaging Madison’s scalp with the hand not still resting on her breast, “go earn your reward, Madison.”

“Yes, Taylor.” Madison kisses her one last time on the neck, then slowly slides off from where she’d been sitting on Taylor’s lap. Taylor seems reluctant to release Madison’s breast, but consoles herself by tangling her fingers in Madison’s hair. The shorter girl doesn’t seem to mind either way—she makes no move to tuck her shirt back down, allowing them to hang bare in the air as she maneuvers herself beneath the table.

Charlotte’s breath catches, and she has to quickly raise her hand to her mouth to cover it so neither of the two hear her. For a moment, she thinks Taylor’s eyes flicker over to where she’s kneeling, but—no, there’s no way she can know she’s there.

Still, she tries to quiet her breathing. It’s hard, though, when she’s kneeling here on the ground, watching as Madison gently hooks her fingers beneath the waistband of her girlfriend’s pants and begins pulling them down.
Taylor soon begins to fill the small alcove with the sound of stifled pants. She’s careful not to make sounds loud enough to alert anyone, but from Charlotte’s nearby position, she can hear them just fine.

Charlotte can’t look away. Guilt—shame—builds in her stomach, but it’s met and extinguished by the hot and heady feeling of lust building. She feels like a pervert, getting off on watching the two of them together, and the shame involved in that feeling only turns her on more.

She’s almost glad when the door to the library opens with a loud bang and Madison sits up with a loud squeak and a thunk as her head hits the table. Charlotte hesitates for a moment, as does Taylor, but when a loud voice issues forth- “Come on, Harry, we don’t have all day”—Taylor can’t scramble to pull her pants back up fast enough.

Charlotte doesn’t wait around any longer. Her face burning red, she turns around and walks back deeper into the library a little, then hurries past the small alcove, turning her head away so they can’t see her embarrassment.

She doesn’t know how she’s ever going to face either of the two of them again.
Canon Omake- Openness

So, all the talk about Victoria and cheating and whatnot, and there's that third option about Victoria and Taylor sitting down to talk things over with Dean, and it brought to mind that, before even talking with Dean, Victoria would try to have a discussion with Taylor about how she deals with her own open relationship. And the very amusing/confusing mess that would be.

So, with a bit of silliness...

Edit: Made a few tweaks. Victoria knows Madison's name, so adjusted that and tried to smooth out the rest of the dialogue some.

Taylor focused on the girl seated across from her, keeping hold of her hand while Victoria struggled to bring whatever was on her mind into words. Victoria seemed to be a mess of emotions today, and had been hesitant in their discussions ever since they arrived in the library.

"You know how you said you were dating someone else?" Victoria finally asked. "Madison, I think you said?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah, what about her?"

"Well, I was just wondering... How do you deal with telling her, about... us." Victoria waved her free hand vaguely between the two of them.

Taylor opened her mouth to respond, but then paused, thinking. "Huh. I don't think we've talked about you, yet."

Victoria gave her a raised eyebrow. "You're not going to tell me that you 'forgot', are you?"

"Well, she's never really brought it up." Taylor answered with a shrug. "The last time, it didn't seem like a good time to talk about it. I just figured she'd ask when she wanted to know."

"Why would she bring it up if you haven't told her? How would she even know to ask?" Victoria asked, somewhat angry on behalf of a girl she didn't even know.

"I don't use cherry lip gloss, of course," was Taylor's offhand answer.

"What would cherry lip gloss have to do—" Victoria blinked. "You went on a date with her, right after you went on a date with me." It wasn't a question.

Taylor just nodded.

"You don't even try to hide it?" Victoria asked, half incredulous, despite the original purpose of the conversation.

"Why would I hide it? It's that whole open relationship thing, right? I mean, she knows about
Sophia, and—"

"Sophia?" Victoria cut in.

"A girl at school. She's on the track team, and in my chemistry class. I help tutor her, and we fool
around a bit," she replied, smiling slightly at some memory. "Nothing too serious, yet, but she has
our backs."

Victoria frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"Ah, well, Winslow High School," Taylor responded with a shrug, as if that was an answer unto
itself. "Lots of gangs, which means lots of E88, and they aren't too nice to lesbian couples. Sophia
makes sure they don't mess with me and Madison. They know better than to fuck with Sophia,"
Taylor explained, with a slight bit of pride.

Victoria grudgingly acknowledged that with a nod. "So Sophia knows about you and Madison?"

"Yup."

"And you said Madison knows about you and Sophia?"

"Yeah. Told her about the time we were kissing in the bathroom."

"You and Sophia were kissing in the bathroom?" Victoria repeated. "And you told Madison?"
Somehow the audacity of the statement made the whole thing surreal, despite her being in the same
position.

Taylor nodded to both questions.

"So, you're dating me, and Madison, and Sophia?"

Taylor nodded again. Then added, "And Charlotte, sort of."

"Sort of?" The pitch of her voice getting a bit higher as the strangeness settled in.

"Well, it's more that Charlotte likes to watch me and Madison. She hasn't asked to join in or
anything." The implied "yet" hung in the air.

Victoria paused as she took that in, then shook her head to clear the image. Not the time or place.
"So," she corrected, "me, Madison, Sophia, and sort-of Charlotte, then?"

"Yeah. And Emma, but Emma is just... Emma."

"Emma." Victoria's flat tone conveyed disbelief that had lost the war with incredulity.

Taylor grimaced and looked away. "With Emma, it's more that I'm just trying to be friends with her
again. We had a bit of a falling out, but I can stand to be in the same room together with her again,
now, so it's getting better!" Taylor's smile brightened up.

"But you're not dating Emma. Right?" There was a certain pressing insistence behind that last word.

"Well, no, not right now. But she knows about Madison, and probably Sophia."
"Right. So just me, Madison, Sophia, and Charlotte — sort of. But not Emma."

"Ah, and there's—" Taylor halted as Victoria held up her hand.

"No, no. That's fine." Victoria took a calming breath. Each additional name seemed to be less about dating and more about increasing weirdness. She didn't want to know how far down that rabbit hole went. "And how many of them know about me?"

"Well... It's never really come up. The rest basically know each other because we all go to school together, but you go to Arcadia, so..." Taylor let the comment trail off, not bothering trying to fit Amy into the description since she'd been cut off when mentioning her. Plus Amy was home-schooled.

"And they all know each other at school?" Victoria shook her head. Normally one would expect that one would want to keep a certain amount of separation between partners, no matter how 'open' the relationship. But Taylor didn't seem to care. But, speaking of caring... "You never thought to bring me up? I'm not sure whether you're being considerate, or if I should be offended."

"Offended? Why would you—?"

"Well, you are dating Glory Girl, you know?" Victoria answered sarcastically.

Taylor frowned. "But that's... I wouldn't do anything like that. It's too public, and that getting out could hurt you."

Victoria stared at Taylor for a moment, before shaking her head and chuckling. "So," she said, getting her bearings again, "the way you deal with open relationships is that you just... don't."

Taylor tilted her head at the redirection of the conversation, but then shrugged. "It seemed like too much hassle. My girls are mine. That's all."

"'Your' girls?" Victoria asked, eyebrow raised.

Taylor smirked, a predatory gleam coming back to her eyes as she leaned over the table, pressing well into Victoria's space. "Yes. Mine."

Victoria matched her stare and her smirk. "I see." And she did, sort of. She still wasn't sure whether she'd want to move completely into that openness with Taylor, or if she could be so completely unconcerned about the relative relations with Dean and Taylor. Either way, though...

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"Also," Victoria said as they left the library, "you should tell Madison about us. It's not fair to leave her in the dark like that."

"What? But—"

"If she already knows about the others, then telling her about me is only fair. Well, as long as she's not going to blab about it."

"She wouldn't do that!" Taylor scowled.
Victoria smiled. "Good. But she's probably worried, so you should do something about that."

Taylor seemed to resist the idea, but finally succumbed. "Fine, fine."

"And you're gonna tell me about any other girls you decide to date?" she added teasingly.

Taylor just rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue.
The more you spend time around your girls, the more you come to realize how little you understand about sex.

Before you put your plan into action, you did spend a lot of time on the computer looking up information about how to please women, and an embarrassing few sessions at the library sneaking sex-ed books under an encyclopedia so you could read them at the library table without being caught. And there’s the stash of magazines in your pillowcase you hope Dad never, ever finds, even if they’re only underwear catalogues. Naively, you’d thought you’d learned enough.

As it turns out, there’s a lot of things that most porn just doesn’t talk about. You’re lucky that you stumbled across that site on safe BDSM practices, for instance; if you hadn’t found that site, you wouldn’t have known to talk to your girls about their boundaries before having sex with them, or about what they need from you before and after. If you’d stuck just to what you’ve learned from porn sites, you probably would have just had your way with her—and that’s not how you want to treat your girls. They’re not sex dolls.

More relevantly, though, everything you’ve read has only talked about how to practice sex safely and how good sex can feel. Nothing has ever talked about what to do if you’re forced to just… stop, right when you were starting to feel really good.

It’s frustrating, because that whole experience—having Madison’s inexperienced but eager tongue darting in and out of you, while you’d played with Charlotte’s lust as she spied on the two of you, hands tangled in Madison’s hair as you’d soaked yourself in the rising lust of your two girls—that is the best sexual experience you’ve had to date, including your first time with Madison. Walking away sexually frustrated after that sucks.

You’re distracted from your rueful thoughts when the bus jolts sharply, causing your shoulder to hit the window with a loud slap. You draw in a hissing breath through your teeth, cursing the town’s council, and begrudgingly shift over a little so you’re sitting in the aisle. This late at night, the bus is less than half full anyway—nobody’s pressed for seats.

A few minutes later, you’re still grumbling to yourself as the bus comes to a stop in front of your bus stop. You unhurriedly climb out and slowly make your way home, sighing a little when you see Dad’s car in the driveway. Of course he’s home early tonight.

He greets you loudly when you open the door. “Hello, Taylor.” He’s standing in the kitchen, stirring a pot of—something, you can’t actually see what’s inside it from here. It smells kind of spicy. Curry, maybe? “How was your day?”

You pout angrily at the floor. It sucked, but if you tell him that, he’s going to ask why, and, no. “It was alright,” you grumble. “How was yours?”

He shrugs. “Nothing exciting happened,” he replies. “Igneous is making some headway, so we might be able to get a bit more traffic in soon. That’ll help.” He pauses for a moment, then turns away from the stove, snapping his fingers. “Oh, and guess what Kurt managed to find for us?”

You blink, startled. Dad normally isn’t this energetic. “What?”
“He found a store carrying those documentary DVD’s!” he says, a smile making its way across his face. Your own lips twitch in response for a moment, but your only response to that is an appreciative nod. “Do you still want to watch it with me?”

“Yes,” you reply quickly. You’re still in kind of a bad mood, but just because you’re in a bad mood doesn’t mean you should drag Dad’s mood down with you. “We could watch it tonight!”

He hesitates. “Ah, I haven’t actually bought them yet,” he admits. “I didn’t want to buy them yet, just in case. I can pick them up tomorrow after work if you want, though?”

You nod. “That’d be nice,” you reply. You’re about to say something further when your phone buzzes in your pocket. Pulling it out with a knitted brow, you open it to read the text. It’s from Victoria.

“u doin good w/ ur makeup? need me 2 cum round?”

You can’t help but scowl down at your phone. Damn it. She can text perfectly fine—you’ve seen her do it before. She just likes to tease you by abusing grammar. Still, you hesitate before responding.

You don’t need any help with your makeup—it’s going fine, and while you’re not getting it on as fast as you’d like, that’s something you think will come naturally with practice. You had a few slip-ups at first, but as long as you’re careful, it still looks fine. At the same time, though—this is Victoria’s night with her boyfriend. You wouldn’t mind getting her to spend it with you.

“Hey, Dad,” you say out loud. He’s turned back to the stove at this point, apparently disinterested in watching you stand like a clueless idiot in front of the front door. Flushing lightly at your own self-reprimand, you hurriedly step forwards, bringing yourself to the entrance to the kitchen. “Could Vicky come over for dinner today?”

He turns his head to eye you. Whatever he sees in your expression apparently convinces him, because he pushes away from the stove and moves to the fridge. “If you want her to,” he says, giving you another smile. “I can make another serving for her. Does she have any way to get here?”

Internally, you snort. Of course she does, but Dad doesn’t know that. “Yeah,” you reply evasively, “she can make her own way here. Thanks, Dad!”

Dad waves you off with a soft chuckle. “No need to thank me, Taylor. As long as we have the food, I’m happy to have any of your friends over whenever you want them here.”

You smile at him for that, stepping into the kitchen so you can give him a quick hug. “Thanks, Dad!” you say cheerily before turning and heading up to your room, your bad mood mostly dissipated as you text Victoria a quick confirmation.

For the next few minutes, you rush around your room, making sure everything is neat and organized. There’s not much mess, but your pillows are askew, and you’d thrown this morning’s clothes on your desk chair when you’d changed to go running, rather than throwing them in the clothes basket like you normally would. Oops. Once that’s done and your room is back up to your standards, you head back down and to the hall, where you try to look casual as you wait for her to arrive.

Less than fifteen minutes after she first texted you, there’s a loud knock on the front door. You quickly head over and open it, revealing Victoria standing there with red cheeks, looking down at her hands.
“Sorry about that,” she says with an awkward chuckle. You tilt your head a little, confused. “I didn’t mean to knock that loudly.”

You wave her off. “It’s fine,” you say dismissively. “Come in, come in.”

She walks in, unconsciously rubbing her arms. She’s wearing some civilian clothes again, and like last Wednesday, isn’t wearing any makeup. You allow your eyes to wander appreciatively over her face for a moment, until she notices what you’re doing and sticks her tongue out at you. The temptation to lean forwards and bite it is strong enough to make you shake your head.

You take her hand, leading her towards the living room. Dad waves at the two of you as you pass, but doesn’t turn away from the stove.

“I think we’re having curry tonight,” you confide in her. “Dad didn’t tell me, but I think so.”

She sniffs the air for a moment. “It smells good,” she decides. “Did you cook it, or did your Dad?”

“Dad cooked it,” you reply matter-of-factly. “He got home early, and I’m not very good with curry anyway. Everyone always tells me it’s too spicy.” You pout at her. “It’s not my fault they can’t handle spice.”

The two of you make your way around the couch and settle into it, still holding hands. You’re tempted to pull her over into a hug, but refrain. It would be embarrassing if Dad caught you like that.

Victoria hums as you pick up the remote. “You should make some curry anyway,” she muses. “I’ll take some home and give it to everyone for dinner. See how Crystal likes it,” she adds with a devious shimmer in her eyes.

You raise your eyebrows at her. “You don’t like your cousin very much, huh?” you observe.

“I’m sure it’s not that spicy,” she replies, waving her hand dismissively. “And yeah, she does annoy me a little bit sometimes. She’s so uptight, you know? Always on me about this and that ever since she got into college.”

You stop the dirty thoughts in their tracks before you can really visualize Victoria’s cousin being on her—damn it. Victoria seems to notice the rising redness in your cheeks and smirks at you. Before she can tease you, you hurriedly say, “I think there are better pranks you could play on her.”

She lets the blush pass without comment, thankfully, although she does continue to smirk at you as she replies. “Probably. My sister does like curry, though, so it wouldn’t be a bad idea. Too bad.”

“Mm,” you reply. So Panacea likes curry. That’s, well, that’s kind of boring, but it’s useful knowledge anyway. You file it away for future reference, just in case you ever get the chance to meet her. You kind of doubt you will any time soon, though—from what you understand, Panacea has largely drawn out of the public eye outside of her work at hospitals around Brockton Bay. “Well, it’s not very nice to play pranks on your cousin anyway.”

“Eh, it’s fine.” Victoria waves your comment aside. “If she can dish it out, she can take it. It’s only curry, anyway.”

You frown, but don’t press the point. That… sounds kind of cruel, but you don’t want to judge
Victoria without knowing more about her relationship with her cousin. That kind of thing might be totally normal for them. It’s not like you’ve ever had a cousin of your own to have a relationship with, so who knows? Still, though, even if it’s normal for the two of them—well, you don’t like it.

Feeling a bit uncomfortable, you shift around on the couch. “Okay,” you mumble. “So, um. How has school been for you?”

Victoria gives you a concerned look—evidently, your shift in topic was not as subtle as you would have preferred—but allows it to pass. “It hasn’t been too bad,” she says eventually. “Political Science has been kicking my butt, though…”

Your fledgling worries don’t disappear, exactly, as the two of you keep talking about school, but they fade to the back of your mind. Victoria gives you a passionate diatribe on the evils of her Economics teacher, who she claims has a vendetta against her specifically (you doubt it), before switching topics to talk about Arcadia’s apparently robust volleyball team. You chime in occasionally with your own experiences at school, telling her about the droning voice of your Earth Sciences teacher and the abysmal choices of food available in the cafeteria. Your complaints feel a bit shallow in comparison to hers, though. Sometimes, you forget that Victoria is two years older than you and already in her last year of high school.

Admittedly, as you admit to Victoria; “It’s hard to complain about the cafeteria food these days, since Madison always makes lunch for me.” You give Victoria a bright grin. “She’s a good girl like that.”

Victoria just laughs softly. “She sounds like it. I wish I had someone who made me lunches so I didn’t have to eat Arcadia’s cafeteria food.”

“Doesn’t your mom make you lunches?” you ask, confused.

She shakes her head. “Mom’s too busy,” she replies. “She used to, when she was younger, but then we started this whole hospital drive, and she hasn’t had much time since. Dad used to help out, but that doesn’t happen too much these days, and Auntie Sarah was never very good at handling money and bureaucracy, so it’s mostly up to Mom to run that side of New Wave. She makes sure to pick us up from school and whatever, but she doesn’t have much time to be cooking and cleaning and all that stuff.”

“Ah,” you say dully. “Well, that sucks. At least she gives you money to buy lunch.”

Nodding agreeably, Victoria leans back against the arm of the couch to look at the ceiling. “Don’t get me wrong,” she says drowsily, “I don’t blame her for that stuff. She’s a busy woman, and she’s helping a lot of people.” Despite her words, however, there’s a wistful tone in her voice that makes you feel a bit sad.

“Yeah,” you reply equally wistfully. “I know how that one goes.” Out of the corner of your eyes, you see Victoria glance towards you, but you don’t turn to look at her. A silence builds between the two of you. Somehow, it’s both awkward and not awkward at the same time.

You’re not sure if you’re thankful or not when Dad finally calls out, “Dinner, girls!”

When the two of you walk into the kitchen, you find three bowls spread around the table. He’s set Victoria’s bowl across from yours—which is a little odd, given that when you used to have Emma over you’d always sit beside her so you could talk easier, but you’re not going to complain about getting to look at Victoria a little more.
Victoria waits for the two of you to begin eating, then takes a mouthful of the curry. She chews it for a moment, then swallows it, raising her eyebrows. “This is nice,” she compliments Dad. “What’s in it?”

Dad looks down at it, frowning. “Sweet potato, chickpea, spinach and chicken,” he says. Then he jerks his head up. “Oh- sorry, I should have asked if you had any allergies!”

“It’s fine.” She just chuckles, brushing his concerns aside. “The only food I’m allergic to is kale, and nobody cooks with kale, so it’s alright. I would have spoken to you otherwise, don’t worry about it.”

He shakes his head, still looking worried, but concedes the point. “Alright,” he says begrudgingly. “Well, Victoria, I know we’ve met before, but I don’t know very much about you. Tell me a little about yourself.”

The two of them chat amicably through dinner, mostly talking about Dad’s job and Victoria’s plans for where she wants to work after school (“Law enforcement,” she says with a straight face). Several times, there’s a point where you could interject in the conversation, but something stops you. A warm glow settles in your stomach as you watch the two of them talk.

You kind of like having Dad and Victoria together at the dinner table, you think. It’s nice. And it’s good to hear conversation flowing through the house again.

Still, eventually all conversations have to come to an end. This one comes to an end when Dad finally finishes his food, having grown distracted several times inquiring after classes at Arcadia. You stand, offering to take the dishes to the sink and wash up, but Dad just waves you off.

“No, it’s fine,” he replies. “It’s been a while since I did the washing up anyway. Give an old man a chance to keep his skills sharp, won’t you?” He gives you an exaggerated wink as he says it.

“But-“

“It’s fine,” he stresses. “I don’t know when your friend has to leave, but go spend some time with her before she does, okay? I can handle cleaning up tonight.”

You clench your hands tight into fists, but as much as you want to argue—cleaning up is your job; if he wanted to start then he should have started months ago—you want to spend time with Victoria more. The only answer you can give him as you grab Victoria’s hand and pull her away is a frustrated growl.

Luckily, she either doesn’t hear the sound, or chooses to ignore it in favour of gripping your hand tighter. “I like your father,” she says brightly. “He seems fun.”

You’re tempted to make a mean remark in turn, but even as you try to formulate the words, your anger is draining out of you. It’s a lot of effort to stay mad at people lately. “He’s alright,” you say begrudgingly.

She snickers. “You’re very grumpy today,” she notes entirely too happily. “Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed today?”

You actually did—normally you wake up on the right side, while you woke up on the left today—but you know that’s not what she means. “No,” you reply, giving the wall near your room something
halfway between a pout and a scowl. You wait until you can pull her into your room and shut your door behind her before you say anything more, though. You definitely don’t want Dad hearing this. “I guess I’m just a little frustrated,” you admit.

She calmly moves over and sits on your bed. “What are you frustrated about?” she asks. “Having some difficulties with your schoolwork or something?”

You stagger over beside her and fall face-first onto your bed, letting out an exaggerated groan. “I wish,” you grumble. “No. Madison and I-“ You pause, carefully not looking over at her. After a moment, though, you decide to just go with it. “Madison and I were fooling around in the library, and we got interrupted before I could finish.”

“Aw, poor Taylor,” she coos. She pats your arm faux-sympathetically, but when you turn to look at her, she’s just smirking at you. You pout at her in turn. It’s not funny! It’s a serious problem! “Can’t you just get yourself off?”

You let out an exaggerated groan, crawling up your bed a little so you can slam your head into your pillow. “It’s not the same that way,” you whine. “It feels better when I can feel someone else there.” Almost immediately, you tense up, realizing what you just said, but you force yourself to relax before Victoria can see it. She seems a little confused by the statement, but after a moment, just raises her eyebrows at you again. Thankfully, she seems to have taken it innocently, not as a reference to your powers.

“That’s true,” she allows. She sits up, moving closer to you so she can watch your face as she talks. “Can’t you and your girlfriend just do it again tomorrow?”

With a half-hearted shrug, you shake your head. “She doesn’t feel comfortable doing it where other people might see,” you say sadly. “Maybe if I could take her to a park or something, but she’s usually busy after tutoring.”

Victoria bites her lip for a moment, seeming indecisive. You turn over, stretching out so that you’re looking straight up at the ceiling rather than twisting your neck trying to look at her. It takes her a few moments for her to make up her mind. Once she has, she inches her way closer to you, then bends down and presses a gentle kiss to your lips.

You lean into it for a moment, running your tongue against her lower lip, then allow yourself to fall back down on your pillow. She follows you down, shuffling her legs backwards so she can lie along beside you, and presses another kiss to your jaw, then another up higher before she moves her mouth up to your ear.

“You’re a very bad influence, you know,” she whispers huskily into your ear. Her breath tickles, causing you to shiver slightly. One hand, the hand she’s not half-leaning on, comes down to rest gently on your stomach, rubbing small circles over your shirt. “I really shouldn’t be doing this with you tonight.” Despite her words, though, her hand creeps down your stomach until her fingers reach the waist of your pants.

You catch her arm before it can move down any further. “You don’t have to,” you murmur. Your breath hitches as she sighs again, exhaling warm air directly onto your ear. “I’m just complaining. If you don’t feel comfortable, you can go home, or we can just talk about books, or school, or whatever you want to talk about.”

A slight huff of laughter escapes her, and she leans closer to tug on the lobe of your ear. You shiver
again. That feels far too nice. “You know,” she murmurs, “sometimes I wonder about you.” She slides her hand farther down, but seemingly deliberately, doesn’t slide her hand beneath your panties, resting them solidly on top of it.

“W-what do you mean?” You squeeze your eyes closed, trying to breathe normally. It wouldn’t do any good to try to talk in the same kind of state Madison had left you in earlier.

“You always seem to know just what to say to make me feel better about what we’re doing.” Out of the corner of the eye, you can just make out the small smile on her face. “Other times, you’re not so good at the talking thing.” As she talks, she slides her hand further down, until her hand is covering your panties completely. Then, she presses down gently with the palm of her hand, sending a sudden wave of pleasure coursing through you.

You bite your lower lip for a moment, preventing a small moan from escaping you. Then; “I don’t know what you mean,” you reply, panting slightly. “I’m always good at talking. I’m the best talker.”

She laughs softly again, the sound so low-pitched it’s almost sensual. “Sure you are, Taylor.” You’re not prepared for it this time when she presses down hard with her fingers, rubbing long, hard lines over your panties. You jerk forwards, barely muffling a moan by slapping your hand over your mouth. Instinctively, your hands move down to push her away, but before you can complete the motion, you bring yourself to a stop. You’re rewarded a moment later when she relaxes her hand, seeming to have noticed. “Sorry,” she murmurs, and lowers her head to press an apologetic kiss to your jaw. A moment later, she presses down again, this time skimming her fingers along first to let you know what she’s going to do.

It takes a lot longer than either of you would like to build up a steady rhythm. You can feel that Victoria keeps wanting to suddenly move her hand or press down somewhere else on you, but she restrains herself, always going slowly and giving you ample warning before she moves her hand or does anything different. You appreciate it—it’s hard enough to just lean down and grab the blankets so you can allow her to set the pace without her being unpredictable about it.

Finally, though, the two of you find a pace you’re comfortable with. By this point, you’re panting uncontrollably, trying to control the tremors in your body as she slowly teases you, pressing in and around the edges of your panties but never slipping her hand beneath.

Then she presses her palm down over your clit, pleasure spasms through your body, and you can no longer keep track of what’s going on. All you can feel is Victoria’s hand on your panties, her tongue on your neck, her warmth against your side, and the pleasure building inside your body— and then —then she presses down hard with the palm of her hand, roughly rubbing your clit, while she leans up and bites your ear, and that’s it; you come undone against her, body spasming while you turn your head, stifling your moans in your pillow.

Victoria doesn’t remove her hand immediately, stroking you through your aftershocks and then resting her hand against you as you curl up against her in the afterglow.

Neither of you says a word; you just lean up and press a tired kiss against her lips, trying to convey your thankfulness that way.

She seems to get it.
Unfortunately, she can’t stay the night. You make a half-hearted effort to consist her, but even as you’re doing it you know she can’t. It’d raise too much suspicion, both with her parents and with her boyfriend.

“Besides,” she murmurs to you as she leaves, “I’ll be seeing you again on Sunday, won’t I?”

“Of course,” you reply with a warm smile. “I’ll finish the third book before then, so bring the fourth with you, won’t you?”

“Definitely.” She hesitates for a moment, eyeing deeper in the house, but evidently decides against giving you a goodbye kiss. You do feel a little let down, but it’s understandable with Dad still awake.

You watch her as she disappears down the street, jogging down towards where you’re pretty sure there’s an alley. You continue watching for a few moments after she leaves your sight, but you know you’re not going to be able to see her rise up and fly away—not this late at night.

With the remaining time you have until dinner, you hang around with Dad. Thankfully, he doesn’t tease you about Victoria, although you do catch him giving you lingering glances a few times when he thinks you’re not looking. Damn—that talk is going to be coming up sooner than later, you think. Eleven does eventually come around. For once, you decide to turn in early, still tired from your time with Victoria earlier.

Feeling sated, you allow yourself the luxury of stretching out in bed, smiling slightly as you feel the faint stickiness on your thighs. You’d changed your panties and cleaned yourself up a little, of course, but you’re going to have to shower before you’re completely clean. You don’t mind, though. It’s a nice reminder.

As you fall asleep, you contemplate your plans for the next couple of days. No use planning for the weekend just yet, but for the next few days—sure.

But, what to do for the rest of the week… hm.
There’s an odd mix of resignation and anticipation filtering through the air at school on Thursday. You don’t even have to use your power to feel it, although you do anyway, just to be sure—you can notice it just by looking at the students around you. Some of them are hunched over their lockers and their bags, looking defensively around them, while others are walking with a spring in their step.

You ignore it, as you do, but it does fill you with a sense of mild curiosity. Unfortunately, it’s not one that’s easily solved. Or, perhaps, it’s not one that’s easily solved by just asking Madison (who just gives you a half-hearted shrug and an apologetic squeeze of your knee for not knowing), and you’re not sure you care enough to go out of your way to ask people. Maybe Sophia will know. You can ask her tomorrow.

Either way, it’s enough of a distraction that despite actually trying to listen to your teachers for once, you still walk out of the classroom learning nothing that you haven’t already read in your textbooks.

It’s a fairly average day, for the most part, until you arrive at the courtyard, where Madison is already sitting at the table waiting for you. Behind her, you can see the girl you’ve been manipulating, sitting with her friends again. She’s wearing a more solemn expression than you’ve seen on her before.

Your attention is dragged away from her and towards Madison when Madison waves at you. You give her a small grin and move to sit across from her, in a good position to see both her and the girl behind her.

“Hi again,” you say, pulling out the lunch Madison has made for you. It’s a watercress sandwich, with a handful of orange slices in a ziplock bag beside it. It looks delicious, although the orange has a slight green tint to it. “How did class go today?”

She shrugs. “It was okay,” she says, blinking slowly. “I’m doing better now, but it’s still really boring. I prefer it when you tutor me.”

You smirk lecherously at her, sending a bright red flush through her cheeks. “I do too,” you say, poking your tongue out slightly at her. She flushes harder in response, her eyes dropping to the table.

The two of you eat in contended silence for a time. Occasionally, you reach out to brush Madison’s leg with your foot, enjoying the way she shivers and snaps her eyes to you each time. The rest of the time, you just enjoy her presence as you extend your power out and over the other girl in the courtyard.

It would be difficult to keep track of two conversations, you think, but you luckily don’t need to. Madison seems happy to sit in silence today, her eyes occasionally searching over your face, but largely just sitting there enjoying being with you—leaving you free to listen to the conversation going on behind her with impunity.

It’s not a very exciting conversation. In fact, for the most part, it’s rather juvenile—you end up tuning out a lot of penis jokes and graphic sexual innuendo. You try to tune most of the rest of them out, and only listen when it’s your girl talking.

She’s very quiet today. Your thoughts are mirrored by somebody else sitting at the table with her.
“You’re very quiet today,” the girl observes. You glance over at the girl, noting her long red hair and crooked nose. “Something wrong, Aisha?”

Your girl—Aisha?—shakes her head. “Nope,” she declares, popping the ‘p’ like she’s blowing bubbles with bubblegum. “Just thinkin’, is all. Brian wants me to come stay at his place for a couple of days.” One of the boys sitting at the table oo’s at her, and she slaps him over the side of the head, scowling. “Ah, shut up, Kev,” she growls.

The girl nods her head. “He managed to find a place, then?” she asks, too casually.

Aisha seems to pick up on the tone, because she immediately scowls defensively. “Yeah,” she says suspiciously. “He got a job as a construction worker. Why, what’s it to you, huh?”

This time, it’s a different girl who speaks up—the last of the three girls sitting at the table. “Jen’s got a crush,” she teases. “She wants to know—” She’s cut off when the other girl, Jen, leans over and punches her in the ribs with an audible thump.

“Shut up,” Jen growls.

Aisha rolls her eyes. “Doesn’t matter either way,” she declares. “He’s eighteen, a bit too old for you, Jen.”

Jen smirks at her. “Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve done it with an older guy.”

Hissing in response, Aisha waves her hands dismissively at her friend. “Brian’s not like that,” she protests, narrowing her eyes at the other girl. “He’s all grown-up responsible now, no fun any more. He wants me to meet him at Frederico’s at six to talk custody or some shit.”

“Aw man.” Both of Aisha’s friends pout at that.

You tune them out at that after Aisha starts heckling them for their interest in her brother. Technically, she’s right about her brother being too old for high schoolers, but you’re pretty sure that wouldn’t stop a lot of people.

You lodge that piece of information away in your head anyway. Frederico’s at six. You’re fairly sure that Frederico’s is a restaurant located near school—not a particularly good one, if you remember rightly, but it’s fairly good for its price range.

The bell rings soon after, and you head to class, frowning mulishly as you try to work out your timetable in your head. Amy mentioned she’s working today, but by law, you can only volunteer until seven at night, and you’re supposed to tutor Madison until five thirty. That already gives you only an hour and a half with Amy, which doesn’t feel like enough—but you need to get Aisha’s attention, and preferably sooner than later.

Given her friends—and the heavy Brotherhood presence at school—you’d prefer to avoid drawing too much attention from Aisha’s friends. You don’t know Aisha’s friends, but there’s enough gang members at Winslow that you’re not going to risk it.

You’re lucky that most of Madison’s friends don’t seem to care too much that she’s spending most of her time with you now—and that’s something else you’re going to have to look at; why did Madison’s friends give up on her so easily?—but you’re already having to avoid doing too much with Emma and Sophia here so you don’t draw attention to yourself. Drawing attention from Aisha’s
friends could go almost as badly. Maybe. You don’t know, and you’d prefer to avoid taking that risk.

With a little sigh, you wait until you get to class, then pull out your phone and send a short text to Madison, telling her that tutoring is going to have to be cut a bit short today.

If you head off at five, you can make it to Frederico’s by five thirty. If Aisha gets there early, and her brother doesn’t, then you might have a bit of time to introduce yourself outside of school. Then you can head to the clinic. You might have up to an hour with Amy then.

It makes you feel a little creepy to do it like this, but it’s the safest way for you to introduce yourself to the girl. And, honestly, you’d prefer to feel creepy than to risk having the attention of a gang focused on you.

As it turns out, Madison doesn’t object too much to you cutting today’s tutoring session short. She’s not happy about it, but then, neither are you. She doesn’t voice any objections she might have, though.

You sneak her a goodbye kiss for the day before you leave. You make sure to tug your jacket closed, hiding you against the lingering chills of winter in the air as you begin moving in the direction of Frederico’s.

You come to a stop just a couple of blocks into your walk, however, when you notice someone walking up ahead of you—someone with purple streaks in her hair. Aisha.

… Well, at least you know you’re heading in the right direction.

You’d been planning on jogging most of the way there, but there’s no point in that now. You allow yourself to drag behind Aisha some, confident in your ability not to lose her—you can feel her even when she turns a corner, after all.

She cuts through two parks and an alley on the way there. You feel a little nervous following her through them, but extending your power out doesn’t reveal anyone who feels like they want to hurt you, so you feel safe enough to go through with it anyway.

As it turns out, she does appear to know the shortcuts around here. You end up at the restaurant before it’s even half past.

The restaurant isn’t too busy, especially for this time of night. There’s maybe a dozen other patrons in here, two small families and what you think is a couple—two teen boys, sitting in what they think is a secure position, but you can see their entwined hands beneath the table. There are few enough people in here that a waitress heads over to you almost immediately once you enter the restaurant.

“Welcome to Frederico’s,” she says, affixing a plastic smile to her face. “May I take your order?”

“I’ll just have a coffee,” you reply. “Um, flat white with two sugars, if I can.”

She nods faux-enthusiastically. “Sure,” she replies. “We’ll have that out in a couple of minutes. Take a seat anywhere you like.”

You give her a cool smile and follow her directions. You choose a seat near the two gay boys, the
seat in the restaurant with the clearest view of Aisha from where you’re sitting. After a couple of minutes, the waitress returns, bearing your coffee with her.

“Thanks,” you say quietly, taking it from her and putting it on the table. She gives you another fake smile and leaves, clearing your view.

For a few minutes, you sit there, subtly watching Aisha. She’s put a pair of earphones in, which are attached to… you can’t see; something in her jacket pocket. Maybe a Discman.

Once you’ve satisfied yourself that her brother isn’t here early, you take a slow sip of your coffee and extend your powers outwards to her.

Boredom is the first thing you feel—a thick, lethargic blanket hanging over her like a low stormcloud. Beneath that spirals a thin core of frustration, around which spirals anxiety and what you think is anticipation, although it feels more muted than you’d expect anticipation to feel.

It takes you a moment to find the threads of loyalty lying beneath it all. They’re more prominent in her now than they were when you started, which is helpful. You tug on them experimentally for a moment, noting her reaction—or, rather, her lack of reaction. She doesn’t even twitch. A smile spreads unbidden over your face before you can conceal it.

Sometimes, when you tug on people’s emotions like this, they have visible reactions—you always have to be careful pulling on someone’s lust, for instance, because working somebody up like that has visible indicators people might notice. You haven’t had any issues with that yet, and it’s unlikely that people will easily connect that with you, but it’s good to check what people look like when you play on particular emotions.

And, lacking a willing girl to test it on, this is really the only way you have to test.

You continue to tug on her loyalty for a few moments, waiting for her to look up enough from her plate of… whatever she’s eating, that she can see you. When she does, you quickly wave at her, drawing her attention enough that she meets your eyes. You give her a grin that she matches in turn.

She stands, picking up her plate of food and walking over to you. One of the waitresses watches her carefully as she walks, but she only heads over to your table and slides in beside you, carelessly placing her food on the tabletop.

“Hey,” she grins. “You’re that girl from school, yeah? You sit near us at lunch.”

You nod. “That’s me,” you say stupidly. “I’m Taylor.”

She snorts. “Aisha,” she introduces herself in turn. “I haven’t seen you around here before, I don’t think. Whatcha up to?”

You shrug and point at your coffee. “I volunteer at a clinic,” you half-answer. “I’m a bit tired today, and I wanted to have a coffee before I headed in. Figured I could try visiting somewhere new.”

“Eh, fair enough.” Aisha shrugs. “Freddie doesn’t make the best coffee, but it’s good for its price, I guess.”

You take another sip of your coffee before you respond, this time considering it. She’s right; it’s not fantastic. They burned the beans slightly, giving it an odd aftertaste, and you’re pretty sure they used

She smirks at you. “I’ll take your word for it,” she concedes. “I don’t drink much coffee. Brian tells me it makes me hyper.” Her smirk grows larger at the words, and you can feel something rising in her. It reminds you of… mischievousness, maybe.

Raising your eyebrows at her, you set your mug back on the table with a heavy thunk. “Is that so?” you reply, giving her a slightly challenging look. “Well, we wouldn’t want you to get hyper, would we?” As you say the words, you nudge your coffee towards her.

Looking down at it, then up at you, she can’t help but let out a huff of laughter. She takes the implicit offer, picking your mug off and taking a mouthful of it. Almost immediately, she places it back on the table, sticking her tongue out with an exaggeratedly disgusted expression. “Ew,” she complains. “That’s bitter.”

“Bitter?” You stare down at your coffee, confused. There’s two spoonfuls of sugar in it. How could that possibly be bitter? Still, while her expression seems to be exaggerated somewhat, she doesn’t seem happy with the mouthful she just drank. “I guess it could be,” you reply. “This is how I normally have it, sorry.” You reach out with your arm as much as you can and give her a half-hug as an apology. Aisha barely seems to notice the movement, but her body unconsciously leans into yours, and she doesn’t try to pull away. You don’t pull your arm back, leaving it lying there across her back and idly rubbing small circles over her hip.

For the next few minutes, the two of you sit around, idly talking about the cuisine the restaurant offers. Aisha’s opinion of the food here isn’t very high—“The only food worth eating here is the salad and wedges,” she tells you with a serious look on her face. When you express your doubt, she gestures to her plate, telling you to try some. And, indeed, they’re rather average.

The two of you are just moving on to speaking about your favourite desserts—“Fried ice cream is the best!”—when something flares at the edges of your mind. You almost twist to turn to look in that direction when it registers—whatever you just felt, a flare of some strong emotion—worry? Anxiety? Fear?—it was strong enough to register with your power despite that you’re reigning it in right now.

You extend your power out, but evidently, whatever caused the flare has disappeared, because you can’t sense any traces of it now. You briefly consider extending your power farther out and seeing if you can catch it outside, but it’s not worth the effort.

Instead, you turn your attention back to Aisha and the discussion about desserts, putting that flare out of your mind. It was probably nothing. Somebody receiving a bad phone call or something.

It’s unfortunate that the two of you are in a restaurant, really. You give serious consideration to the idea of playing with Aisha’s lust a little and seeing how she responds to you, but that’s probably not a good idea, given the two of you are in the middle of a restaurant and she’s expecting to meet her brother soon.

When the clock has almost reached six, you slip your arm back around from Aisha’s waist with a small pout. She shifts slightly, but doesn’t comment on it. There’s no spike of irritation or disappointment in her, so you’re really not sure how she felt about that, but she didn’t push away through the conversation, so she’s… accepting, at least.

Outwardly, you don’t give any sign of your disappointment at having to stop touching her. “Sorry,” you say apologetically to her. “It’s getting late, and I have to be at the clinic soon.”
She looks confused for a moment before comprehension dawns. “Oh, right.” She shrugs. “It’s fine. I’ll see you around school, yeah?”

You nod, giving her a pleased smile. She can’t help but puff up a little, looking happy about your reaction. “Of course,” you say warmly. “Maybe we can have lunch together some time, yeah?”

“Sounds good.” She waves, giving you another small smile. “See ya, then.”

Your phone rests heavy in your pocket. You’d called home earlier as you were waiting for a bus that could take you here. Dad wasn’t home then, so you’d just left a message on the answering machine telling him you were going to the clinic and that you’d be home by seven thirty.

It feels awkward to walk into the clinic this late during the day. You’re probably imagining the looks of curiosity some of the patients sitting in the chairs off the side seem to be giving you, but even so, it sets your teeth on edge. The confidence you were feeling earlier has vanished almost entirely, all of a sudden.

For a moment, you stand around awkwardly, not really sure what to do. Doctor Fitzgerald isn’t out here to give you something to do, and you’re not sure if it’s appropriate to just head straight into the storage room or the break room and get to work. Could you get in trouble for that?

Standing around with so many people in here makes you feel a little anxious. You hesitate, then step forwards towards Doctor Fitzgerald’s office.

You make your way to his office and knock gently on his door. It takes a moment, but eventually, you hear his tired voice coming from inside; “Come in.” Pushing the door open, you step inside his office and stand there nervously.

He looks up at you, blinking slightly, as though he’s surprised to see you. You quickly shove your hands behind your back where he can’t see them, so he doesn’t see the way your hands ball up out of nerves. “Hi,” you say quietly. “Sorry I’m late. I got held up a little.”

He shakes his head, but looks a little concerned. “Don’t worry about it,” he replies. His voice is hoarse, as though he’s been speaking too often, or maybe yelling a lot. “I didn’t expect you to come in today. Is everything going okay?”

You nod. “Everything is fine,” you say quietly. This feels much more awkward than you had anticipated. “I, um. I didn’t know if I should just go and clean up the storeroom, or if you wanted me to do something else.”

“Ah.” The doctor gives you a searching look. A few seconds later, he settles back against his chair, giving you a considering look. “Our storeroom was reinventoried yesterday. Do you have much experience with filling out forms, Taylor?”

“Filling out forms?” You stall for a moment. “Um, I haven’t done it much, but they’re usually pretty simple.”

“Hm.” He looks down at his desk for a moment, then scoots his chair close to his computer and
begins clicking on something. “Well,” he says after a moment, “I’m sure you would prefer something a little more stimulating than cleaning windows.” He gives you a small grin that you can’t help but return. “I’ll print you off the inventory from yesterday. I’d appreciate it if you could fill out some purchase order forms for us.”

“Well, you reply hesitantly. “Are you sure you want me to do this kind of thing, though? I am only a volunteer.”

He gives you another small smile. “I’ve been told you’re a reliable young girl,” he says, a hint of faint amusement in his voice. “Give it a try. We’ll see how you do.”

“Okay.” You’re not sure how you feel about this. Getting involved in this kind of thing feels—not illegal, but it feels like more responsibility than you thought places like this would generally entrust to a volunteer who’s only been here a few times. Sure, you work for his friend too, but…

A couple of minutes later, he rises from his chair and moves over to a printer. You look over, startled to find that the printer is quietly whirring away. Wow, that is a very quiet printer. From the top of it, he withdraws a small sheaf of papers, probably twenty or thirty sheets. “Here you are,” he says, moving over to hold them out to you. You accept them, glancing down at them—arranged as they are, you can see that there are price listings from at least three different companies. “You can work on them in the break room, if you want,” he adds with another smile. “Just make sure to wipe down the tables first.”

“Okay!” You give him a smile that’s half anxious and half reassuring, then turn and quickly make your way to the break room, studiously avoiding the waiting room as you go.

It’s empty when you arrive. You set the papers Doctor Fitzgerald had given you aside, moving over to the sink and grabbing out a washcloth. There’s only four small tables in here, so you give each a quick wipe over, and the one you’re planning to sit at a more thorough cleaning before grabbing some paper towel and drying it off. Only once it’s dry do you grab your papers again and move to sit down.

Before you get to work filling the papers in, you pull out your phone and send Amy a quick text—“I’m here. Do you want to come and have a coffee?—then pull a pen out from your schoolbag and get to work.

Luckily, it’s not very complicated work. There’s a handful of purchase order forms—exactly five, you soon find. One form for each of the five catalogues you have. Five catalogues, and two inventory listings—one showing, as far as you can tell, what the clinic should have, while the other shows what the clinic does have.

The purchase order forms just have a handful of cells for you to fill in. Item name, item number, price, and quantity to order. If you had to guess, you would guess that there’s a separate sheet that Doctor Fitzgerald or one of the administration staff will fill out, with this just being one of them. It’s enough to keep you occupied, though.

About ten minutes later, you hear the sounds of shoes scuffling over the break room’s linoleum floor. Looking up, you see Amy approaching you, holding two Styrofoam cups. Her hair is frizzled, and there are bags under her eyes.

She passes one of the cups to you, and you accept it with a murmured thanks. You wait for her to take a seat before you say, “Are you feeling alright?”
She waves you off, taking a long, slow draught from her own cup. Once she’s finished, she sets it down with a sigh. “Yeah, I’m doing fine,” she mutters, slumping forwards on the table. “I’m tired. There was, uh, I’ve been at work since six. I’ve been on my feet all day.”

You lean over and pat her arm sympathetically. “At least you’re getting paid for it?” you offer.

Looking up, she gives you a little glare that soon fades into a resigned roll of her eyes. “Yeah, I guess that’s true,” she concedes. “I do like being able to save.”

“Mm,” you reply, a little thread of guilt worming its way into your voice. Yes. Save. Mhm. “What are you saving for?”

“Dunno.” She shrugs. “I don’t have much to spend my money on, so I’m setting it aside. Maybe I’ll buy a car soon. Mom’s paying for me to go to college, so I dunno…”

A sulky pout grows on your face at that. You don’t say anything out loud, though. It’d be nice to earn enough money to save some… although, you don’t think Amy has as many girls to spend her money on as you do. And her job does pay better, if only by virtue of the fact that she works more than a handful of hours a week. “A car might be nice,” you allow. “You could go anywhere you want then.”

She shrugs half-heartedly. “Where could I even go, though?” she asks tiredly.

You consider it for a moment. She looks… not just tired. Lost, maybe. Something else, something you can’t pin down, but it leaves a sour taste in your mouth when you notice it in her expression. You don’t want Amy feeling like that.

Hm.

“There’s lots of places you could go.” You reach up so you can rub your chin in a parody of Sherlock Holmes. “There’s a sauna some ways outside the city—actually, I think it’s a whole resort, but I’ve only ever been to the sauna,” you admit sheepishly. “But it’s a really nice place, and it’s very warm. You could go there for a day. They even do massages!”

She scoffs lightly, but looks over at you, a small smile making its way unbidden over her face. “I don’t think a sauna would be my thing,” she replies. “Maybe if there was a spa.”

You frown. “There’s no spa,” you say sadly. “Well, then, maybe a nature hike! I know there’s a good one through some woodlands a few hours away—”

“Do I look like the kind of person who enjoys nature hikes?” she interrupts you, her voice flat.

“Yes,” you lie boldly. She snorts, shaking her head, but you don’t think she’s actually offended. “Well, fine, okay, no nature hikes then. What else…” You think for a second, trying to remember some place that she might enjoy visiting. Then inspiration strikes you. “Oh! Okay, there’s a bookstore in Boston.” Amy rolls her eyes in that, opening her mouth, but you push on before she can say anything. “But it’s not just a normal bookstore. It’s huge. I’m pretty sure it’s bigger than a football field.”

The best part is, you’re not exaggerating. You’re pretty sure the store is actually that big.
She pauses at that, the objection dying on her tongue as she gives you a considering look. “… That’s pretty big,” she allows.

You nod furiously. “It’s huge,” you say earnestly. “I went there when I was a little kid. There’s got to be hundreds of thousands of books there. Maybe millions. Imagine how peaceful it would be, surrounded by that many books.” You close your eyes, trying to imagine it yourself. Being surrounded by the dusty smell of books, the sound of rustling paper, shelf after shelf of books— you’re pretty sure that would actually be heaven.

She gives you an odd look. A smile, one that’s strained but warm, and somehow wistful. You’re tempted to reach out with your power and see what she’s feeling, but— no. Not to Amy.

“That does sound nice,” she says wistfully. “But Boston’s a long way away, and I don’t think I could convince Mom to drive up there just to visit a bookstore.”

You don’t know what kind of mother wouldn’t want to go visit a bookstore like that, but okay. You search through your memory again, trying for something. And then— oh. Yes. You bite your lip as you consider how to say this.

“Well,” you say carefully, “I guess you could always do something closer to town, then.” You inconspicuously avoid looking at her face, ducking your head to look at your inventory sheets. “Did you know there’s a museum here in town?”

There’s a soft exhale from where Amy is sitting. You can’t help but glance up, taking in the soft smile on her face as she looks at you, before you hurriedly glance back down. “Yes, Taylor,” she says. “Everybody knows that.”

“Right.” That’s fair. Even at Winslow, you’ve had to go there twice for school. “But did you know that they’ve been working on a new exhibit recently? An exhibit on old British culture.” From what you’ve been able to gather, it’s mostly a token gesture made since the US and Britain had recently renegotiated shipping agreements, but either way it suits your purpose.

Amy drums her fingers on the table. “Really,” she murmurs. “Is that right?”

You nod your head, still refusing to look up at her. You don’t want her to see your red cheeks. “Yeah,” you reply. “I’ve been, uh, thinking of going myself. And if you need something to do, well, um. It wouldn’t cost as much for me to buy you a ticket too.”

There’s silence for a few moments from the other end of the table. You don’t dare look up until Amy finally speaks. “Yeah,” she says, her tone lilting and teasing. “I know the ticket deal you’re talking about. For couples, right?”

Your head rockets up, and you can’t help the way your eyes widen in alarm until you see the smirk on her face. “It’s not for couples! It’s just a ticket for two!” You’re not sure why you’re being so defensive about it, considering that you do want it to be a date.

“I know, I know.” She pokes her tongue out at you briefly, blinking long and slow. “Sorry. That sounds nice, Taylor. I wouldn’t mind going to see that exhibit.”

“Ohkay.” You let out a quick sigh of relief, drawing another smirk from Amy. “Well, u-um. Would Saturday or Sunday work better for you?”
“Saturday afternoon would work best,” she says calmly. “I’m working on Saturday morning, and it’s Dad’s birthday on Sunday.”

You nod eagerly. “Okay! Saturday afternoon then.”

You do end up getting the paperwork for Doctor Fitzgerald done with plenty of time to spare. It’s not complicated, although you do end up having to draw your notebook out of your bag and do some multiplication there to figure out the purchase prices of some of the items. Amy, unfortunately, only has a couple more minutes to spare; you barely have enough time to ask her about her week before a nurse is hurrying into the room, calling for Amy with an exasperated voice.

At least Doctor Fitzgerald seems pleased when you hand the forms to him at seven. He quickly scans one of them as you stand there, mouth moving as he mouths the words to himself. When he doesn’t find any readily identifiable problems with it, he gives you a big smile. “Thank you, Taylor,” he says gratefully.

You just fob him off with an awkward little wave. After having actually done the paperwork, it doesn’t feel as awkward as it did before—it wasn’t complicated, and it definitely didn’t require you to know any confidential information. It just still feels weird, but what do you know? Maybe their accountant quit recently and they’re struggling to keep up with their paperwork, or something.

Either way, you’re rather glad that Dad has cooked dinner by the time you get home. It’s not a fancy dinner—it never is—but it feels good to be able to just eat and stumble up to your bedroom.

You don’t fall asleep immediately, but you don’t bother heading over to your desk and getting your textbooks out to study, either. Instead, you just grab Victoria’s copy of Harry Potter and get to reading.

School the next day is… odd. You’re not quite sure what you were expecting out of the day, but whatever it was, it wasn’t Madison dragging herself in looking half dead.

She makes her way over to you, standing by your locker, and collapses limply into your arms as soon as you stretch them out for her. She lets out an appreciative little moan that makes you glad nobody else is around to hear it as you tighten your arms around her and pull her into a more proper hug.

“You look tired,” you murmur. You’d woken up to a goodnight text from her this morning that had apparently been sent after three in the morning; by the look of her, she really mustn’t have fallen asleep until around then. “Is something wrong?”

She shakes her head against your neck, leaning closer against you. “No, nothing,” she says. You can feel her lips pull up into a small smile against your neck, and you can feel the contentment practically radiating from her. “Just didn’t get to sleep until late.”

You gently stroke her back. “Any particular reason?” you ask quietly.

Madison leans back slightly so she can look at your face. A moment later, another sleepy smile spreads over her face, and she burrows herself back against your neck. “No, no reason,” she murmurs. Despite her words, though, she doesn’t let go of you at all.
Well, you’re not sure what’s wrong with her, but evidently something kept her up late last night. If she’s in a clingy mood today after that, then so be it. You can deal with a couple of occasional dirty looks if it makes her happy.

Thankfully, her clinginess doesn’t last through the whole day—she peels away from you when the bell rings, however reluctantly. She snuggles back in against your side during first period, but not quite as noticeably as before. You can feel Charlotte staring at the two of you, but she doesn’t say anything.

You make sure to sit beside Madison at lunch—you’re not quite confident enough in Aisha’s attraction to you to allow Madison to sit on your lap in front of her, but you’re quite happy to sit there and hold her hand.

You’re a lot more confident during tutoring, where nobody else is around to see. Not even Charlotte, today. You allow Madison to sit on your lap, where you spend most of the session running your fingers through her hair and giving her small compliments each time she gets one of your questions right.

It feels a little odd. It’s not like you’re even slightly opposed to having this much contact with her, but the last time you felt like she needed this kind of physical contact, she was still coming down off the high of your first time with her. Nothing like that happened yesterday that you’re aware of, and a surface-level sensing of her emotions doesn’t reveal anything but exhaustion and the same warm contentment. Something else must have happened. Maybe she’s on her period?

Whatever the case, she thankfully recognizes the need to let you go once tutoring for the day is over. It’s a good thing, too—you’d feel bad about leaving Madison, but you’d feel bad about leaving Sophia in the dust.

Still, while you’re travelling home on the bus, you make sure to reply fairly promptly to all of Madison’s texts. She’s surprisingly restrained in sending them, considering how clingy she was at school, sending you only five throughout the entire half-hour trip.

Once the bus rumbles to a stop, you begin to move home, then pause. No—you’re pretty sure you don’t have enough fruit at home.

Luckily, there’s a small fruit and vegetable store a few blocks away from your house. It’s more expensive than the supermarkets tend to be, but you just don’t have the time to head there and back before Sophia can arrive.

Luckily, it’s still not too expensive, although you’re definitely not happy about the price. You don’t end up getting much; you walk home with two plastic bags filled with watermelon, cantaloupe, grapes, strawberries, blueberries, and a kiwi fruit. Twenty-six dollars is far too much for that kind of fruit.

Once you get home, you check to see if Dad is home yet—he’s not. Humming softly, you hurry over to the counter and begin pulling out the fruits.

You’re almost done when the doorbell rings. Frowning down at the cantaloupe you were just dicing, you hurry to the front door. You’re not surprised to find Sophia standing there, frowning at you. She doesn’t have her schoolbags.

You hurriedly step aside, making room for her. “Come in, come in,” you tell her, allowing her to pull
her shoes off and place them to the side of your door. “I was just cutting up the fruit for you.”

“Huh.” She briefly glances at you, her eyebrows raised. She seems inordinately surprised, considering how simple the gesture was for you. “Thanks, Hebert. Skipped lunch today.”

“That was silly of you,” you scold her. She gives you an amused little scoff. “Don’t laugh at me, Sophia! Lunch is the most important meal of the day, you know?”

“Thought that was breakfast,” she replies dryly. You pause, then let out a soft ‘oooh’, causing her to snicker.

You shake your head, leading her to the kitchen once again, where you resume dicing the cantaloupe. “Well, whatever,” you declare. “Lunch is still very important. Why did you skip it?”

Sophia shrugs, a motion half-seen out of the corner of your eye as she jumps up to sit on the kitchen bench. “I was busy,” she replies. “Coach has been giving me a lot of extra work on the side.”

You frown. “But a proper diet is essential for any athlete,” you argue. “ Couldn’t you speak to your coach and tell her the extra work is cutting into break time?”

She lazily shakes her head in response. Before you can stop her, she leans over and picks one of the strawberry slices out of the large bowl you’re storing all the fruit in. You scowl at her, waving a wooden spoon threateningly. “Nah,” she drawls. “I could speak to her, but it’s all good enough work, I guess. Looks good on the college applications, you know?” She smirks at some joke you’re not privy to, and before you can do anything, she leans over and steals a blueberry. Your wooden spoon smacks ineffectually down on the bench a moment later.

You shake your head. You don’t get it, but you’re not the sporty type—jogging is as far as you’d like to take your physical activities, personally. And you do understand the desire to have extracurriculars on your college applications. But—“Don’t let it become a habit,” you tell her in a severe voice. “You could hurt yourself.” You tap her abs with your wooden spoon to emphasize the message.

A wry grin spreads across her face. “I’ll make sure to skip lunch on Monday just for you, Hebert,” Sophia replies. You turn and give her a look, which in turn she returns playfully. She also takes the opportunity to lean across and steal another blueberry, causing you to let out a huge sigh and give her a disappointed look, which only makes her give you a faux-apologetic pout in return.

It ends up being way too much fruit salad for the two of you. You make both yourself and Sophia a bowl of it, and you prepare two smaller bowls for you and Dad to eat later, but there’s still enough that you’re able to make a fifth bowl of it to press on Sophia.

She frowns down at it. “Keep it. It’s yours.”

You don’t push it at her. Something in her emotions stirs—something… uncertain, lost, but also angry. Like a vicious little puppy, hackles raised and teeth bared. “I made it for you, not for me.” Your voice is calm, soothing.

She glances at your face for a moment, looking you straight in the eye. You meet her glance, then meaningfully drop your gaze back down to the bowl. With an exaggerated roll of her eyes, she takes it from you and moves to your fridge, placing it there. “Thanks,” she mutters. The anger quiets, although the uncertainty remains, if anything growing a little stronger.
“No problem,” you say cheerily.

Tutoring with Sophia goes well, as expected. You’re long since used to her mercurial moods—back before she shoved you in that locker, she would flash from boredom to anticipation to seething anger with no apparent cause.

She departs at eight thirty on the dot, leaving your lower lip swollen and your hair tangled in knots. You follow her down, checking to ensure she takes the bowl from the fridge—she rolls her eyes, but does—and go to pat her on the ass as she leaves, but she ducks forward, turning to smirk at you again as you fumble awkwardly with the air.

You watch Sophia as she strolls down the street, still carrying her bowl of fruit salad uncertainly in her arms. When she fully disappears, you pull back inside and head into the living room, where Dad is waiting.

It doesn’t take you much convincing to take you to work after you’ve had a shower, although you get the vague feeling that he’s not happy with you working this late. To be fair, it is just before nine at that point, and you are working until three. It doesn’t bother you too much, but you can see why Dad wouldn’t be too happy with it.

It’s not particularly strenuous work, though—just, long. There’s a marathon of some Earth Aleph movies, the production of *The Lord of the Rings* they’d made over there. All three movies were playing, and the marathon wasn’t expected to end until after two. It’s a full sitting, too—although on reflection, it isn’t that surprising. People in Brockton Bay don’t get to watch Earth Aleph movies very often.

All it means is that by the time Dad picks you up and you collapse into bed at home is, you’re exhausted, and all you can think about are volcanoes and elven bread.

You barely have enough time to consider your plans for the weekend before your head hits the pillows and you’re asleep.
On Saturday morning, you wake to the low sound of the house’s heaters creaking reverberating through the house. You blink tiredly, mind racing to figure out why Dad would have the heaters on this early—at least, until the sound of rain gently pattering down on the roof manages to make its way through the fog on your mind, and it clicks.

It’s raining. Ugh.

You crawl out of bed, giving the sky an irritated glance as though it cares. Damn it. You can’t even go jogging now, and you’ve never figured out how umbrellas are supposed to protect your legs from the rain, so you’re going to show up to your date with Amy with wet legs. Ugh. You barely got any sleep, and already the day is looking terrible.

You stomp your way over to your dresser, drawing out some of the clothes Victoria had bought for you. If you’re not going jogging, then there’s no reason for you to not dress nicely now, and you’d like to look pretty for your date.

Dad is already awake and out in the kitchen, you find once you’ve showered and walked out. It makes sense—your house isn’t the kind of house to have fancy rain-detection programs or whatever. Your house isn’t fancy enough for you to even know what kind of things a fancy house has.

“Hello, Taylor,” he says mildly, not even turning to look at you. You glare at him from behind his back. How did he know you were there? Your footsteps aren’t that heavy! “Do you want some breakfast? I’ve got bacon and eggs cooking, or I could make you some toast.”

You bite your lip, considering. “I wouldn’t mind some eggs on toast,” you say eventually, still scowling a little. You’ve never been a big fan of bacon. Most people you know talk it up—both Dad and Emma really enjoy it—but when it’s fried and cooked, it’s just kind of average. Eggs, on the other hand. Eggs are good. “Did you turn the coffee machine on?”

He nods, although you can only see it by the way the back of his head moves. “I turned the percolator on before I started cooking. It should be done by now.”

It won’t take him long to finish cooking breakfast, so you don’t force yourself to dawdle too much as you head over to the coffee machine and begin pouring each of you a cup of coffee. You make sure to add enough sugar for you, while leaving it out of Dad’s. You still carry them over about a minute before the eggs finish cooking, giving the two cups of coffee just enough time to cool down before he brings out the two plates of breakfast.

Breakfast is quiet, although in a good way. Neither of the two of you are the kind for small talk. Instead, you pull out your phone beneath the table and begin responding to all your texts, making sure to send Amy a reminder about the museum. About two minutes later, your phone buzzes with a reply from her; “Looking forward to it.”

You get up and move back over the coffee maker. You can feel the tiredness pressing against your consciousness—it’s not terrible yet, but you know you’re going to be feeling it later in the day. Hopefully, getting some more coffee into you will help push that off.

“I’m going to the museum today,” you call out as you begin fiddling with the machine again.
“Around lunchtime.”

Dad glances up at the roof, then over to you with a concerned expression on his face. “Today? Are you sure?”

You nod. “Don’t worry, I’ll take my umbrella,” you assure him. “I’ll be on the bus, so I won’t get wet.”

He frowns. You can tell he wants to say no, but something holds him back. “I could drive you there instead,” he says eventually.

“No.” You immediately shake your head, placing your cup on the kitchen bench so you can move over to where Dad is sitting and emphatically press down on his shoulders. “You stay home and relax, Dad. I’ll be okay. I’m only going to the museum.” Plastering the most convincing smile you can on your face, you hope he ignores the way your hands shake on his shoulder.

Honestly, it won’t be the end of the world if he drives you, but, well, you like having Amy to yourself. Intellectually, you know that Dad catching a glimpse of her won’t change that, but it feels like it will. You don’t want his first time meeting her being through the windscreen of his car in the pouring rain as he drives you to a museum. You’d much rather be in- well. You want to be the one to introduce the two of them, not happenstance, and you want it to be at a time when you can make sure the two get along.

He looks at you for a long moment, then lets out a sigh and mumbles something you can’t hear. Then he looks up at you, giving you a wry smile. “Okay, Taylor. But make sure you take your umbrella, okay? And bring a spare jacket, just in case.”

“I will, Dad.”

“Good.” He nods, looking somewhat mollified, even though you’ve already told him you’re planning on bringing your umbrella. “Oh, before I forget—Alan called. He invited the two of us over for dinner tonight. Would you like me to tell him you’re busy?”

You consider it for a moment. Instinctively, you want to say yes, but something holds you back. A desire to reward Emma for sticking to her word, maybe. Or an instinctive desire to rebel against Dad’s assumption that you don’t want to go. “No,” you say after a moment’s thought. “I’ll go.”

“Really.” He raises his eyebrows for a moment, as though caught off-guard. You pout angrily at him for it, which just causes him to look even more confused. “Okay,” he says defensively. “I’ll tell him you’re coming.”

You nod sharply. “Good.”

The rest of Saturday morning is spent lying on the couch in a half-awake fugue. At some point, Dad switches the television on for you, but you’re too busy texting everyone on your phone and steadfastly ignoring the text your phone company had sent you, reminding you that you’re going to have to buy more credit next week. Ugh.

Unsurprisingly, Madison is the most prompt responder to your texts, often replying within two minutes of whatever text you send. She’s so prompt that you feel obliged to send her a text telling her
to make sure she pays attention to her surroundings, to which she replies with a “>:<”, a text-smiley whose meaning you don’t understand.

Surprisingly, today, Sophia is actually responding to your texts more than once every couple of hours. It’s not nearly as regular as Madison, but you get the feeling that either she’s checking her phone more often or she’s stopped ignoring them when you first send them—which, well, you’re not sure she actually does that, but it wouldn’t surprise you if she refused to answer texts promptly out of principle. Still, now she’s responding surprisingly often, even if the talk is just banal conversation about the weather and how her mother is trying to make her clean her bedroom.

All up, between Madison, Sophia and Victoria, you’re kept busy enough just sending and reading texts that you manage to pass the time until it’s time for you to leave for your bus without falling asleep. You’d considered taking a nap, but you’re not the type of person who responds well to them. Most of the time, you just wake up more tired than before.

When it’s time, you get up and hurry to the front door, waving goodbye to Dad. He gives you a surprised look and a little wave in return as you grab your umbrella and trudge off to the bus stop. Sure enough, as you walk, the bottom of your trousers are soon soaked. It’s not even so much the rain as it is the water you kick up as you walk, which promptly soaks into your socks and your trousers. It’s not so cold that it’s unbearable, but it’s certainly pretty uncomfortable.

You dry out a little on the bus, but only enough that by the time you step off a block away from the museum you’re damp rather than dripping water over the ground. That changes very quickly as you make your way hurriedly over to the museum, scowling up at the grey clouds above.

Your scowl disappears almost immediately when you finally arrive at the museum and spot Amy standing awkwardly there, her arms crossed defensively in front of her as she scans the street ahead. When her gaze finds you, a grin splits her face, and she lets her arms drop as she waves at you. You wave back, a smile crossing your own face as you pick up your pace and move towards her.

She’s dressed up nicely today—very nicely. She’s wearing a comfortable-looking blue ruffled dress, and for once, she’s wearing more than the bare minimum makeup. Idly, you wonder who helped her put it on—her mother? Her father? Or is she more skilled with it than she makes herself seem? Either way, she looks nice. She’s even done up her hair, smoothing it out some and tying it back so it doesn’t frizz all over the place in the rain, just like you have.

You greet her with a smile and a small one-armed hug when you make your way up the stairs. She’s warm against you, and you’re reluctant to pull away for a few moments. Thankfully, she doesn’t seem to mind, and even settles into the cuddle somewhat.

If it wasn’t for someone coughing loudly behind the two of you, you’re not sure how long you might have stood there like that, half-cuddling her while you hold your umbrella in the other hand. As it is, though, someone does very rudely cough at the two of you, causing Amy to step back with an alarmed look.

You level a small glare at the person who had interrupted your cuddle time. It’s a balding, middle-aged man, who is currently giving the two of you a dirty look. Without even spreading your powers out, you can feel disgust emanating from him. You curl your lip in turn, sneering at him as he walks past. He blinks, startled, and hurries into the museum a little faster.

“Some people,” you sigh, aggrieved.
Amy rolls her eyes affectionately at you. “We were kind of holding up the stairway,” she points out. “We should go in.”

You shrug and gesture for her to follow you. She follows you placidly, tossing you an amused glance as she goes. You’re not sure what she’s amused at, but your instinctive response is to scowl at her. You refrain, though. You don’t know what she’s so amused about, but whatever it is, at least she’s not being brought down by that guy’s rude looks.

Tickets into the museum aren’t cheap, but thanks to their weekend deals, it doesn’t cost too much. You mentally wince as you pay, but you make sure that by the time you turn back to Amy, none of your misgivings show on your face.

“Alright!” You almost reach out to take her hand before you remember her request last week not to do so in public. Instead, you offer her up a hesitant smile. “Are you ready?”

She smiles at you. It’s a surprisingly sweet smile. You’re not particularly concerned about it, but you have noticed that Amy can be kind of bitchy at times. She’s not the kind of girl you associate with the term ‘sweet’. “Yeah,” she replies. “Show me around?”

“Okay!” you reply enthusiastically.

It’s a little bit nostalgic, coming to the museum. Mom used to take you here all the time, four times a year—every time they would change up their displays and bring in new attractions. Dad came along on occasion, too, but mostly it had been a thing you and Mom did. She would take you all around the museum, even lifting you up on her shoulders when you were younger, and go around to every single display case and tell you in a very serious voice all about the history of the pieces. Even the ones that hadn’t moved or changed places since you were two. You haven’t been here outside of school visits in… a long while now.

You guide Amy around the still-familiar building. The showcase of British culture isn’t very exciting, which is kind of disappointing. British culture is very old, and there are a lot of tales that could have been woven. Then again, it could also have been expensive to set up a fantastic display, and Brockton Bay has never been the kind of place to funnel a great deal of money to its libraries and museums.

Your favourite part of the museum is the fossil room. It’s only a small room, off to the side of the gift shop, but it’s packed to the brim with small fossils and chunks of amber. Nobody besides the two of you are in the room at the moment.

“It’s … okay,” Amy allows. She’s standing in front of the longest of the display cases in the room, looking down at an array of old mammalian fossils. “There’s definitely a lot of them.”

“Yeah.” You pad over to where she’s standing, glancing down at the collection. “They used to be part of a private collection, I think. Them and some of the fossils outside.” There’s a few fossils out there, including the complete remains of a *Smilodon*. “They were donated when I was still a kid, after the previous owner died, I think. He must have been a big bone fanatic or something,” you add wryly. Seriously, that’s a lot of old bones.

She just hums slightly. She doesn’t look fascinated, but she’s interested enough that her hands are skimming over the glass lid of the display cases as she reads the plaques around each one. You don’t have the heart to remind her that the museum has a no touching rule; you’ve reminded her four times, and each time she looks guiltier that she forgot.
You glance down into the display case, trying to see what she’s looking at. “I think that’s the *Psittacosaurus* femur,” you tell her proudly. “It’s-“

“- the ancestor of the Triceratops,” she finishes for you. You tilt your head curiously at her. She arches her eyebrows at you, but eventually bumps your hip with her own and snickers at the pout you give her. “I used to study dinosaurs,” she tells you conversationally. “I was going to be an archaeologist when I was younger, after Mom and Dad watched *Indiana Jones* with me.” She snaps her wrist at you and makes a *wuh-pssh!* sound at you, as though she’s cracking a whip. “Then Dad told me one day that archaeologists spend most of their time digging in the dirt, not fighting bad guys and escaping from traps. I cried for hours.” She snickers again at the memory.

You close your eyes for a moment, considering that. “I think you’d look cute in an *Indiana Jones* costume,” you muse, opening them again to give her a good look-over.

She shakes her head, giving you a funny little grin. “I think you’d pull it off better,” she replies. “If you cut your hair, at least. You’ve definitely got the chest for it.” She bumps your hip again, giving you a little teasing smirk.

You inhale sharply through your teeth. You’re not sure which of those two statements you find more offensive—cutting your hair? *Preposterous*—but you do give the idea some consideration. You wouldn’t mind owning a leather jacket anyway…

Before you can say anything, though, Amy gives you another little smirk. “Then again,” she says slowly, “you might make a better Marion. Your hair’s a bit dark, but we could make do.”

You want to grumble at her, but you also don’t want to discourage her. “Okay,” you say instead. “It’s a deal. You can be Indiana, and I’ll be your Marion.”

A flush steals down her neck. “I didn’t-“ She cuts herself off, looking over to the side as her blush deepens. “That’s not-“ She bites her bottom lip this time, then lets out a long sigh. “Okay, Taylor,” she says finally, still refusing to look at you. Even from here, though, you can see the way the corner of her lips is turning up in an embarrassed smile.

Yes! Victory!

You nod triumphantly. “Excellent,” you say happily. “Now come, Ms Jones. Tell me about these fossils.”

Amy leads you around the fossil room for the next half an hour, pointing out each fossil in turn and explaining their role. Some of them, unsurprisingly, she doesn’t know—not all of them come from dinosaurs, and as she explains to you, that was where little nine-year-old Amy had focused. Dinosaurs were just cooler than post-Cretaceous mammals to a child.

It’s times like today that you wish you’d studied up on ancient insects or something, so that you could have something to impress her with. But, unfortunately, you didn’t, and you don’t. You’re forced to pad along behind her, listening to her remarks and trying to absorb as much of the information as she gives you as you can.

Not that you mind, really. It’s not exactly unpleasant—and you have a good view from behind her, anyway.
Unfortunately, as things go, the date can’t last forever. When the clock on the wall in the main hall ticks over and chimes three o’clock, you give serious consideration to the idea of abandoning the idea of buying Madison a choker today and inviting Amy to go look for a place that sells coffee, but you decide against it. Madison has been a good girl, and you have just spent several hours out on a date with Amy.

The two of you stroll out of the museum, not quite hand-in-hand, but certainly closer than most of the onlookers around you might have expected from two teenaged girls. You don’t mind, and Amy doesn’t seem to care either, so you don’t shift away.

You’re not in such an urgent hurry that you run away as soon as the two of you get out, though. You wait with her at the top of the museum’s stairs, umbrella held open awkwardly to try and ward off the spray of water that accompanies the rain. You have moderate success, which isn’t really a success at all, because you’re still damp by the end of it.

Eventually, a car pulls up in front of the museum, and Amy stretches to her feet. She holds her hand out to you, and lifts you to your feet once you take it. “Do you want a lift home?” she asks.

You shake your head. “I’m not going home,” you reply. “I have to go to the mall for a bit.”

Amy shrugs. “Mom will drive you to the mall if you want,” she says. “It’s raining. She won’t mind. Come on, you’ll get sick if you try walking there in the rain.”

Immediately, your first reaction is to point out that you’re not going to walk there, you’re going to take the bus, but you quell that reaction so you can instead say, “I don’t mind getting sick. I’ll have the prettiest nurse if I do.”

The blush that spreads over her face at that is a brilliant red. She squeaks a little, shaking her head slightly, but despite trying for several seconds, she can’t manage a counterpoint to that.

You wait. You want to ask her if she will wear a nurse’s costume for you if you get sick, but somehow, you think it might be a little bit early for that kind of teasing still.

Eventually, she just shakes her head harder and gestures for you to follow her down the stairs. You shake your umbrella as you go, causing her to let out another cute squeak as droplets of water rain down on her. “Taylor!”

You just give her a cheeky grin as the two of you move over to her mother’s car. It lasts precisely until Amy opens the back door for you, gesturing for you to get in.

It’s a very nice car, you find as you climb in. You’re not sure if the seats in the back are made of fake leather or real leather, but either way, it’s certainly much nicer than Dad’s rickety old car—not that you have anything against Dad’s care. It’s comfortable. This one is sexier, if that word can apply to cars. There’s nothing wrong with either.

Amy’s mother turns to look at you through the car’s rear view mirror, but doesn’t say anything to you, instead turning her head to look at Amy. “You didn’t tell me you’d be bringing someone home with you.” Her tone is clipped and short. Oddly, though, you don’t sense any strong emotions emanating from her.

You can almost see Amy’s smile fall off her face at her mother’s tone. Oddly, that is when you can
sense emotion from her mother- frustration, perhaps, or muted impatience. It fades too fast for you to
tell, and you’re not—you don’t want to use your power. It won’t be on Amy, but it feels too close.

“I—” Amy stutters, then clears her throat loudly enough for you to hear from the back seat. You still
haven’t put your seatbelt on. “I just- it’s raining, and Taylor doesn’t have a car. I thought you could
drive her.”

The woman eyes Amy for a moment, then turns her attention to you. “Fine.” Her voice is still
clipped, but in the rear-view mirror, you can see that her gaze isn’t as angry as you’d expect. In fact,
she looks more… consternated with herself. “Where do you want to go, Taylor?”

You jerk a little, then hurriedly clip on your seatbelt as you respond, “Uh, just to the mall, ma’am.”

The woman nods stiffly. Beside her, you can see Amy shrinking back more. You want to reach over
and stroke her arm in reassurance, or tell her that her mother isn’t angry at her, but—how?

The three of you drive in silence, the low thrum of the car the only sound permeating the air. Several
times, you try to say something, but each time, the air gets stuck in your throat, and the words wither
and die.

You don’t want to say that you’re glad when the car finally pulls up at the mall, because you’re not.
You are glad to get out of the car and the oppressively awkward atmosphere, though.

Before you head in, and before the two head off, you make sure to tap on Amy’s window until she
winds it down, giving you a cautious look. You smile at her and raise your phone. “I’ll text you later,
okay? Make sure to tell me when you’re working next!”

Amy nods. “I think I’m working Tuesday, but I’ll check,” she promises.

A small smile spreads over your face, and if her mother wasn’t right there, you’d lean over and press
a kiss to her cheek. You’re not sure what Amy has told her mother about the two of you, though, and
you don’t want to out her if she hasn’t told her mother yet, so you settle for waving goodbye at the
two as they drive off.

Only then do you head inside, turning your mind towards the matter of Madison’s choker.

It’s not a big, important matter, which is why you’ve been putting it off- it’s a long trip to make for
something that should only take you half an hour to find. It’s only three thirty now, so you’ve
afforded yourself a lot of extra time to find one for her.

You start by looking around the smaller stores, especially those that advertise themselves as having
engraving in them. They’re all fairly expensive, but maybe you can find one that’s cheaper?

Honestly, Madison probably won’t be too upset if you don’t manage to find her one. You’re not
even sure if you’ve mentioned it to her before, and if you have, she’s been content without one so
far. You just want to find her one.

Just the thought of her carrying around a sign of her relationship with you, a note to the world that
she’s yours and nobody else’s—even though nobody besides the two of you will understand what it
signifies, you still really want that.

It takes you a fair while to find a store that carries anything affordable within your price range and
isn’t too tacky. If you were willing to compromise, you could probably get her something cheap and
tacky for half of the effort and a quarter of the price, but—you don’t want her to wear something
cheap and tacky.

The fact that she’s yours isn’t something she should be ashamed of. You don’t want her symbol of
that to make her feel like she should be.

You’re not sure if it’s desperation or the low fog of tiredness beginning to creep back into your mind
that prompts you to head into a proper jewellery store. All you know is that you’ve been searching
for over half an hour and haven’t had any luck.

Thankfully, almost as soon as you walk into the store, a man appears, hovering a good three feet
away. “Good afternoon, miss,” he says smoothly. “May I help you?”

Blinking at him, you consider it for a moment. “I’m looking for a—a gift,” you reply. “For a friend
of mine. I want to, uh. She wants a choker, with a little tag on it.”

He furrows his brow. “A choker, hm?” he muses. “And with a tag.” He gives you a searching look.
You shift uncomfortably under his gaze, but thankfully, whatever he sees isn’t something he
disapproves of. “Very well. If you follow me over this way, we do have a good range.”

And indeed, they do have a fair range of chokers and necklaces over on this side of the store. Most
of the store is predominantly taken up by rings and earrings—things people buy more, you suppose
—but there’s still easily fifty or more of them over here.

“What is your price range?” he inquires casually. You bite your lip, considering.

“Um, up to maybe sixty dollars,” you tell him softly, glancing furtively around the store so nobody
can hear you. They can’t judge you! You’re only fifteen, how can people expect you to have lots of
money?! “But I have to get it engraved, so, um. I don’t think I can spend all of that on the choker.”

He nods, then leans down. You follow his example, peering into the cabinet.

“We don’t cater to a very exclusive clientele,” he says conversationally. “Much of our stock is rather
expensive, as you would expect, but I do make it a habit to stock jewellery for people who aren’t as
financially advantaged as myself. Even people who don’t have six-figure salaries ought to be able to
look nice on a night out, after all.”

That’s the first time you’ve ever heard a business owner say that, you’re pretty sure. Not that you
make a habit of talking to a lot of business owners.

He goes over each of them with you, explaining the drawbacks of each one and giving you their
prices.

At first, you’re drawn to a fairly simple choker, a band of velvet wrapped around what he tells you is
a core of leather. There’s no tag on it, but he assures you that you could easily attach one to the
chain. Unfortunately, that would bring it well out of your price range, so with a disappointed
expression, you let it slide.

There’s also a nice gold one, but—as the manager hastens to point out—it’s not real gold. It looks
nice if you want to wear it out for dinner occasionally, but—and he says this while glancing at you
out of the corner of his eye—if you intend to wear it with any regularity, it will quickly discolour.
In the end, you settle on something much simpler; a thin choker made of interweaving silver bands, complete with a small tag at the front where the choker clips together. It doesn’t cost much—twenty-five dollars, down from one hundred—and he even directs you to a small business that he assures you will handle your engraving both cheaply and professionally.

You’re not sure why he’s being so helpful, but you make sure to give him a smile and a “Thank you!” on your way out.

It’s well after four, approaching five, when you return home from the mall. Madison’s choker, now engraved with a simple “T.H.”, rests in a small paper bag beside you. The first thing you do when you get home, even before taking your purse out, is place it securely on top of your dresser.

After that, once you’ve dropped your belongings off in your room and stumbled back downstairs, you collapse on the arm of the couch beside Dad and let out a loud groan. The tiredness, which has been creeping at the edges of your consciousness all day, is starting to catch up with you. You’ve been awake for the better part of ten hours now, and only had two cups of coffee.

Dad gives you a concerned look. “Are you feeling okay?” he asks tentatively.

From your position slumped upside-down beside him, you wave him off, turning your head so you can rest it comfortably against the couch. “I’m fiine,” you assure him, voice muffled by the couch cushions. “It’s fiinee.”

He chuckles slightly. You hear him rustling, then you abruptly shriek as strong hands seize you under your arms, sliding down to grab you around the stomach. You squawk as he lifts you, flips you the right way up, and drops you back on the couch, leaving you glaring up at him and kicking the couch petulantly. How did he even stand without you noticing?

“What?” he says mildly, the question obviously rhetorical. “You’ll hurt your back if you stay like that for long.” Despite his concerned words, however, you can feel amusement rolling off him in thick, warm waves. You just scowl up at him, kicking the couch again twice more for emphasis. “Anyway, I told Alan we’re both going to be going over for dinner. Do you want me to call him and tell him you’re not feeling well? You do look a little sick.”

You shake your head, scowling up at him even harder. “I already said I’m fine,” you remind him. “I’m just a little tired.”

He just stares at you, then looks down at your legs and back up. You’re not sure what he’s getting at, but whatever it is, indignation rises in you over it.

“You’ll be fine!” you snap. “Geez, Dad.”

He holds up his hands, looking a little taken aback. “Okay, okay,” he says soothingly. “I won’t call him, then. Make sure you’re ready by six, okay?”

You nod sharply. “Okay.” You give him a little salute to punctuate the message.

He chuckles and pats you on the head as he walks past you out into the kitchen. “I’ll make some coffee,” he calls back. “Are you going to wear that, or are you going to get changed?”
You look down at your clothes. You’re dressed nicely enough that you felt comfortable going on a
date with Amy in them, but honestly, your socks feel a little bit gross, being as damp as they are
now. Your shoes could probably do with some drying out, too. “I’ll get changed,” you yell back.
“Don’t let it get cold!”

He doesn’t let it get cold, mostly by waiting for you to get back out to the kitchen after changing
your socks and pants before pouring your coffee out. It’s good. You feel a little more alert, a little
less head-blurry, once you take your first mouthful.

The two of you sit around the kitchen bench for a while, sipping coffee in a casual but not
uncomfortable silence. Neither of you feels the need to speak until it’s nearly time to go, at quarter to
day.

Only once the two of you get up, two cups of coffee later, and gather your keys and other effects,
does Dad feel the need to say anything. “Oh, by the way,” he says casually, “I bought those DVD’s
today, if you’d like to watch them later.” You’re quickly growing used to Dad starting a sentence
with ‘Oh, by the way’. He’s not very good at seguing into other topics.

You smile up at him. “Cool,” you reply. “We can watch them after book club tomorrow?”

He ruffles your hair, giving you a little smile. You hurriedly bat his hands away, pouting sulkily at
him as you hurriedly run your hands through it again in an attempt to straighten it. He just widens his
smile, though, and leads you out to the car.

The lingering aftereffects of the caffeine are blunting the edge of your tiredness, but you can feel it
creeping into your awareness once more, seeping in. It’s—not the kind of tiredness that makes you
feel like you want to rest your head against the car window as Dad drives. It’s more the kind of
tiredness that makes you feel slower, like you can’t connect the dots between thoughts in your head
as easily.

When Dad pulls up in front of Emma’s house and you step out, you find yourself stumbling a little at
first. Blinking, you glare down at your feet. Properly chastised, they carry you up and into Emma’s
house without further issue. The movement wakes you up a little, at least for a few moments, and
you gaze around the house, noting how sharp and sterile it looks.

Alan greets the two of you, popping his head around the corner. “Danny!” he says with a large
smile. “And Taylor! It’s good to see the two of you again.” Then he blinks, taking a closer look at
you. After a moment of looking at you with a curious look, he turns back to the kitchen. “Would
either of you like a cup of coffee?”

You look up at Dad, who is nodding. “Not for me, but I think Taylor would like one,” he says.

You butt his shoulder with your head, giving him a mulish look before you turn to Alan. “I would
like one, if it’s not too much trouble.” You try to smile at him, but you’re pretty sure it comes out
looking more like a loopy grimace. “Thank you, Alan.”

He nods. “Not a problem. Emma’s out in the living room, if you would like to go and watch a movie
with her. I’ll bring it out to you in a couple of minutes.”

There’s a surprising lack of twisting in your gut at that idea. You’re not sure why—maybe you’re
just too tired to appreciate the risk? Except that’s silly. Intellectually, you know she won’t do
anything to you tonight. Not with Dad in the same house, and not when either Dad or Alan could walk past at any moment and hear anything cruel she says.

That hasn’t stopped you from feeling anxious before, though. So, okay, yeah, it’s probably the tiredness.

You nod at Alan, then make your way out to the Barnes’ living room, where you come to a stop in the doorway.

Emma is sitting on the couch, her back turned to you and her head resting against the back of the couch. Her hair cascades down around her shoulders, resting in messy bundles over the back of the couch and disappearing from your view. She’s sitting very still, and a few moments pass before you hear the slight sound of cloth rustling and paper turning. Despite her still posture, though, she looks… soft, kind of. Unguarded. The TV isn’t turned on, and the only illumination in the room comes from a lamp shining orange light over the room on the small table beside Emma.

She looks peaceful like this. Not threatening at all.

Something, some invisible weight, seems to—not lift of your shoulders, but grow lighter, at least a little.

“Hi.” You keep your voice soft. It doesn’t seem right to break up the peacefulness of the room.

She stiffens slightly, then slowly turns her head. When her gaze lands on you, she relaxes somewhat. Only somewhat, though. Her shoulders are stiffer now, and you can see one arm curled over her stomach now, a defensive posture. “Hi,” she replies, equally softly. “You came. Um. Hi.”

You nod, the movement a little stilted. Not all your anxiety is gone, it appears. “Yeah.” Your laconic answer is all you can summon up.

A stilted silence threatens to grow, until Emma shakes her head. “Oh. Um. Do you want to sit down?” She gestures at the couch beside her, then visibly thinks better of it and shifts her arms to gesture at the couches off to either side of the one she’s sitting on.

“Okay.” You take her initial invitation, moving to sit on the same couch Emma is sitting on, although you do shift yourself up until you’re sitting as far away from her as you can. That’s a comfortable distance, you think.

This time, a silence does lap, although it’s significantly less awkward this time. You take the opportunity to rest your head back and look over at Emma, taking in her appearance.

She’s—you’re not going to say underdressed, but she’s not wearing as much makeup as she does at other times. She never does when she’s at home. Never has. You can understand it, a bit. Her home is her sanctuary, much like yours is to you.

Dressed down like this, she looks much less armoured than she does at school. It feels silly to think of it that way, but it’s true. She looks much more open, more… vulnerable.

The thing that draws your attention immediately is the hints of dark bags under her eyes. She’s concealed it with makeup, but either she hasn’t done a very good job of it, or she applied it early this morning and it’s started to fade away. Her eyes are bloodshot, too. You can’t say she looks terrible—even on her worst days, Emma has never looked terrible—but she looks even more tired than you
feel.

She shifts under your scrutiny, lowering her eyes to the couch. She doesn’t say anything, but her hands clench into fists against it. Instinctively, you flinch slightly, causing her to look at you with wide eyes and her hands to unclench.

“I—sorry.” Emma shakes her head, scoffing slightly at herself. “Um. You look tired. Do you want some coffee? I’ll go make you some.” She attempts to rise to her feet, but you’re already shaking your head.

“You're dad is making me some,” you reply. “Thanks, though.”

She settles back, hands coming back up to fiddle with the book on her lap. You look down at it, but only have time to read a couple of words—The Psychology Of—before her hands come up to cover the title. Quickly, before you can read it, she closes the book and hurriedly puts it aside, on the same table as the lamp. “Okay.”

Thankfully, Alan arrives before the two of you can lapse into silence again, bearing two cups of coffee. He puts one on the coffee table in front of you, not worrying about a coaster, and one in front of Emma, who looks up at him and gives him a tired “Thank you”.

“Thanks,” you mutter in turn, reaching over to grab it. It’s warm, and when you take a sip of it, just sweet enough, too. Not that that’s surprising. After Mom had died, you’d spent a fair few nights sleeping over at Emma’s house while Dad tried to cope with everything. It hasn’t been long enough that he would have forgotten something as simple as how you like your coffee.

He gives the two of you an encouraging smile. “Dinner will be ready in about an hour,” he says, his gaze flickering between the two of you. “We’re having roast lamb tonight.” That’s Dad’s favourite. “Emma, your mother and I are only going to be in the kitchen talking to Danny. If you need anything, just come and ask, okay? The same goes for you, Taylor.”

Emma hunches her shoulders, looking deliberately away from both you and her father as she replies. “Okay, Dad. Thanks.”

You look between the two of you, your brow knitted. You reach out with your power briefly, but her emotions are turbulent right now. Anxiety, fear, happiness, contentment, and something—some deep anger, jagged shards of it all aimed directly towards her own core—wrapped tight in a thick mist of tiredness. You hurriedly withdraw your power, grimacing slightly. You’re not nearly awake enough to try and decipher her emotions tonight.

Instead, you just wait until Alan has finished staring between the two of you and left the room, then just sit there, nursing your coffee in your hands for a moment as you try to gather up the courage to say something. Say anything, really.

So you start with the basics. “How have you been?” you ask, silently clutching your cup a little harder.

Emma looks over at you with a dull expression on her face. “Alright,” she murmurs. Anger courses through her for a moment, another wave of the jagged emotion aimed within her, followed swiftly by—shame?—and then something solid, earthy. Determination? Resolution? “Well… kind of. Things are getting better, I think.”
“Hm.” You don’t bother asking what those things are. You’re both well aware of the issues she’s facing and your shared histories. “You look tired.” Modulating your voice carefully, you try to keep your tone soothing and non-judgmental.

She grimaces. “I haven’t been sleeping well.” Placing the coffee on the table beside her, atop her book, she shifts around, drawing her legs up to rest on the couch and wrapping her arms around then. Huddling defensively in on herself, she continues, “You look tired too. Have you been sleeping properly?”

“I worked late last night,” you reply. “Then I had to get up early for a date.”

Abruptly, something dark and poisonous rises up in her, the emotion flashing up so quickly it overwhelms even the jagged shards of her anger. You can’t help but flinch a little, even as she fights it down, burying it beneath iron bands of self-control. You quickly look away, mind reeling and the fog of tiredness receding a little. That—that was the strongest emotion you’ve felt coming from Emma, ever. One of the strongest emotions you’ve felt altogether. You’re pretty sure it was jealousy, or at least it felt like it. It has that same dark, almost toxic taste to it.

She doesn’t say anything for a moment. You can feel her internal struggle as she tries to bind the jealousy up, leaving the jagged shards of anger free to grow deeper, sharper within her. Even with your face turned away, you can see her bury her head in her knees from here.

Once she has it back under control, she looks up again, nodding. Tiredness has spread over her face, seeping into her posture; she’s almost slumping over where she sits. “I see,” she murmurs, her voice almost inaudible. Then, louder; “You always were the kind of person to just power through tiredness when you wanted something.” She looks up, giving you a small smirk. There are no traces of that seething jealousy on your face.

You’re glad you’re still looking away from her, only able to watch her through your peripheral vision, because you’re pretty sure she’d notice your frozen expression otherwise. Your heart is beating a little faster than usual, beating hard enough that you can feel it thumping against your ribcage, almost. It’s a conscious effort to get your face to loosen back up so you can turn back to her as you reply.

“It’s not like you’re any better.” You match her small smirk. “You were always the one who made us both stay awake until two on Christmas morning.”

“It’s not like you ever argued,” she notes. “You were always so eager to see Santa Claus. Remember the periscope?”

A loud gasp escapes you. “Oh, the periscope!” The periscope had been your idea, when you and Emma had been just four years old. Your preschool teachers had taught you about submarines earlier that December, and you’d gone home and bugged Dad until he helped you make a silly little periscope you could use to pretend to be a submarine in the bathtub. When Christmas had rolled around, you’d come up with the fantastic idea of sitting at the top of the stairs and using the periscope to peer down into the living room where the Christmas tree sat, hoping that Santa’s anti-spy powers wouldn’t activate if he couldn’t see you. It had almost worked, until Alan had found the two of you awake and giggling to each other at the top of the stairs half an hour past midnight.

In retrospect, it’s probably a good thing he’d found the two of you. If you’d spotted Emma’s mother putting the presents beneath the tree when you were just four years old, it would have absolutely crushed you.
Her smirk grows into a more genuine grin. “And there was the Tooth Fairy incident,” she recalls. You shake your head, a low “nooo” escaping you as you try to fight off the memories, and her grin grows even bigger. “And you made me wait to go to bed until midnight on every single one of your birthdays until you were ten so I could wish you happy birthday straight away.”

Your smile turns nostalgic. That had been one of the best feelings, watching Emma struggle to stay awake as the two of you played with your dolls while the minutes ticked by. It was the one night of the year Mom and Dad didn’t make you go to bed by eight, and you made the most of it, enacting silly night-time plays with Emma and your dolls. Emma had done it, too. Every single time, she had fought to stay awake until midnight so she could lean over and place a single kiss on your forehead and wish you happy birthday “on the firstest minute!”.

“Yeah, but I always let you go to bed at midnight,” you recall, tapping your chin. As you talk, you reach out with your power, gently touching her emotions again. You’re not sure if it will help much, but—even if you’re too tired to decipher what’s going on here, you know for sure that whatever she’s feeling right now is much darker than you ever want Emma to feel. You don’t tug on it, though—you just gently pull on that happiness she’s feeling, trying to ease it up as much as you can without being too overt. “I remember your eleventh, Emma.”

On Emma’s eleventh birthday, the two of you had stayed over at your place for the night. Mom and Dad had sent the two of you to bed at nine, but you had remained awake until they had gone to bed, at which point the two of you had snuck out to the living room and watched Cinderella three times in a row, until eventually the two of you had fallen asleep against each other on the couch. You can still remember the sound of Emma’s snores.

A flush rises over her cheeks as her grin grows a little wider. “That was a good night,” she recalls fondly. She releases her legs, looking wistfully over at you. “At least until your mom woke us up at eight and yelled at us.”

Chuckling, you nod. That hadn’t been a pleasant moment.

Determined not to let the conversation slip back into awkward silence, you take a deep breath. Emma is looking down at the couch now, tracing small circles over its surface. There’s not much more the two of you can say along those lines without straying into territory neither of you are comfortable with.

Instead, you move onto a simpler topic. “So what have you been doing lately?”

If you didn’t have your grip already on her happiness, you’d be taken aback by the sudden surge in stormy sadness that rises in her briefly, before she fights that, too, down beneath bands of iron self-control. As she does that, you give her happiness a somewhat stronger tug, and watch in relief as a small smile blooms on her face. Aside from that, though, she just shrugs half-heartedly.

“Nothing much,” she mumbles. “School. Hanging out with Sophia. Homework. That kind of thing. Um. Oh! Dad’s been getting involved in the campaign for mayor this year, so I’ve been helping him make posters for that.”

You blink at her. Huh. “Your dad is getting involved in politics? Isn’t he a lawyer?”

She shrugs. “I think he wants to move into a position with the council,” she says, frowning. “Dad’s work has been having trouble lately. Not a lot of people in the city have the money to afford a
divorce lawyer any more. Mister Calvert says that if some of Mister Christner’s policies go through, there could be some new jobs opening, so Dad’s been helping out where he can.”

A frown steals over your face for a moment. Isn’t that a conflict of interest? Actually, for once, you’re pretty sure you don’t know—does it count as a conflict of interest if you’re hoping that a candidate you support will create a job you can apply for?

You dismiss the thought almost immediately. No, if Alan is involved, then it’s not corruption. He’s not the kind of man who would do illegal stuff like that.

“What are you doing to help?” you ask instead. “Are you designing the posters or helping to make them?”

“I’m just helping to make them,” she admits. “It’s kind of tricky, actually. You can’t just print them on regular paper…”

The two of you continue talking for a while. At first, the two of you talk about Emma’s responsibilities in politics—“It might look good on a college application,” she says wryly at one point—and eventually move on, talking first about how Emma is doing in school—“I’m doing pretty good,” she says, a tiny hint of pride in her voice that abruptly drops into a depressed murmur as she continues, “It’s not like I have much else to do these days”—and then on to how her modelling career is going—“It’s going okay. I’ve had other things on my mind so I haven’t been speaking to my agent as often as I should.”

By this point in the conversation, though, she’s interrupting her words every other sentence to stifle a huge yawn and blinking sleepily. You’re not doing much better; in fact, you’re pretty sure you’re slurring your words all over the place.

“Still half an hour until dinner,” Emma moans. Behind her, her cup of coffee still sits there, half full but no longer steaming. Your own sits on the table, abandoned and almost forgotten. She lets out a frustrated groan. “I’m so tiiiired.”

You lean over and pat her on the arm sympathetically, drawing a thankful smile from her. “I know,” you admit. “I’m tired too.”

She snuggles up against the arm of her couch, lowering her head to rest on the armrest. “Dinner’s going to be soon,” she slurs. She stretches her feet out hesitantly, eventually letting them come to rest a little over halfway across the couch. “We could, uh.” She yawns again, attempting to stifle the movement against the armrest before just accepting that she wasn’t going to be able to hide this one. “We could, uh. Watch a movie or something.”

You blink hazily at her, the words taking a few seconds to penetrate into your head. By that point, Emma’s eyes are already half-closed, although her gaze is fixated on you.

“Maybe later,” you mumble. You were going to say something else, but—whatever you were going to say, it’s lost somewhere in the fog in your mind. “Could keep talking. Talk about, um. Books.”

But when you look up, Emma’s eyes are completely closed, and her chest is gently rising and falling. Her feet are warm. You stretch out your own legs alongside hers, lightly rubbing your feet against her thighs. Mmm.
… Emma’s already asleep. It’s only half an hour until dinner time anyway. And you are feeling pretty tired.

Dad will wake you up for dinner anyway, won’t he?

You close your eyes for a moment, letting out a tired sigh. You’ll just think about it for a moment. Weigh up the pros and cons of taking a nap.

(The last thing you register is the feeling of Emma shifting against you, her legs moving backwards to tangle against yours.

Her stockings are soft against your legs. It feels nice.

And then, nothing.)

Sunday comes and goes in a blur. Dad does not, as it turn out, feel like waking you up. You were out like a light, he tells you on Sunday afternoon; you didn’t even stir when he picked you up and carried you out to the car. He tried to tell you that you curled up and snuggled against his chest, but you’re pretty sure he’s just making fun of you by that point.

For most of Sunday, you just go and spend some time with Victoria—which reminds you; you should really ask her what was up with those questions the next time you see her—before coming back home to hang out with Dad.

As it turns out, he got a whole lot more than just one DVD. As he explains to you with an embarrassed smile, apparently this man—David Attinsomething—has done several series covering different topics, and he got three complete series for less than twenty dollars. They’re not the most thrilling videos you’ve ever watched, but they’re informative enough, and Dad seems engaged with the man’s style of narration.

It’s a good time, at least.

You’re still feeling the lingering aftereffects of your tiredness when you finally collapse in bed on Sunday night, however. Your study is proceeding apace, but you’re too tired to sit there until eleven at night doing it, so you’re in bed a little after ten.

You close your eyes and snuggle into your pillow, considering your plans for the next couple of days. This is the last week of school before you have holidays for two weeks, so… hm.
Monday arrives with a rumble of thunder and the light patter of rain. You give a resigned sigh as you go about your morning routine, blinking the last vestiges of sleep from your eyes and grumbling about not being able to go jogging that morning.

Classes are, as usual, boring. You spend more time through the day reading through your business textbooks than you do listening to your teachers, which is becoming less and less of an unusual occurrence. None of your teachers have even said anything yet.

After classes have finished for the day, you head to the library, a mixture of both anticipation and nervousness churning in your gut. You’d been sure that Madison would be happy to accept the choker when it was just an abstract idea, but now that it’s time to actually give it to her, you suddenly find yourself feeling a lot less certain.

It’s too late now, though. You’ve already engraved the tag, and the store’s return policy had explicitly stated that any alterations to the jewellery would prevent items from being able to be returned.

You arrive there slightly ahead of her, and take advantage of the minute or so your early arrival affords you to drop your bag by your table and quickly scout the library, checking if anyone else is in here. There’s something particular you would like Madison to do, and she’s probably going to refuse to do it if anyone else might be around to see. Thankfully, there’s nobody else in here; it’s just you, a newly arrived Madison, and the two librarians sequestered away in their office.

Madison doesn’t look surprised to see you here ahead of her, although normally she’s the one who gets here first. Your classes for the last periods of the day are usually much farther away from the library than hers are, but it’s easy for her to get held up in the rush of students or catching up on the last of her school notes, while you can head straight here immediately after the bell rings. You’ve told her before that you don’t want her scrambling to meet you if it means falling behind on her classwork; you want her to keep her grades up so she can go to college and pursue her degree in fashion design.

You pat your leg with an inviting grin. She returns the smile, blushing lightly, and hurries over so she can place her bag off to the side and rest herself on your lap, leaning back against you. Your arms automatically rise up to hold her in place, causing her to let out a contented sigh.

Ordinarily, you’d be leaning down to get your textbooks out by now. Madison doesn’t seem to notice the lack of movement on your part, content to just close her eyes and lean back to rest the back of her head on your shoulders, but all you can focus on is the choker in your pocket.

You take a deep breath, preparing yourself. Then, you slip your hands beneath Madison’s shirt, resting them on her warm skin there, and begin drawing small circles around her bellybutton, drawing a small smile from her. “Madison,” you murmur in her ear. She answers with an incoherent murmur, too busy enjoying the feeling of your hands against her. “Madison.”

She stirs, opening her eyes and blinking lazily towards you. “Yeah?” she whispers.

Flattening your stomach, you push her shirt a little higher. “Take your shirt off,” you reply, giving her what you hope is a persuasive grin. She glances around the library, but before she can voice an
objection, you continue; “I’ve already checked, there’s nobody else in here. The only person who can see you is me.”

At that, she lifts her head and lets out a long exhale, her cheeks growing a little red. “I don’t, um. If you want me to, then okay.” She reaches down to where your hands are, but instead of beginning to undo them, she just rests her fingers on the lowest button. Her cheeks flush even darker for a moment, but you just lean down and around to place a small kiss against her jaw. Apparently it helps to alleviate her anxiety, because she exhales again and begins undoing her buttons torturously slowly.

Patiently, you wait for her to undo all of them before you slide your hands further up her body and gently nudge her shirt open. The material opens freely, and you coo slightly as the sight of a lacy black bra is revealed. “You’re still wearing these,” you murmur, lifting your hands to cup the bra in your hands briefly. “You remembered.”

“Of course.” She bites her lip, nibbling it anxiously beneath her teeth. It’s hard to see it with her head only half-twisted to look at you. “You said you like it when I wear these, so I wear them all the time, um. In case you want to see them.” She lowers her hands to her lap, then thinks better of it, moving her arms down to rest against your thighs instead. Then, with a slightly naughty expression on her face, she turns her head further to eye you and says, “Actually, I was going to come to school without a bra today.”

“But you didn’t.” You trace your fingers beneath the edge of her bra, drawing a shiver from her. “Why not?”

She looks at you with lidded eyes. “I knew you wouldn’t be happy if I did,” she replies. “It can get kind of obvious when I’m around you.” Both of you glance down at her bra, through which you can see the shape of her hard nipples. “And other people aren’t allowed to see me like that. You’re the only one who can see me like that, even through a shirt.” She finishes her sentence off with a single definitive nod.

Pleased, you slide two of your fingers beneath her bra and maneuver them up high enough that you can place them on either side of her nipple and gently squeeze it between them. You’re lucky her breasts are so small, or you wouldn’t be able to do that. “Good girl,” you murmur directly into her ear, drawing a shiver out of her. “I want to see you without a bra on, but not where anyone else can see. This body is mine.” You punctuate that with another squeeze of her nipple, drawing a nod from her, along with another, stronger shiver.

“I know.” She lets out a shaky breath, her mouth forming a small smile. “I’m yours. Not just my body. I’m yours.”

You can’t help but lean in and give her a kiss at that. Her smile grows wider. She’s pleased with drawing that reaction from you. You hold it until your neck starts to grow uncomfortable from being so twisted, then bite her lip slightly and withdraw, causing her to pout, which fades after a moment as you caress her cheek and murmur into her ear, “Turn around.” You slide your fingers back out from beneath her bra so she can.

It’s difficult for Madison to maneuver herself, sitting on your lap so close to the table. You oblige her by sliding the chair backwards, but she still has to awkwardly lean down and pull her skirt up until it’s resting mid-thigh so she can spread her legs wide enough to place them over either side of the chair. You wait patiently, giving her an encouraging smile when she looks up at you with a light blush, embarrassed at how long it’s taking her.
Eventually, though, she makes it. You have to jump your chair a few times to get it back close enough to the table that Madison has something to lean against if she wants to lean back, but you make it. Her hands are tracing small circles on your sides, and she’s buried her head in your shoulder again.

That won’t do, though. You stroke her back gently. “Madison,” you call out in a soft sing-song voice. “Sit up.” She does immediately, tilting herself so she can sit straight up and look attentively towards you. You place another kiss on her jaw, then lean back. “You haven’t finished taking off your shirt, Madison,” you remind her.

She glances down, then back up at you, but doesn’t question you. A few seconds later, she’s folding her shirt neatly and putting it on the table, her cheeks somewhat redder. Her hands hesitate, hovering awkwardly at her sides. “The bra too?” You nod, so she reaches around behind herself to undo the strap of her bra and pulls it off, placing it on top of her shirt.

Leaning down, you press a kiss to her nose. “Good girl,” you praise her again. The combination of the affectionate kiss and the praise causes a happy grin to spread across her face as she proudly presents her breasts to you. Idly, you note that you should probably find some more pet names for Madison—if you keep calling her a good girl all the time, it’s going to lose its impact.

It’s tempting to play with her a little, but you’re still well aware of the choker sitting in your pocket. You don’t pull it out immediately, though. First, you spend a few moments idly stroking your hands through Madison’s hair, watching her preen under your attention.

A brief impulse runs through you, and you’re left wishing you’d brought a brush with you. Her hair has a tendency to fall down, covering her neck. You kind of want to do her hair while she’s like this. Have her sit topless on your lap, focused on her homework, while you play with her hair, tying it up in a ponytail. It’d probably still be too long for you to stare at her neck through, though. Maybe you could get her to cut it shorter instead. She’d do that if you asked her to, you’re pretty sure. She might even find it erotic, cutting her hair away from her preferred style in order to better suit your tastes.

Then again, you like Madison as she is, too. Her long hair is nice. It looks very feminine.

You stew in your thoughts for a moment before you mentally shake your head, clearing your thoughts. Now isn’t the time for you to get lost in your head fantasizing about her.

“You haven’t finished taking off your shirt, Madison,” you say, your voice barely above a whisper. She stirs, her eyes half-opening; apparently, she’d closed them—and leaned further into your petting—while your attention had been distracted. “I’ve got a present for you.”

She looks curiously at you. “Um, thank you?” She looks slightly confused, and a little afraid, so you rush to reassure her.

“Don’t worry, you didn’t miss anything.” You stroke your fingers through her hair one last time, then withdraw your hands so you can take out the choker. You’re not the kind of girl who celebrates little one-month anniversaries anyway, although you do make a note to at least celebrate your six-month anniversary with her. “This is something special.” You pull the box out from your pocket, making a slightly theatrical show of it, and present it to her.

She takes it from you, not even looking at it for a moment as she leans in to press a kiss to your lips before leaning back and opening it. Lifting it out of the box, she examines it for a moment—then her
eyes widen as they fall on the tag, and she looks up at you, shocked.

Nervousness floods you. “You don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to,” you hurry to reassure her. “I can, um. I can take it back, too, if you don’t want it.”

Madison examines it for a moment, running her fingers over the shallow engraving on the tag. “What’s it for?” she whispers.

“It’s, um.” You lick your lips. This had all sounded much better in your head. “It’s for you to wear so that everyone who looks at you will know. That you’re mine, my cute little sub.” Her face heats up at that, as does yours. “I mean, um, they probably won’t know still, but that’s okay. I don’t need everyone in the world to know, it’s for you, so that you always have a sign. So that—“

Madison leans in, interrupting your rambling with a kiss. After a shocked moment, you return it, slipping your tongue into her mouth to approvingly rub over hers. It ends after a moment, leaving the two of you slightly panting, which does… interesting things to Madison’s breasts, sitting on your lap as she is.

“It’s like a brand,” she mumbles. Her cheeks flush red again, then turn even darker as she licks her lips. “Except, um. Yes. Yes, of course I’ll wear it. Please.” She leaves the box sitting on her lap and takes the choker out, holding it up to you with a vulnerable expression on her face. You’re not even slightly ashamed at the thrill that shoots through you at that look.

Your hands are trembling slightly as you take the choker from her and bring it up to her neck. She lifts her chin up and tilts her body back, revealing the pale expanse of her throat to you. It’s tempting to lean down and give her a little bite, just to see how she would react—would she flinch back and pull away, or would she sit still and allow you do what you will to her? You refrain, though. You don’t actually want to hurt her.

The choker fits perfectly around her neck, resting just above the hollow of her neck and allowing the tag to sit against it—plainly visible to anyone who looks at her chest. The bright silver looks nice beside her pale skin.

Neither of you say anything. Madison just leans down, circling her arms around your neck, and rests herself against you in a warm, grateful hug. You let her take her fill of contact for several minutes, just writing small letters on her back with your finger.

Honestly, you’d be content with just sitting here like this until five, but there is one other thing you need to talk to Madison about. Victoria was, after all, right. It’s unfair to keep Madison in the dark about her.

Still, she’s radiating such contentment that you’re reluctant to disturb her just yet. You can give her a few more minutes of basking before you interrupt her.

You let over fifteen minutes pass before you gently nudge her. You’re a bit worried that she’s going to fall asleep at this rate, anyway—after last Friday, you’re concerned about her sleeping habits. You’d considered inviting her over through the week so you could make sure she’s sleeping properly, but you don’t have a bed big enough to comfortably hold both of you for the entire night, and if Madison’s sleeping over, you’re not letting her sleep anywhere except beside you.

You have to nudge her again, this time a little harder, before she stirs and moves back, pouting at you. You give her a soft apologetic kiss, but refrain from pushing it too far. Her lips are entirely too
distracting today.

Now that she’s up and looking at you expectantly, you can feel yourself growing nervous again. You can’t help but extend your power a little, settling—just gently—over Madison’s emotions. You refrain from touching them, but you want to know if she gets upset, at least, so you can try and smooth it over as quickly as possible.

“Madison,” you say, then stop and lick your lips. How are you even supposed to say this? She just waits patiently for you to continue, though, giving you a moment to compose your thoughts. “We haven’t, um. We need to talk.” She suddenly looks hurried, so you quickly circle your arms loosely around her waist and add hastily, “Not about anything bad for us! I think, at least. I just, um. I think I need to tell you about the other girls I’ve been seeing.”

She tilts her head questioningly at you, but there’s no flare-up of irritation or sadness in her. “Why?” she asks calmly.

You almost reply with “Victoria told me I should”, but you manage to catch the words before they come out of your mouth. That would not have been a good response. Instead, you try to phrase it a little differently. “Because I need to be honest with you,” you say instead. “And I don’t want you to feel like I’m sneaking around behind your back.”

A gentle smile spreads over her face. “You don’t need to tell me if you don’t want to,” she says. “I’ll understand. It doesn’t upset me any more. I know you won’t forget about me.”

“Of course not,” you reply instantly. “Never. But, um. Honesty is good in every relationship.” Her smile grows bigger, and she ducks her head for a moment. You’re a little puzzled—you didn’t say anything embarrassing!—but you press on before you can lose your nerve. “A-anyway. Um. I’ve already told you about Sophia, haven’t I?”

She nods. “You told me you kissed her in the bathroom. And you’re seeing Emma, right?”

“Uh.” You nod your head, then catch yourself and shake your head. Then, after a moment, you nod. “Kind of. It’s complicated, but I do want to see her, eventually.” Sadness does spike in her then, so you pull her tighter against you. She relaxes. It doesn’t disappear immediately, but it does lessen somewhat. “Are you okay with that?”

Instead of answering, Madison leans in and presses a kiss to first one cheek of yours, then the other. Then she shifts back and calmly looks you in the eyes. “I am,” she replies simply. “I kind of figured you would want to date them, if you’re dating me.” You want to protest at calling it dating—Amy’s the only girl you’re dating—but your objection dries up before you can voice it.

Isn’t it a kind of dating, anyway? It might not be the romantic kind shown in movies, but—if it makes the two of you happy, then why can’t you call it dating?

Besides—you kind of like the idea of having girlfriends.

“Right,” you say eventually instead. “There’s also, um. There’s some more.” She doesn’t look startled at that, which is a little odd, but good. Maybe you haven’t been as subtle as you’d like. Or maybe she just stares at you a lot. That does seem like a thing she would do. “I’ve been dating a girl called Amy. She works at a clinic I volunteer at. We’ve only been dating for a couple of weeks now.”
Madison looks curiously at you. “Alright,” she says calmly. Her depression has mostly faded away by now, and oddly, it hasn’t spiked back up again after learning of Amy. “Is there anyone else?”

“There’s Victoria too,” you admit. “She’s—um. You have to promise not to tell anyone else, okay?”

She knits her brow, but nods. “Of course not,” she assures you. “I’m good at keeping secrets.” For some reason, she half-smirks at that. You give her an odd look, but let it pass.

“Right.” You sigh a little. “Victoria is, um. Her full name is Victoria Dallon.” Madison’s eyes widen slightly. “Yeah. I’ve been dating Glory Girl.”

The admission feels good, but you can’t enjoy it too much, because Madison’s emotions are boiling away beneath your touch. Slight anger, depression, slight horror, and arousal hanging thick and heavy over it all—and then all of it but the arousal falls away, smothered beneath a blanket of acceptance and determination, with more than a few threads of happiness beneath it. You blink, a little startled. That’s a much stronger reaction than you had anticipated, and not a hint of it has shown on her face.

She nods again, slower this time. Then, abruptly, she smiles and leans in close to you. “Of course you are,” she murmurs. “Even superheroes can’t resist you.” Her smile turns lopsided again, as though at some private joke, before she presses another kiss to your lips and settles against you, her face close enough that your breaths mingle. “Is there anyone else?”

You hesitate. “Kind of?” you tell her uncertainly. “There’s, um. I’m not dating anyone except you, Sophia, Amy and Victoria.” It sounds kind of ridiculous when you list them out like that. “And, maybe Emma eventually. But there are two other girls that I want to seduce.” And there’s more beyond that, but it feels a little ridiculous to admit that you want to seduce Amy’s mother and Miss Militia to Madison. “They’re, uh, Charlotte and Aisha. Charlotte is in our Lit classes,” you add helpfully.

She leans in and pecks your lips again. “I know who Charlotte is,” she murmurs. “I think she has a crush on you.”

Shaking your head, you rub her back a little, enjoying the way her body feels against you when she shivers. “I think she has a crush on you,” you reply back, smiling slightly. “She’s a smart girl like that.”


Finally, you can shake your head. “No, there’s nobody else yet,” you tell her. “Just the ones I mentioned.”

“Hm.” She smiles again. “Okay. Six girls, and me. You’re building yourself a nice harem, hm.”

You blink, startled. You haven’t… actually thought of it like that, but—yes, that is what you’re doing, isn’t it? “I guess I am,” you concede. Offering her a tentative smile, you say in a hopeful voice, “Is that okay with you?”

She nods, like it wasn’t even in question. “Of course,” she says, sounding slightly surprised. A moment passes, and she seems to think about it. Then some form of comprehension settles in on her face. “Oh, because I was anxious before?” You nod, and she grins wryly. “I was afraid back then that you would get bored of me,” she admits. “I didn’t want you to leave me because you found a
You balk. A cuter girl than Madison? You know lots of cute girls—Amy is very cute—but... “I could never find a cuter girl,” you say. “I can find lots of other girls that are cute, but none of them would be you. You’re my Madison, and you’re the cutest Madison.” You nod resolutely. That’s exactly how it is, so she doesn’t need to be worried any more.

She huffs a little laugh out, smiling genuinely at you. “I stopped worrying about that a while ago,” she admits. “After we, um. After we had sex. You were really nice, and sweet, and you held me all through the night and asked me how I was the next day.” Her eyes are unfocused, and she has the cutest, goofiest little grin on her face as she talks. You have to refrain from letting out a little squeal and hugging her tightly to you so you don’t interrupt her story. “I think that—maybe it’s a little early for that, but yeah.” You blink for a moment, a little confused—she’d cut herself off very quickly there. She doesn’t sound like she’s having any regrets over your bedtime activities, so what did she mean to say originally?

After a few seconds, she ducks her head shyly and admits, “So, um. I’m okay with being in your harem, Taylor. It’s okay. I really don’t mind if you want to date other girls, too.” Madison smiles up at you, an adoring little grin that makes the warmth in your belly grow stronger. “Just. God, this is embarrassing.” She ducks her head, laughing quietly at herself. “Sorry. Sorry. I just want to say, it’s okay if you date other girls. I’ll be in your harem, that’s okay, I like being in your harem. I’m your little sub. I’ll do whatever you ask me to. But, um. I don’t want to date anyone else. I just want to be with you.”

You pause, raising an eyebrow at her. She blushes even harder, then darts forward to hide her face against your shoulder. “I didn’t ask you to,” you say slowly. Honestly, you’re a little confused now. Where did that even come from? Unless—is she worried that you’re going to try to use her to seduce Charlotte?

Her voice is muffled against your neck as she replies. “I know. I just wanted to say it.” She lifts herself back up to look at you. Her face is somehow even redder, to the point that you actually raise one of your hands from her back to her cheek. It’s warm. “It’s, it’s my thing. Okay? I’ll help you however you want, I’ll make your girlfriends breakfasts and lunches, I’ll even help you seduce girls if you tell me to. But I don’t want to have any other girlfriends, and I don’t want to have sex with anyone except you.” She nods in a self-satisfied manner.

You’re still stuck on the “I’ll even help you seduce girls” part, but you shake it off. “Um, okay,” you say slowly. “I won’t invite you to any threesomes if you don’t want me to. That’s fine.”

She pouts at you. “Good,” she says sulkily. Your confusion just grows even stronger. She’s kind of sending you mixed messages here. Then she buries her head back against your neck. Her tone is more serious as she continues, “I just—I want to be your girlfriend. You can have other girlfriends, but I only want to have you.” She lifts her head up then, and presses a little kiss against your neck. When she speaks, her voice is lower, softer, but no less serious. “Actually, it’s kind of a turn-on,” she admits to you, whispering the words almost directly into your ear. “I like knowing that you can have lots of girlfriends, but I can only have you.”

This time, you’re the one who shivers. She’s right. That is kind of a turn-on.

There is one thing you have to check first, though.

“Does this mean I can’t ask for a foursome?” you ask plaintively. She looks curiously at you, so you...
expound on your request a little. “I just- I’ve had this fantasy where I have a foursome with you, Emma and Sophia. If you don’t-“

Abruptly, depression flares up in her again, and she leans in to press a firm kiss against your lips. You don’t scowl at her, but after a moment, you do reprovingly bite her lip. She’s getting a little too aggressive with these kisses. She winces, but doesn’t retreat back to your shoulder. “That’s fine,” she says after a moment, looking seriously at you. “I can’t—I don’t want to have regular threesomes or anything. I like that you’re the only one who is allowed to touch me, no matter who else wants to. But if you have a serious fantasy, then I’ll do it. I want you to be happy more than anything.”

You lean forward and gently kiss her nose. “Okay,” you reply simply. “Then that’s that.”

Madison doesn’t end up getting much studying done that afternoon. You briefly consider asking her to put her shirt back on, but—she **did** just reaffirm her commitment to you, and she gave you several new fantasies aside from that. And she even told you that she’d be willing to help you seduce other girls. Doesn’t that deserve a reward? Admittedly, you’re deriving just as much pleasure from fondling her as she is, but that’s beside the point.

You also make sure to give her a very thorough goodnight kiss before she puts her shirt back on and goes out to meet Rick, too. Not because she deserves it, this time. Just because you want to.

Shirtless studying is the best kind of studying. Now you really want to ask Dad about that basement, so that you can do this kind of thing all the time.

Surprisingly, for once, the glow of your time spent with Madison doesn’t entirely fade by the time you get home. It’s not as strong now as it was immediately after Madison whispered her words into your ear, yes, but you still feel as though you’re suffused with a soft, warm glow as you pad inside the house.

Surprisingly, Dad is home when you get home, sitting in his armchair and watching something on the television—a game of football, you think. You stop by the doorway, poking your head in, and call out, “Hello, Dad.”

He twists in his chair to look at you and gives you a serious nod. “Hello, Daughter.” The corner of your lips curl up, but Dad somehow maintains a straight face as he continues, “Nice weather we’ve been having.”

“It’s been raining for three days,” you note. He glances out the window, where the rain is still softly pattering down on the ground, then turns back to you and shrugs. You sigh. “Do you have any plans for dinner?”

He just shakes his head. “I was thinking I might cook us some chicken,” he muses. “Does that sound alright to you?”

You think about it for a moment. “Do we have enough for three?” you ask. “I want to invite Emma over.” You’ve been—you haven’t exactly been thinking about it all day, but now, in the moment, it feels right to invite her over. That flood of dark depression and anger you’d felt from her on Saturday had scared you. It still does.

On the television, a host of people scream loudly, you assume as somebody kicks the ball into the
net. Or however football works. Do they have nets in football? Regardless, it makes a strong contrast to Dad’s momentary silence as he looks at you with a serious expression before he responds.

“We have enough for three, yes,” he says, watching you carefully. You watch him as he watches you, giving him a slightly confused look. He seems to grow a little puzzled himself, but eventually just nods, still looking a little dissatisfied. “I’ll go call Alan and ask him if Emma can come over, then.”

“Okay.” You give him a smile, then wave a little at him before you dash up to your room.

Your room is mostly still clean, but you give it a quick once-over anyway, straightening your sheets and tidying your homework notes on your desk. From experience, you know that it won’t take Emma long to get here; maybe half an hour, depending. If Alan says it’s okay, of course, but why wouldn’t he?

While you wait for her to get here, you pull out Victoria’s copy of the next Harry Potter book and settle onto your bed to read it. You’ve finished four of them by now. They’re still not your favourite books, but the last one was actually kind of okay, even if it spent entirely too much time dwelling on the stupid romances. Harry should have just gone to the Yule Ball with Ron, you think. Or maybe with Draco; if there’s anything Sophia has taught you, it’s that it’s much more fun to play around with people who used to hate you.

You wonder what it would be like to live in that kind of world—in a world where everything is at your fingertips, if you only study hard enough and dedicate yourself to the practice. It’d certainly be different.

“Taylor!” Dad calls from out in the hall. Hurriedly, you pull your bookmark out from behind the front cover and put it on the page you’re reading so you don’t bend Victoria’s book as you put it down and rush out to meet them.

Emma and Alan are standing in the hall. The two of them look over as they hear your feet pattering down the hall, and each give you a smile. Alan’s smile is small but genuine, and his spoken “Hi” reflects that, while Emma’s is tired and happy. She’s wearing more makeup today than she did over the weekend, but you can feel the tiredness hanging heavy over her shoulders and weighing her down.

“Hello, Taylor,” she says lowly. She gives you a perfunctory little wave.

“Hi,” you say in return, waving to both Emma and Alan. Then you step forwards and reach for Emma’s hand. After a moment of hesitation, she reaches out and lets you take it and pull her off towards your room. You ignore the bemused looks that Alan and Dad give you as you go.

Emma stumbles along behind you, looking a little taken aback, but you don’t slow down. In a few moments, the two of you are in your bedroom. You make sure to close the bedroom door behind you with a loud click, although you don’t lock it.

She blinks at you for a few moment, then shrugs resignedly and moves over to sit on your bed, plucking at the edges of your blanket.

You’re pretty sure you did actually have a plan for what you were going to do once she was over, but now that she’s here, sitting in your bedroom with that exhausted look on her face, your mind has gone entirely blank. Seeking something to say, you move over and sit beside her on your bed.
It feels different to have her in your room now. Last time she’d been in here, you’d been panicky and anxious, almost refusing to let her talk. You’re still not sure if you’d touched her in an attempt to seduce her, or just to drive her out of your bedroom. Now, it feels almost—almost right. It helps that this time, you were the one to invite her in.

Briefly, you consider trying again. Would she let you touch her, this time, if you tried to? Probably not. You’re not sure you’re ready for that anyway.

You cast your mind around for a topic to talk about. The first thing that pops into your head is, “How is everyone?”

She side-eyes you, then closes her eyes and lets out a sigh before responding. “They’re doing fine,” she says flatly. “Dad’s still busy with his campaign work, and Mom’s busy working, like always.”

You hum a little. “What about your sister?” you ask, raising your eyebrow. As you do, you quickly stretch your power over to her and rest it over her emotions. Sure enough, she’s not in a good place. There’s that same core of anger, although this time it feels more like a jagged, sour sphere, spikes growing off in all directions but towards you. Dozens of spikes pierce inwards. Surrounding that is a low, grey cloud of depression. And, hovering over it all, is a thick, smothering blanket of tiredness and apathy.

It takes a few moments for you to dig through her emotions, looking for the threads of happiness you’d picked up last time. They’re buried, and buried deep, but they sing to your power, calling back to you, and you manage to get a good grasp on them.

You wait for her to finish talking, watching her expression carefully. After a few moments of pulling gently on her contentment, the lines on her forehead ease a little, and she stops slumping quite so hard. She’s not—she’s not happy, not even close. It’ll take a lot of work to get her there, you think. But this helps.

“Right,” you murmur when she finishes. “And how have you been?”

She shrugs, another half-hearted little gesture. “I’ve been alright,” she mumbles. “Nothing exciting happened. Sophia came over yesterday, we watched a movie together. I did my homework.” The ghost of a smirk spreads over her face. “Mister Gladly told me my essay was the most impressive essay he’d received yet. You’d better be careful, Taylor, or I might take over your position as the best student.” Almost as soon as she says the words, the teasing twist to her mouth suddenly fades in favour of an anxious grimace, as though she’s afraid she offended you.

You scoot a little closer and rub her knee, pulling sharply on her contentment for a moment. She lets out a shuddery sigh and leans sideways, towards you. “Mister Gladly is dumb,” you mumble. “My essay was really good.” You pout at her, but allow the corner of your lips to turn up in a slight smile so she knows not to take you too seriously.

Emma shakes her head, but her expression looks a little more open now. “I’m sure it was,” she murmurs, angling her knees towards you. You reward her with a small pat to the thigh before you resume rubbing her knee. “What did you do your essay on?”

“Japanese culture,” you reply. “And how it was influenced by the sinking of Kyushu.” You mean to elaborate further, but Emma shifts again, bringing herself closer to you, and your mouth goes dry. She’s really warm.
“That sounds interesting.” You can tell she doesn’t believe it, though. You don’t even need to feel her emotions to know that—she’s never found examinations of other cultures exciting. Hesitantly, she raises an arm, sliding it slowly behind your back. You don’t pull away, feeling—knowing—that whatever she’s trying to do, she’s not doing it to hurt you. And, indeed, all she does is hesitantly slip her arm around you and pull herself into a half-hug beside you, resting her cheek on your shoulder.

You return the hug, placing your own arm over her shoulder and allowing her to rest comfortably against you. It feels… nice. She’s soft, like Madison, although she’s a little bonier. Much softer than Sophia’s toned body.

The two of you keep up this quiet conversation about your schoolwork in the comfortable confines of your bedroom. It’s—comfortable is not a word you would use to describe interacting with Emma, and neither is safe, but it rests somewhere in the middle.

The entire time you talk with her, you keep a tight hold of her contentment, not letting it fall back beneath that shroud of apathy and depression. You don’t know what’s causing it, although you do have some very strong ideas, but if there’s something you can do to help Emma fight off her depression, you’re going to do it. And this seems to help.

Eventually, Dad calls the two of you down for dinner.

“It’s nothing exciting,” he says once he’s sitting down at the table, having served all three of you up dinner. “Do you still like lemon and rosemary chicken, Emma?”

Your friend looks up at him with wide eyes, then quickly nods and looks back down at her plate. You follow suit, examining what he’s cooked. He’s right—it’s nothing particularly exciting. He’s roasted some potatoes, and there’s some boiled peas and carrot slices off to the side. He cooks meals like this all the time, really. Potatoes are cheap, since they’re so abundant in supply nowadays, and frozen peas and carrots from the supermarket don’t cost very much.

Admittedly, rice dishes would be even cheaper—there’s a cape in India who has the power to exert some control over the weather, and he’s been helping India’s farmlands for the past few years. Food has been flowing through the country more abundantly than ever before, supported by donations from several charities, including one particularly large one rumoured to be funded by the Protectorate. But you don’t own a slow cooker, and rice cooked in a pot on the stove tends to be bland and unexciting.

Under the table, you find Emma’s hand and give it an encouraging squeeze. You still haven’t lifted your grasp from her contentment—it’s not in as much danger of just falling back down beneath her apathy just yet, but you don’t want to risk it.

Dad picks up the slack for you eventually, filling the air with questions about Emma’s schoolwork and regaling her with stories from his workplace. Emma doesn’t quite laugh at his stories, but at several points, you can feel her squeeze your hand beneath the table, and she does manage to muster a smile at some of his funnier stories. Eventually, even you join in, lobbing some jokes at Dad’s expense that draw faint, affectionate grins from her.

It’s nearly eight by the time the three of you finish eating. Dad stands, collecting the plates from in front of the two of you. “What time do you have to be back home?” he asks.

Emma looks up, her eyes wide, as though she’s startled at being addressed. “Ah—Dad said by nine.”
Her grip goes limp in yours for a moment, but you don’t let her hand slide out of yours, and even bring your other hand across to cup her hands. After a moment of your attention, she perks back up a little, drawing in a deep breath. “Thank you for the dinner, Danny.”

“Any time,” he says, tossing her a smile over his shoulder at her. “It’s good to have you over again, Emma. I know she won’t say it, but Taylor’s missed you.”

Your outraged cry of “DAD!!” muffles Emma’s silent chuckles, which muffle the worst of your anger. You sit back down from where you’d stood up, taking your hands off your hips to brush down your skirt with swift, angry movements. He’s not allowed to tease you just because you teased him about mistaking his own handwriting and eating Darcy’s lunch at work. He’s a Dad! Dads aren’t allowed to tease their daughters, they exist to be teased!

“All right,” Emma responds, turning her head to regard you with a small, warm smile. “I’ve missed Taylor too.” Her smile grows more hesitant as she takes in your face, but you just lean over and pat her leg again, tugging her contentment back up until she’s smiling at you.

Your angry pout doesn’t last long in the face of her beautiful smile. Your anger washes away, and soon you find yourself giving her a happy grin in return as you lead her back to your room.

It doesn’t feel great to have Emma over. You can still feel a pool of anxiety in your stomach as you sit beside her, and you’re not sure that will ever go away. You’d been sure, once, that you and Emma would be best friends forever, and up until you’d returned from that camp, you’d been certain that she had felt the same. And, yes, now you know the reason—but it’s a bullshit reason, even though it’s one you can kind of understand. If she turned on you once before, how can you be sure she won’t turn on you again?

But that kind of works in her favour, too. Emma might have turned on you, yes, but she was your best friend for well over a decade. Hell, she was your first friend, your only friend, for a very long time. She was your first in a lot of ways. Your first friend. Your first crush. The first girl you’d ever imagined kissing. The first girl you’d imagined while masturbating. And, as it turned out, the first girl to break your heart.

You shake your head wryly. Even your own thoughts are confused about her.

It’s hard to think straight about Emma right now. In the end, all you know that Emma is not in a good place—she hasn’t been for a long time. And you know that you could never stand by if you know that there’s something wrong with her. If there’s anything—anything—you can do to help her through this, you’ll do it. Even if that means ignoring your nervousness, ignoring the growing anxiety boiling away in your chest, and holding her on your bed for half an hour while she toys with the buttons on your shirt and breaths warmly against your neck.

Alan turns up a bit before nine, unfortunately. You’re a little annoyed at having an extra ten minutes stolen, but you have to let it slide—if you yell at him for it, you’re just not going to get any time with Emma. And besides, as he notes—Emma does have to get to bed. Even from half a house away, with hours of buoying her happiness passed by, you can still feel that thick smog of tiredness filling her.

You do make sure to give her a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek before she goes, though. She looks almost as surprised as Dad does, which just makes you poke your tongue out at her. She shouldn’t be so surprised—that’s how the two of you always said goodbye when you were younger.
After that, you retreat back to your room and pick your book back up, letting out a tired sigh.

School comes and goes on Tuesday, another dreary day at Winslow High. The one upside to the day is that it’s at least stopped raining, so you’re able to see the grimy bricks and crude graffiti that passes for decoration at the school lit in all its glory by the sun.

It’s tempting to ask Madison to take her shirt off during today’s tutoring session—or, better, maybe her panties—but you refrain. As much as you enjoy playing with your girl, it’s important that she keeps her grades up, and you don’t want to be a distraction from that.

She should have a life outside of you, or so you keep telling yourself. It’s pleasant to imagine keeping her all to yourself, having her stay in your house and cook and clean for you, but it’s not healthy. And as much as you’d like to take Madison’s fantasies that far, have her devote her entire life to you one day—it’s more important to you that she stays sound of mind.

Besides, there is one thing to look forward to through the day; today is Amy’s day at the clinic.

The clinic is surprisingly empty when you walk in today—there’s only one person in the waiting room, a bald man with a greying beard sitting on a chair, gingerly nursing an arm wrapped in plaster. Besides him, there’s two other men—a man in his twenties wearing a Brockton Bay University jacket washing the windows, and a man sitting behind the receptionist’s desk, looking frantically around as though he’s lost something.

You approach the receptionist hesitantly, looking on in. “H-hello?”

He jerks and looks up, as though startled by your appearance. He relaxes when he sees it’s only you. “Oh. Hi. Oh! Um. Yes, hello, how many I help you?”

You blink at him, a little taken aback. “I was just wondering if Doctor Fitzgerald is in,” you say quietly.

He nods. “Yes. He’s in his office. I can show you the way if you’d like—“

“No, that’s fine.” You take a step back, shaking your head. “I know the way. I’ll go speak to him. Thank you for the help.”

“No problem,” he calls after you, but you’re already gone.

The doctor’s door is closed, but you only have to knock once before you can hear him calling out for you to come in. You swing the door open, taking in the room’s tidy appearance, then step in and close the door behind you. “Hi,” you greet him.

He pushes his chair back, gesturing for you to take a seat, then walks his chair out from behind his desk. “Hello, Taylor.” He smiles kindly at you, an expression that you hesitantly try to match. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been alright.” You move over to one of the padded chairs in the office and sit down. “I’m, well, here for the day. Is there anything you need me to do?”
He hums for a moment, then pushes his chair back behind the desk. You’re kind of jealous. You’ve always wanted a wheelie chair of your very own. Especially one that spins. Mm. “I checked your forms last week,” he says casually. “You did a good job of filling those out for me. Natalie—our administrative assistant,” he explains at your inquisitive look, “was very grateful. We’re always looking for volunteers who can help out with the administrative side of running the clinic.”

You frown a little. “Is that even legal?” you ask.

He chuckles. “It’s a bit unorthodox,” he admits. “I did call your dad and ask for permission before assigning you inventory duty, don’t worry. And our sponsors don’t mind if our volunteers assist on the clerical side of things, either. We have nothing to hide. The New Wave movement regularly provides broad-level financial statements to the public, including expenditures. The only thing you’ll learn by filling out these forms for us that you couldn’t learn by reading their website is what brands of medical equipment we use.” You do remember that the forms had little private information on them, either—not even the required dates of delivery.

That doesn’t seem very smart to you. Then again, they are run in part by a lawyer. And they are a not-for-profit charity, too. Maybe there’s some legality you’re not aware of?

Learning that does a lot to ease your nervousness, anyway. You nod at him, most of your concerns appeased. “Cool,” you reply.

He coughs briefly, moving his hand up to cover his mouth. Once he moves it away, he starts searching through the papers on his desk. “I’ve got some more forms that you could fill out if you’d like,” he informs you. “I can find you something else to do if you’d like, but I’d appreciate it if you could do this for me. Natalie is very busy, even with Oliver’s help.”

“Sure.” You wait for him to gather up the papers, then take them and glance down. It seems to be just more acquisition forms—yes, it is. Although this time, it seems like there’s janitorial supplies in there, too. “Thank you, Doctor Fitzgerald. I’ll go fill these out now.”

He lazily waves you off. “If you need any help, just come ask me,” he calls out as you leave his office.

Disappointingly, Amy isn’t in the break room when you get there. You’re not sure why you expected her to be—she does have work, after all. It’s easy enough to fix; you just place your papers down and pull out your phone, sending her a short text to let her know you’ve arrived. Then you sit down and begin tidily filling out the papers. They’re pretty much exactly the same as last time.

You get so engrossed in the papers that you don’t notice somebody sneaking up behind you until they’ve wrapped their hands around you. Your first warning sign that somebody is there is when a hand sneaks out of nowhere and covers your eyes at the same time a warm body presses itself against the back of your chair. Instinctively, you attempt to jerk forwards, but you’re surprised enough that you can’t put any real effort into it—and by the time you’ve recovered somewhat, you can already feel the person’s hot breath against your ear as she whispers into your ear, “Guess who?”

“Amy!” You scowl at her, the expression only growing more glowering when you hear her giggle softly as she removes her hand.

“You’re a good guesser.” Amy moves around the other side of the table. She’s holding a small cardboard tray bearing two simple cups of coffee from the clinic’s cafeteria. “I guess I’m not very good at pretending I’m not me.” She takes one of them out of the tray and passes it over to you before sitting down.
You take it and poke your tongue out at her. “I don’t know anyone else in this clinic who would try and hug me,” you point out.

She nods her head, conceding the point. “That’s fair. Anyway, I bought you a coffee.” She points unnecessarily to it, prompting you to take a quick sip and nod.

“Thanks. I’m a bit tired,” you admit.

She nods easily. Now that she’s settled in, you can take a good look at her. The dark bags beneath her eyes are slightly less prominent than they were on Saturday, and there’s a slight smile on her face as she looks around the break room. She looks… happier. A little less stressed out.

You consider it for a moment, then speak again. “You look good,” you tell her.

Amy gives you a pleased smile. “So do you,” she says over her coffee. “I like your hair.”

You touch your hair self-consciously. You… didn’t even do anything with it this morning, except tie it back so it wouldn’t get in your way. Is she making fun of you? Hopefully not. You like your hair. “Uh, thanks,” you say, hiding your frown by taking another sip of your coffee. Then, eager to distract yourself; “Have you been doing anything interesting?”

She half-shrugs. “I’ve been busy,” she replies. “Work has been piling up, and Mom wants me to take some of my exams soon.”

Taking another sip of your coffee, you think about what to say next. Sometimes, you wish conversation would come to you a bit easier. Then; inspiration! “What subjects are you taking?” you ask curiously. You don’t think you’ve ever asked.

She’s happy enough to sit there and tell you about it, prompting you to tell her about your own classes in the meantime. As it turns out, she is entirely predictably mostly focused on literature classes and the sciences—“I have to take maths to get into college,” she confides in you, “but I’m not very good at it, so I got away with only having to do calculus and physics”—with a lesser focus on computer studies.

Eventually, the topic shifts towards college. You’re not sure what you want to study at college yet, or even if you want to go to college—after all, if this team idea of yours pans out, you probably won’t have the time to go to college. Amy, however, is actually quite surprising. “I want to study medicine,” she says entirely predictably, “but I want to do some legal studies on the side.” At your surprised look, she elaborates somewhat; “From what I’ve heard Mom say, apparently a lot of legal work involves learning how to find relevant information and interpret it. I don’t want to get into law, but knowing how to look it all up will be useful, you know?”

It does make sense, and you make sure to tell her as much, giving her a pat on the shoulder for having such a good plan. She gives you a slightly confused look, but you just go back to filling out your papers as you talk to her, paying your actions no more mind.

The two of you fill the break room with idle chatter for the next hour. You’re done with the reports within forty minutes, but—surely Doctor Fitzgerald doesn’t need them right now, does he? He can wait a little, surely. You don’t want Amy to have to go back to work just yet.

Finally, however, time begins to catch up to the two of you. You jerk as you look over at the clock.
“...and see that it’s already half past six.

Amy looks over to the clock herself and sighs. “I guess you have to go soon?” she asks.

You nod, frowning a little. “I should leave in about fifteen minutes,” you say quietly. “I’ve got to take these papers back to Doctor Fitzgerald before I go.”

She smiles, but it’s an unhappy smile. “Alright. Do you want to go now so you can make sure you’re out on time?”

Blinking, you quickly shake your head. “No—no,” you deny. “I don’t want to go yet. We’ve still got plenty of things to talk about. I haven’t even asked you out on a date yet!” Your voice raises shrilly by the end.

Snickering, she waves you down. “Okay, okay.” Her snickering ceases, and she smiles fondly at you. “You want to take me out again?”

You nod eagerly. “I haven’t figured out where I want to take you yet though,” you ramble. “I was thinking we could go to the movies, but we already watched one and there’s nothing very good out yet, and I was going to take you out to the carnival, but it closed down after a new cape took some drugs or something and destroyed some of the rides.” You’d heard about it on the bus’s radio this morning. “And, um. So I was having trouble thinking of places I could take you. Is there anywhere you would like to go this weekend?” You give her an anxious smile.

She smiles, a soft and warm smile. “We don’t have to do something special every time, Taylor,” she reminds you gently. “We could just get some coffee, or some lunch or something. We could, uh, never mind.” She flushes slightly.

“We could what?” you ask curiously.

She blushes heavier, shaking her head. “No, never mind,” she replies. Now you’re really curious, but you can see it’s making her uncomfortable, so you let it drop. “But yes, we could just do something simple if you wanted.”

Hm. You do like simple, although you also have a fascination with the more complex kind of dates. Then again, that can always come later. You’d like to just enjoy some simplicity with her now, you think, before everything becomes more complicated later. “Alright,” you say, smiling at her. “Would you like to go out for lunch with me on the weekend, Amy?”

“Yes.” She matches your smile. “Saturday would suit me better—Mom wants me to go to a fundraiser on Sunday. Is that alright with you?”

You nod eagerly. “Yeah! I can do Saturday. I’ll figure out a place and time and text you on Friday?”

“Sounds good.” She stands up, stretching, and you follow suit. Sitting down for that long tends make the muscles in your back a little sore. “I’ll see you on Saturday, then.”

You make sure to give her a quick hug before she goes, which she returns easily. She’s a little shorter than you, so her arms naturally go under yours, allowing you to pull her in easily as you rest your arms around her shoulders. You quickly peck her on the top of the head, a kiss that’s short and sweet without being too pushy, as the two of you let go; then, steadfastly ignoring the way her gaze burns into your back, you pick up your papers and give her a jaunty wave goodbye.
The doctor seems happy with the paperwork. He scans over them for a moment as you hand the sheaf of papers to him, but doesn’t seem to find any irregularities, because he gives you a small nod. “Thank you, Taylor,” he says, letting out a small groan as he falls back into his chair. “I hope I’ll see you again next week.”

You nod pleasantly at him, but don’t give him a strong affirmation. Next week is school holidays, and you’re not sure if you’ll be coming in during them. Maybe. You’ll keep it in mind.

The bus drive home is as short as usual, affording you plenty of time to reheat the dinner Dad left for you in the fridge and head up to your room. You fall almost immediately into doing your homework, only a slight scowl on your face as you do it. So Mister Gladly didn’t think your essay was as good as Emma’s, huh? Well, screw him. You never even liked World Issues anyway.

You stay up finishing off your homework until nearly ten—a good two and a half hours, maybe a little more—before you crawl into bed, leaving the light on so you could read through this Harry Potter book some more again.

By the time you finally fall asleep, your thoughts are pleasantly fuzzy. Thoughts about wizards in silly hats flash about as you imagine your plans for tomorrow—most likely a busy day, with the holidays approaching. Whatever are you going to do…
You run a critical eye over your body in the mirror. Your hair is still damp—there’s only so much you can do about that, even using a second towel just for it—but the rest of your body is mostly dry.

It’s been nearly a month since you started jogging at Sophia’s suggestion, and you’re starting to get noticeable results. You’ve never considered yourself to be fat—Dad doesn’t make enough money to buy enough food to make you fat—but you’re well in the process of losing what little bits of fat you had on your body. The slight bulge in your stomach is gone, and your cheeks are thinner than before. Touching your stomach, you can feel tense muscles there—very different to the feeling of Madison’s soft skin. Your legs, too, are beginning to take shape, although you have a long while to go before you can begin comparing yourself to Sophia.

Internally, you frown. You’re going to have to be careful. Putting on some muscle is fine, but you can’t afford to lose too much weight. You’re not far off from being underweight as it stands, and Dad can’t afford to buy more food on a regular basis.

You trace a finger up, from your thigh to your chest. Your frown becomes external as you tilt your head and consider your body. Your chest is still flat, or so close to flat that the difference is negligible—it’s not like you have nothing there, your breasts are just so small that they’re barely worth considering. There are twelve-year-olds out there with bigger chests than you have.

There’s no use in thinking about it. Turning away sharply, you march over to where you’d placed your clothes and begin putting them on, steadfastly ignoring the total lack of a bra amongst the items you’re putting on.

You’re not totally unhappy with your appearance, if you’re being honest; you do like the more toned look your body is taking on. You just wish you could… fill out your frame more, kind of. It’d be nice if you had a few more curves. Your hips are kind of wide, which is nice, and your shoulders are narrow, but you’re very far off from having an hourglass figure or anything like it.

You wish you could see what Madison and Victoria see in it. They seem to appreciate the way you look—in fact, you know they do; you can feel how much they do. But no matter how hard you look, no matter how much you squint and turn your head, you can’t see what they’re seeing in you.

But, oh well. If they’re somehow able to convince themselves that your body is attractive, you’re not going to do anything to dissuade them. That would be silly.

Dad is once again gone by the time you make it back out to the kitchen. He’s left you a full pot of coffee bubbling away in the coffee machine, with the jar of sugar left beside it. You hurry in, popping two slices of bread into the toaster on your way, and set yourself to the task of making some breakfast, trying to set aside the lingering doubts in your mind.

Soon enough, everything is cooked and eaten. You wash the plate you’d put your breakfast on very carefully—apricot jam can get really sticky if you don’t take care to clean it soon after—and quickly wash your hands to get rid of any remaining stickiness before you head off to the bus.

The bus is uncomfortably warm today. You can hear the vehicle’s air conditioning system laboring to cool the air, but all that results is the faint smell of dust and burning rubber permeating through the air. Everyone around you is wrinkling their noses in disgust.
You’re about halfway there when your phone buzzes in your hand when you’re busy replying to a good morning text from Amy. You finish typing the text before you open it, but when you do, you can’t help but frown a little.

It’s from Victoria. “won’t be able to come over today. sorry”

You hesitate a moment, then quickly fire off a response. “That’s okay. Is there something wrong? Anything I can help with?”

Her reply is almost instant, sent less than a minute later. “nothing’s wrong just gotta talk to somebody. see you sunday”

You make a face as you reply in the affirmative before pocketing your phone again. It’s a little bit disappointing, if you’re being honest; you like having your extra time with Victoria on Wednesdays now. But if she needs to do something else, you’ll live with it. If there’s something wrong, you’d like to think she’ll tell you about it on Sunday.

At least Madison is still waiting for you by your locker when you arrive at school. She’s been doing that more often, lately; waiting by your locker for you even after putting your lunch in it, waiting patiently for you to come and give her her good morning cuddles. It’s always a good sight to see.

Today, it’s an even better sight. She’s waiting patiently for you at your locker, one hand clutching her first-period textbook down by her waist and one hand at her neck, gently toying with the choker at her neck. Absently, you note the faint red flush on her face, present even though she hasn’t looked up and seen you yet, but your attention is drawn down to her clothes. It’s not the first time you’ve seen her dressed in the clothes you told her to buy, but it is the first time you’ve seen her dressed in them while she’s wearing her choker. A thrill shoots through you. She dressed up for you.

If you were a little braver, you might give her a kiss as a reward for dressing like this, but there’s still people in the halls, and you don’t want to draw their attention or their ire. Instead, once you reach her, you just pull a surprised Madison into a tight hug—and you can’t quite refrain from giving her an affectionate kiss on the tip of her nose, causing it to crinkle a little as she gives you a wide grin. “Taylor!” she says happily, and eagerly returns the hug.

“Madison!” You give her a grin of your own, waiting a few moments before you break the hug and step away a little so you can run your appreciative eyes over her again. “You look nice.” The compliment makes her duck her head again, giving you an embarrassed smile.

“I thought you might like it,” she says shyly. She toys nervously with the cuff of her sleeve. “Do you, do you like it?”

She obviously already knows you do, but if she wants verbal affirmation, you’re happy enough to give her some. “I do,” you say, then step forwards and pull her into a hug again. This time, you don’t stop at that; you push her gently until her back hits the wall, and she lets out a soft gasp. “I like it a lot.” Your voice rumbles as it comes out, almost purring. Her eyes dart around the hall, but you hold your position for a moment, enjoying the way she trembles against you as she moves her gaze back to you and smiles slightly, a tinge of red still dusting her cheeks.

“I’m glad. I—“ She cuts herself off, glancing around the halls again. Then she changes tack, ducking her head again. “Yeah. That’s good.” Her small smile grows a little bigger, and she stops leaning back, moving into your hug instead. You cradle her against you for a few moments, allowing her to...
soak in your warmth, before you gently step out of the hug and move back.

You look over her one last time, one last glance to let her know how much you appreciate her efforts for you, before you take her hand and begin leading her towards the classroom. She dutifully follows you along, trailing a step behind you and clutching your hand tightly.

The two of you hesitate when you round the corner towards the classroom and see Charlotte sitting against the wall opposite it again, her head buried in her English textbook. You give Madison a hesitant look, then pull her back around the corner so Charlotte won’t accidentally see either of you.

You glance around, making sure nobody else is around to see, before you lean in and press a deep kiss to Madison’s lips.

It’s a little unfair, honestly—you know that Madison can barely resist doing whatever you ask her to do even without fogging up her mind with a kiss. But she responds enthusiastically enough, opening her mouth eagerly to let you explore her to your content.

You pull back after a long minute, giving her lower lip a couple of quick nips on the way, leaving her panting in front of you and staring at you with lust-filled eyes. A smirk steals quickly over your face, and you give her another kiss, then another, before ripping yourself away.

Damn it. That was supposed to feel good to Madison, not cloud your mind too! Not that you mind very much.

Licking your lips, you allow yourself to enjoy her taste for a few seconds as your mind clears. Only then do you lean in, pressing up against Madison again so you can whisper your next words directly into her ear. “Hey, Madison,” you murmur. “You said you’d help me seduce other girls, didn’t you?”

She blinks drowsily at you for a moment, the words taking a moment to come together in her head. Then she nods. “I did,” she murmurs. “What do you need me to do?” She shifts at the question, squeezing her legs together.

You move a hand up to her hair, gently stroking your fingers through it. She shivers at the contact, squeezing her legs tighter. “I want to invite Charlotte to have lunch with us,” you murmur. “And maybe Aisha, too, if she’s not busy.”

Madison exhales slightly, looking down. She actually looks a little disappointed. “You—ah.” You gently trail your hands down farther, stroking them right through her hair, making sure to follow the contours of her spine as you go. Not because you think it will help convince her to do it, just because you enjoy the way she trembles as you do. “That’s, that’s fine,” she gasps.

Smiling at her, you kiss her again before taking her hand and pulling her in the direction of the classroom again. She follows on shaky legs. When you get to the classroom, you calmly sit down and spread your legs out a little, holding your arms out for her. She obediently follows you down and sits between your outstretched legs, calming a little as you encircle her with your arms. Or maybe calming is the wrong word; she still resembles a little melting puddle. It’s all you can do to resist shifting her up so she’s sitting on one of your legs and you can feel how damp she is. She stops trembling quite so badly, though, and contents herself with reaching up and playing with your sleeve.

You look over at Charlotte, who is currently peeking at the two of you over her book. You flash a grin at her, causing her to let out a little startled sound and bury her head back in her textbook. A red flush sweeps over her neck, causing your grin to grow wider; something she notices when she peeks.
her head over her book again.

Charlotte freezes this time, caught in the act. You hold your grin for a moment, something that’s easy to do, before it falls off your face.

“Hi,” you say simply. Madison stirs in your arms, looking up at you, but settles back down as the words register.

Meanwhile, Charlotte just winces and places her book down. Her face is red too, although that’s fading somewhat. She licks her lips nervously before responding. “Hi. Sorry. I, um.” She winces. “I didn’t mean to stare.”

You shrug. In your lap, Madison pouts. “It’s okay,” you reply. “No harm done.” Absently moving your hands down so you can slip them beneath the hem of Madison’s shirt and rest them on her soft stomach, you point with your chin at Charlotte’s book. “Catching up on work?” As you speak, you slowly stretch your power over to Charlotte. Embarrassment is flooding through her, washing over a bedrock of boredom and frustration. You can feel small tendrils of lust poking through the boredom, now familiar to your senses. You grab then and begin pulling.

Charlotte blinks, looking down at the book. “Oh. Uh, no, this is for a friend.” She waves the book at you, rolling her eyes a little. “I run a tutoring group. One of the boys in the group has been having some trouble with his English assessments, so I’m looking through the textbooks to get an idea of where he’s up to.”

That’s really nice of her. You blink, giving her an impressed look. “That’s really cool.”

“Taylor tutors me after school,” Madison speaks up matter-of-factly from your lap. You drop a kiss on the top of her head, causing her to look up and smile shyly at you.

“Yeah, I’ve seen the two of you in the library. She seems like she knows what she’s doing.” Charlotte beams at you, clearly impressed with your fantastic tutoring work. You preen a little. “You’re lucky to have a tutor like her.”

Madison nods eagerly. “I’m very lucky to have Taylor,” she says seriously. “She’s the best… tutor.” The pause in her words is long and deliberate. Your lips quirk up, even though she can’t see it while she’s staring at the other girl, and Charlotte blushes again, the red that had just faded suffusing her cheeks again. You can’t help but tug strongly on her lust as she does so, causing it to grow even deeper.

“That’s, um, that’s good.” Charlotte nods, doing her best to stare off somewhere off to the side of your head. Her gaze keeps turning back to look at you. “It’s always good to have a good tutor. Good tutors are the best,” she rambles.

“Yes.” You snicker to yourself, quietly enough that she shouldn’t be able to hear it from here. “It helps that Madison is a good student.” You press another kiss to the top of your girl’s head as she preens. “I’m kind of making it up as I go along, though. It can be a bit difficult. Maybe you could come sit with us at lunch and—“

“Yes!”

Charlotte’s face reddens once again as both you and Madison stare at her, a little alarmed. You’d been hoping for a yes, but you hadn’t expected it to be that emphatic.
“Uh, good,” you reply, a little uncertainly.

Before you can say anything else, and before either of you can embarrass Charlotte any more, the sound of the bell ringing echoes through the halls. Reluctantly, you peel your hands out from under Madison’s shirt and stand, offering her a hand up. It’s one thing to be holding Madison like that in front of Charlotte, and quite another to be doing so in front of your entire class, after all.

Aisha, as it turns out, is no harder to convince to come and sit at your table than Charlotte was, although she is considerably less enthusiastic about it.

“The guys won’t miss me for a few days,” she jokes, smirking at nobody in particular. “Not like they spend a whole lot of time looking at my face.” She reaches up and jiggles her breasts a little, just in case you missed what she was thrusting at. You try your best not to stare, although by the way her smirk grows a little more, you’re not sure you succeeded.

Charlotte and Madison are already seated at the table when you arrive with Aisha. Madison is sitting demurely at one edge of the table, a plastic-wrapped sandwich sitting in front of her alongside another you recognize as the one she made for you. Charlotte is sitting across from her, already halfway through a small container of orange slices.

“Right.” You slide into your place beside Madison, gesturing across the table for Aisha to take a seat beside Charlotte. “Everyone, this is Aisha.” She gives them a two-fingered salute as she reaches into her bag, drawing out her own—rather plain—peanut butter and jelly sandwich from within a battered blue lunchbox. “Aisha, this is my…” You hesitate. Should you introduce Madison as your friend or your girlfriend? “My friend, Madison.” You opt for the former. You’re not confident enough in how she feels about you to try and introduce her to the idea of being part of a harem just yet. “And this is my other friend, Charlotte.”

“Yo. Nice to meet ya.” Aisha is barely done speaking when she manages to unwrap her sandwich. It seems she doesn’t care for the pleasantries of introductions, because she immediately moves to begin eating. Which, okay. Introductions are kind of boring.

The conversation over lunch is pleasant. It’s not all that dissimilar to your usual conversations with Madison, although the two of you often end up sitting together in a kind of contented silence, and there’s much less whispered flirting than when the two of you are alone. That kind of silence proves to be almost impossible with Aisha around; the girl doesn’t seem to be satisfied unless someone is talking. She ventures through all kinds of topics over the course of lunch, venturing from complaining about the peanut butter on her sandwich (“Who even likes crunchy peanut butter?! Crazy people, that’s who!!”), to comparing class notes with Charlotte (“Wait, you mean this algebra stuff is going to be important next year too?!”), to making fun of the school grounds around you (“I don’t think the gardener is weeding the garden,” she says with a wink; you give her a confused look, because what the hell is that even meant to mean?).

It’s an odd experience, sitting down next to friends. It reminds you of elementary school, where other girls had always gaggled around you and Emma, fawning over your books and Emma’s clothes.

It’s been a while since you’ve been surrounded by friends like this.

Madison looks slightly confused when you first lean over and place your head on her shoulder, but
when she looks down and sees the happy smile on your face, you think she understands. She doesn’t comment when you wrap your arms around her, or when you pull her closer so you don’t strain your neck. And none of them comment on the way you stop speaking midway through lunch in favour of just—just resting against Madison, closing your eyes, and listening to everyone around you talk.

For the remaining half of lunch, you just sit there, soaking in the presence of your girls around you. Affection flows from them as conversation does, golden threads snaking from their chests and wrapping themselves around the table, forming a weave of glowing warmth that settles over the four of you and comes to rest gently over your cores.

It’s pretty much the best day you’ve ever had at Winslow.

The sound of the television has filled the house by the time you walk in, the faint sound echoing right through to your bedroom. You peek into the living room as you walk past, slightly relieved to see Dad sitting there on the couch. He gives you a small wave and a “Hello” that you return.

You carefully place your bag beneath the desk in your room, then walk back out to the living room and plonk yourself on the couch beside Dad, letting out a loud, tired sigh as you do so.

“Tough day at work?” Dad sounds amused as he talks. You scowl up at him, noting the way his eyes just crinkle more as he looks down at you. It makes you want to scowl harder, but somehow, you can’t. It’s not often you see him show happiness like that.

Still, you can give your best impression of it. You’re too close to him to put your hands on your hips—and besides, you’re still sitting down, so there’s no real way you can do that and not look silly—but you can cross your arms beneath your non-existent breasts and scowl up at him like that, so you do so. “School can be hard, Dad!”

He pats your shoulder, then heaves himself up to his feet. “I know it can, Taylor. Do you want a cup of coffee while I’m up?”

You maintain your scowl for a few moments, just so he knows how unhappy you are about his teasing, before you let it fall off and nod eagerly. “Yes please!”

A few minutes later, he returns, bearing two cups of coffee. He hands one to you, keeping the other to himself; when he sits down, you catch a faint whiff of some sweet-sour scent, causing you to wrinkle your nose. He notices and grimaces, moving his cup to the other side of him and setting it on the small reading table there.

You take a sip from your coffee. It’s sweet enough, perhaps a little on the overly sweet side, but not too much. You give Dad a thumbs-up, which he returns.

“Alright.” Dad settles back into the couch, wriggling to make himself a little comfortable. He looks kind of like a worm doing it. You imitate him for a moment, trying to fight back a laugh, which you ultimately fail at; Dad looks a little offended as you quickly raise your hand to your mouth to stifle the giggles. “Well, if we’re all done laughing at our loving fathers,” he says sternly, “we’ve got another episode about cheetahs to watch. Want to watch it with your old man, Taylor?”

You very carefully lower your hand, your giggles having faded midway through his sentence. You keep your hand up there, ready to quickly cover your mouth again if he does something else silly, but
he just sits very still. “Yes,” you reply. He grunts and points the remote at the television, bringing up the menu.

Cheetahs, as it turns out, are not quite as fascinating as everyone always claimed they were back in elementary school. They can run really fast, but that’s the only feature they have that really interests you. You much prefer panthers, really. Rhinoceroses are also okay. They’re like leathery, fat unicorns.

The first episode finishes a little before six thirty. Dad cracks his fingers, but doesn’t immediately move to pick up the remote. Instead, he gives you a sidelong glance. “Victoria isn’t coming over today?” he asks.

You shrug. “She had to go talk to somebody about something,” you inform him. “She said she can’t make it today, but I’ll still see her on Sunday, so that’s okay.”

“Ah.” He nods sagely. “What about your… other friends? Is Sophia still going to be over on Friday?”

You give him a confused look. It’s not even Thursday, why does he care about what you’re doing on Friday? “Yes, she is,” you say slowly. “She still needs help with her Chemistry work.”

He gives you a long look, then nods wisely again. “Okay,” he says. He sounds amused for some reason. “I’m just checking in case you need me to pick you up anything from the store tomorrow. I wanted to cook us something nice on Saturday, since it’s the start of the school holidays.”

Oh, yeah. That does make sense. You give him a wide-eyed nod. “I don’t need anything,” you reply. His brow knits for a moment, but you don’t give him any time to consider your mixed messages. “Wait, actually. Are you going to the- the fruit store near the Walmart?” Argh, you used to know the name of that store.

“Yeah. Do you need me to get you something from there?”

You nod eagerly. “Sophia likes fruit salad,” you tell him seriously. “Could you buy me a banana and an orange?” You’ve been checking in your catalogues; the rest of the fruit is relatively cheap at the corner store, so you should be able to buy it there, if you need it. Otherwise you’ll make do; you do still have an apple and some grapes in the fridge. Dad probably can’t afford to buy you everything you’d like to put in it, unfortunately.

He gives you a strange look, but eventually acquiesces. “I can,” he allows. “Do you girls have everything else you need up there for your ‘study sessions’?” He puts a strange emphasis on the last two words of his sentence, but you just brush it off. He does weird stuff like that all the time. “We do.” You mull it over. “I think I might go to the thrift store on the weekend and see if I can find a bigger desk, though. It’s hard for me and Sophia to both fit on it.”

He looks at you for a long moment. Then, he sits back on the couch, closing his eyes and humming. “Hm… Will it fit? Your room is kind of small.” You both know it’s true. It’d been fine when you were younger, but now that you’re growing up, it’s getting rather cramped. Originally, Mom and Dad had planned to expand the house, but—with Mom’s hospital bills, and then Dad’s issues with his wages, those plans had obviously fallen through. Honestly, your bedroom is more of a glorified office than anything.

You just shrug. “I’ll make it fit. I need a bigger desk anyway. And a bigger bed, too.” Dad’s face
falls, and you hurry to reassure him. “But, um. That one can wait! I still have a bit to grow before I’m too big for it.”

He leans his head against the back of the couch, rubbing his temples. “No, you need a bigger bed,” he groans. “Maybe we could move the bookcases down into the basement and make some room that way?”

Instinctively, you go to shake your head—like hell you’ll let your bookcases get moved!—but you pause. Hm.

“Well,” you say carefully, “I need those bookcases to put all my books in them. And I need a bigger bed anyway, and this couch is getting uncomfortable anyway.” You shift on it to demonstrate your point. “We need a spare bedroom anyway.”

“Taylor…” Dad rubs his temples harder.

You forge on ahead before he can voice his objections. “It just makes sense for me to move down to the basement!” you insist. “It’s bigger, and it’s probably warmer in the winter too!” It’s not. There’s no heater down there. “And it’s bigger!” You gesture widely with your arms to demonstrate just how big it is.

He lets out a tired sigh in response, but you can see him giving you an evaluating glance out of the corner of his eye. He seems conflicted about something. “… If I let you move into the basement,” he says carefully, “you’re going to need new furniture. Kurt will help me install some windows down there, and we’ll repair the stairs, but I know you have a job now. If you want any furniture besides my old bed, you’re going to have to buy it yourself.”

You beam at him. “Thank you!” you squeal, throwing yourself over that side of the couch so you can give him a big, affectionate hug. “Thank you, thank you!” You squeeze him tightly so he can feel how thankful you are.

Your own bedroom. Your own living space! A little space where Dad can’t accidentally come wandering past an open door and see something he shouldn’t! A space that’s big enough to not feel cramped if you have more than one person over! A place where, where you can actually put stuff!

Even when you go to bed later that night, you’re still buzzing with excitement. Today has been an excellent day. First your table at lunch has filled up nicely, and now Dad has told you that you can have the basement as your new bedroom!

Sure, you won’t have anything fancy down there for a while—Dad has his old queen-sized bed dismantled up in the attic, where he’d put it after he’d bought Mom and himself a new bed when you were eight after they’d somehow broken the headboard—but just having a bigger bedroom is already amazing.

There are so many things you might be able to do now that you hadn’t even been able to consider before!

At eleven on the dot, you try to force yourself to go to sleep, despite the excitement still buzzing in your brain. You’re excited, but you’re going to be a lot less excited if you can’t manage to get yourself some sleep for tomorrow.
In an attempt to distract yourself, you lay there considering your plans for tomorrow.
Thursday finds you bright and cheery after yesterday’s fantastic news, even by the time you walk into school. You have to shove your hands into your pockets to stop them from trembling in anticipation as you walk to your locker to deliver the news about your new bedroom to Madison.

It’s a silly thing to get so excited about. You know that. Most girls your age would be happy that they could get a bigger bedroom, but not *this* happy. You’re not most girls, though. In your opinion, it’s one of the best things that could have happened to you.

It’s a space of your very own—a space away from Dad’s intrusions, away from the worries of the outside world. A space that you own, that you control, that you can arrange to your liking and do what you want in. There are still realities that go against that—you can’t do anything too loud in there, for instance, because even if Dad doesn’t mind, you could still wake up the neighbours—but it’s not something you’ve had before. At least, not to this extent.

Madison is, as always, standing by your locker. Today, she looks up as you approach, the slapping sound of your feet on the school’s concrete floor apparently loud enough to alert you. She smiles and pushes herself off your locker to hurry toward you, eagerly throwing her arms around you.

You can’t help but chuckle and return the embrace. “You seem happy this morning,” you note, then press a quick kiss to her neck. Nobody else is around in the halls yet, so it’s safe to do that kind of thing. Quickly, while you have the chance, you press another kiss to her neck, lightly nipping her as you go.

She leans into you, tilting her head slightly to give you better access to her. “Ah…” She breathes lightly out, her body twitching slightly against yours. “Yeah, um. D-Dad told me that I could work in his restaurant over the holidays if I wanted, and now you’re here, s-so I’m happy.”

“Oh?” You quickly look around the hall, making sure that nobody else is around just yet—the benefits of it being so close to school holidays; most of the students at Winslow have unofficially taken the week off already—before you reach up and tilt her head backwards so you can gently suck at the front of her throat for a moment, right above her choker’s tag. It’s a little bit difficult, considering the angle and the height difference, but you manage. After a few long moments, you stop, satisfied that a small bruise will form there later. Madison’s breaths are coming slightly heavier. You move your hand back down to her hip, tapping it lightly. “Are you saving for something, Madison?”

“I, ah.” You move your head back, which she understands as permission to lower her head back down, then press another kiss to the corner of her mouth. “I wanted to save for, um. S-so you could choose more clothes for me to wear.” She hesitates for a moment, searching your face. “It’s really nice to wear these clothes for you. I-I wanted to have more so I could, um, have enough to wear all the time.”

You hum appreciatively. “I’d like to see you wearing clothes I choose all the time,” you muse. “But I don’t like you spending your money on it.”

Madison nods, then steps closer and tucks herself in her usual position against your neck. You gently push her back to your locker. Once she’s resting securely against it, she tightens her arms around you and speaks. “I don’t mind,” she murmurs. “I’d only spend it on something silly anyway. I’d prefer to
Closing your eyes, you scrunch your nose and try to avoid letting out a sigh. “I want you to spend it on silly things for yourself,” you gently chide her. “It’s okay. You’re my sub, but you’re allowed to do things that don’t involve me.”

She pouts against your neck, the movement tickling your skin. “I don’t want to,” she mutters childishly. You pinch her hip reprovingly, and she shifts against you, pouting again. “Sorry,” she apologizes softly. “But I really do want to do this. It—” She hesitates for a moment. Eventually, she mumbles, “It makes me feel good. A-and not just in a sexy way, but in a sexy way too. It, it reminds me of you. Makes me feel like you’re there all the time, telling me what to do all the time. It’s… relaxing.” She nods firmly, still tucked away against your shoulder.

Relaxing. Huh. You’re still resistant to the idea, but the idea of Madison wearing those clothes isn’t only doing it for her. Damn it. And you really, really like the idea of Madison feeling like you’re commanding her all the time, even if it’s by a method as simple as telling her to wear clothing you choose for her. “… Fine,” you grumble eventually. She begins to smile, but before she can celebrate too much, you continue. “But. You can only spend half of the money you make on this. You have to keep at least half of what you earn for your own hobbies, okay? Buy some books, or CD’s, or some material to practice making clothes with or something. And I’ll pay for half of whatever the clothes cost.”

She still nods eagerly. “Okay!”

You continue to hold her for a few minutes, frowning where she can’t see it. That’s—not alarming, but it’s a little concerning. You don’t want her becoming overly fixated on you. It won’t be healthy for her, and it won’t be healthy for your relationship with her.

A thought suddenly strikes you, and you can’t help but smirk. Maybe you could order her to have some hobbies outside of you. Now that would be a mess. Would she actually focus on some hobbies, or would she just come to fetishize whatever hobbies she came up with?

Either way, it’s a problem for later. You’ll have to think about it. That and why you never seem to see Madison’s other friends around.

You smooth out your face before stepping back out of the hug, sliding your hand up until you can take her hand and tug her off towards the classroom. She stumbles a little for the first few steps, taken off-guard, but you don’t slow down, and she’s soon hurrying to catch up.

As you walk, you consider something. “Hey Madison,” you say, waiting for her to hum and acknowledge you before you continue. “Speaking of money, do you remember the deal we made last Wednesday? About the temperature play?”

You turn your head back just in time to see her blinking at you. “Yes?” she asks uncertainly. “Do you not want to do that any more?”

You shrug. “If you’d like, we can still do it,” you reply. “But I was thinking about it yesterday, and —you’ve been a good girl recently, haven’t you?”

“I’m always a good girl.” She preens a little, until you slow down so you can reach back and pinch her hip again, at which point she pouts at you.
“Except when you try to spend all your money on me,” you admonish her. She flushes, ducking her head. That’s not quite accurate, and both of you know it, but the principle is sound. “But yes, you have been a good girl recently. I was thinking that I might take you out for a date over the holidays. Maybe over the weekend, or on Monday?”

She nods eagerly, bringing her other hand up to cup yours as she hurries alongside you. “Of course!” she says energetically. “Where do you want to take me?”

“I was thinking we’d go out for dinner,” you reply. “There’s a really nice Italian restaurant I know of. We could go there, and maybe you could come back to my place and spend the night afterwards?”

She blushes, but nods again, just as eagerly as before. “That sounds great,” she says happily. “Um, would you like me to wear anything in particular?”

You’re about to reply in the negative when you glance at her again, seeing the deep blush on her face. You tug her closer to you as you walk, leaning in. “You should wear a nice dress to dinner,” you instruct her. “And tie your hair back so I can see your pretty neck.” She nods eagerly, blushing an even darker red. It’s such a delicious colour, you can’t help but push her a little further. “Bring your summer pajamas, too, but don’t bother bringing any underwear. You won’t be needing it.” At that, Madison actually lets out a small moan, pressing herself up against your arm as the two of you walk.

The two of you arrive at the classroom to find yourselves alone. Charlotte isn’t sitting there. You frown. Hopefully, she’s just running late, or had something else to do—it’ll make it hard to get her number if she isn’t here. Madison waits patiently as you sit down against the wall, only moving to sit down in your lap once you’re sitting down properly.

You move your hand up to her hair and begin running your hands through it. She mewls happily as you do, snuggling back into you. Your other hand wraps itself tight around her waist, pulling her until she’s pressed up against you.

“So,” you say to her as you idly straighten her hair out, “I have some good news.”

“Oh?” She almost turns her head to look at you, but catches herself and stays still, her head bowed submissively to your hand.

You hum, enjoying the feeling of her hair around your fingers. Her hair is nice and smooth. “I’m getting a new bedroom,” you inform her. “Kind of. I was talking to Dad, and he said I could move into the basement if I wanted. And no jokes about living in my parents’ basement,” you say sternly, tapping your finger against her neck. “It’s a nice basement. Dad used to use it for storage. He’s going to put in some windows and fix the stairs.”

Madison nods—as well as she can nod with your hand all tangled in her hair. At this point, you’ve given up all pretense of straightening it; you’re just idly running your hands through her hair as you will. “I’m glad you’re happy about it,” she says diplomatically.

You smile a little. “It’s bigger than my bedroom,” you explain. “A lot bigger.”

She makes a pleased noise, although you’re not sure if it’s because you’re rubbing her stomach or because of the news you’re giving her. “That sounds nice,” she agrees. “Your bed is a little bit small.”
Madison’s bed is certainly a lot bigger than yours. “I’ll be able to put in a new bed,” you say dreamily. “And get a bigger desk. Maybe some more bookcases. Who knows.”

You can’t see her face from here, but you think she’s smiling. “I’m glad,” she replies.

You’re about to expound, but before you can, the loud sound of Winslow’s bell echoes through the halls. Letting out a great sigh, you reluctantly push Madison’s back slightly until she stands, allowing you to climb to your feet.

Classes continue apace. You’re nearly finished your business textbooks by now—you make a mental note to remember to take them back to the library sometime during the holidays so you don’t accumulate any late fees—but you still have enough in there to read to give you something to do for the next couple of days. And besides, even if they didn’t, you could just reread some of the earlier segments.

First period is, as usual, very nice; Madison snuggles against your side as she does her schoolwork, occasionally leaning in and whispering to you, inquiring about a particular topic. You make sure to squeeze her thigh every time she does, a small gesture of affection to reward her for asking.

You’re actually quite impressed with how quickly her grades have been recovering. She was really struggling just a couple of months ago—without your intervention, you’re not sure if she would have been able to graduate school with grades high enough to earn her a place at the local community college, let alone at any university that could give her a degree worth anything. You haven’t seen her grades lately, but you don’t need to see them to know that she’s doing great.

The next three periods are… pleasant enough, you suppose, but barely worth mentioning. You miss having a girl’s warmth at your side.

Once the bell rings for fourth period, you hurriedly put your textbooks back in your bag and scurry out the classroom door, heading towards your table.

Despite how quickly you rushed out, you’re still not the first person there. Aisha is sitting there already, the tip of her tongue poking out the side of her mouth as she scrawls something on the table with a pencil. You slow down watching her, eventually coming to a stop altogether. It’s cute.

After a few moments, she lifts her eyes, spotting you. Her eyes widen, and she hurriedly stuffs the pencil back in her pocket, waving you over.

“Hello, Aisha,” you greet her, offering her a small smile. “You got here early.”

She shrugs, sniffing regally. “Had History fourth,” she says dismissively. “Teacher doesn’t like me. Figured I’d skip. Spent most of fourth waiting over in the corner.” You glance over in the direction she waves. It’s a small alcove, sheltered from the view of anyone looking out from the opposite direction by a large bench resting in front of it. If anyone walked outside during that period, they might be able to see her from there, but none of the teachers at Winslow ever bother patrolling looking for truantaing students.

You want to tell her she should be going to her History classes, but you don’t know if she’d take that well just yet. Instead, you settle for a simple, “I see.” Then you gesture down at the table, or more directly, at the mark she’s awkwardly trying to hide by placing her elbows on the table and leaning forward. It gives you a nice view down her shirt, but you’re more curious about the table. “What were you drawing?” you ask.
She stiffens for a moment, looking around, then relaxes. “Nothin’ serious,” she says dismissively, moving her elbow. “Just my name.” You take the implied permission and lean in to look. It’s definitely her name, but it’s not drawn in simple script. It looks—very similar to the graffiti scrawled over the halls of Winslow, in style of nothing else. Large, pop-out letters spelling ‘AISHA’, each letter growing from the one before it.

It actually looks really well-drawn. “It looks nice,” you compliment her. “Do you draw often?”

“Sometimes,” she says guardedly. “Why?”

You look down at it, hiding a frown. “No reason,” you reply. “I was just wondering. It looks nice.” You give her a smile, hoping to ease her ruffled feathers. It works, to an extent.

Luckily, before you can say anything else to set her on edge, Madison arrives, with Charlotte following her soon after. You pull out the lunch Madison has made for you today—a tuna roll with lettuce, tomato and grated cheese, wrapped inside turkish bread—and wait idly as everyone else gets out their lunches.

Before anyone can begin eating, though, you pull out your phone and place it on the centre of the table, drawing everyone’s attention.

“It’s nearly the school holidays,” you begin. “And I know I’m looking forward to not having to come to school every day.” Across the table, Aisha smirks at you, while beside you, Madison nods. Charlotte doesn’t react to your statement, instead demurely pulling out a small plastic tub from her bag, filled with grapes. “But I was thinking maybe we could get together over the holidays and do something. We could go to the carnival together, or something—I hear they’re supposed to be reopening then.”

“That sounds like fun,” Charlotte says wistfully. “I’m going to visit my uncle over the holidays, though. I’ll be gone from Monday to Friday.”

You look over at her, noticing the small frown on her face. “That’s okay,” you reassure her, giving her a smile. “We can figure out something—we could go during the second week of holidays, or we could go do something else together afterwards.” She blushes lightly at that, nodding. “I need everyone’s phone numbers if we want to set it up, though.”

“You already have mine!” Madison chimes up beside you. You pat her knee consolingly, nodding in acknowledgement.

Charlotte pulls your phone over, rapidly dialing in something on your keypad. Beside her, however, Aisha frowns.

“My phone bill doesn’t cover much,” Aisha warns you. “My brother covers it, but he doesn’t make a lot of money. I’m on one of the lowest plans, so I can’t talk much.”

“That’s okay,” you say brightly. “Just tell me if you can make it on a particular day or not.”

She nods slowly, taking the phone once Charlotte has finished with it. You tap Madison again, leaning in to whisper in her ear, “You should get their numbers too. Just in case.”

Once everyone has given each other their numbers, you take your phone back and give everyone
The rest of school passes by in a blur. Most of the teachers have essentially given up for the term; less than half the people in your class have even shown up today, and most of those who have turned up are just making paper airplanes and throwing them around the classroom.

You yourself clutch one of the airplanes in your hand as you walk off the bus that afternoon, heading home. Some of those paper airplanes had been surprisingly complex, creating little planes with folded noses and actual little tails and everything. You’d taken one of them as you’d walked out towards tutoring with Madison, idly throwing it around the library while Madison studied.

It’s a little after five when you walk into your house, tossing the airplane towards the trash can in your kitchen as you go. It misses wildly, veering up and over onto the kitchen counter, forcing you to walk over and pick it up so you can place it into the trash can properly. Damn it. Some of those kids had made throwing the airplanes look so easy.

You pull out your phone as you head over to your room and place your bag beneath your desk, then lift the phone and begin typing out a short message to Emma. ”Can you come over today? I need some help with something.” Then, while you wait for her to respond, you head back out to the kitchen.

Dad’s already put dinner on—just some chicken and frozen vegetables in the slow cooker, from what you can see. You don’t have time to investigate before your phone buzzes in your pocket, an appropriately prompt response from your friend. ”I can come over. I can be there in fifteen minutes.”

You move over to the fridge and pull out the milk, tapping out a message as you go. ”It’s not urgent. Don’t hurry. Just come over some time today ” Then, once the message has been sent, you busy yourself by making a cup of coffee.

She doesn’t hurry, exactly, but she’s not slow either. By five to six, Alan’s car is pulling up in the driveway, allowing the two of them to climb out. You hurry out the front to meet them, giving Emma a big hug and stretching your power out over her. She’s not feeling as bad as she has been the last couple of times you’ve seen her, thankfully. Still, you reach in, maintaining a gentle grasp over the fronds of her happiness.

“Hello, Alan,” you greet her father. “Hello, Emma. Come in. Uh, Dad’s in the living room, Alan.” You pause for a second, then sheepishly admit, “I forgot to tell him you were coming over.”

He chuckles, giving you a small grin. “You should remember to tell your Dad that kind of thing,” he chides you. “Still, happy to come over. You said you needed help with something?”

“Yeah!” You release Emma from your hug, ignoring the light dusting of red over her cheeks, and grab her hand. “Come on, Emma! I need to show you something!”

You lead Emma down to the basement, flicking the light on as you go. She gives the empty room a curious look, then turns to you with a frown, ignoring the dust covering the room. “You needed to show me your basement?” she asks.

You nod enthusiastically. “Yeah!” You gesture expansively around the room, indicating the bare concrete walls and floor. “Um, well, kind of,” you amend. “Dad told me yesterday that I could have
the basement as my new bedroom if I wanted, since my old bedroom is getting kind of small. But I’m… not really good at planning out rooms. I was hoping you could help me out.” You give her what you hope is a winning smile.

Emma glances at you, then off to the side. “What’s wrong with your old room?” she asks.

“It’s just kind of small.” You shrug dismissively. “I wanted a bigger room, you know?” Somehow, you don’t really want to tell her that you wanted a bigger bed. That seems a little too personal right now.

She nods anyway. “Okay. And you need my help with what?”

“With designing it, of course!” You fondly shake your head. “I’ve never been good at figuring out how to make places look good, Emma.”

Still, she hesitates. “Isn’t one of your Dad’s friends an interior designer?” she asks. “You could ask her.”

“I don’t want to ask her.” You pout sulkily at her. “I asked you over to help, not one of Dad’s silly friends.” You wave your arm dismissively. “You were always really good at this kind of thing. And—and I trust you to help me make my new room look more than I do any of Dad’s friends.” You nod firmly. Surprisingly, it’s true. Wrapped up in Emma’s emotions like this, feeling her happiness grow and sway as you tell her you trust her—it’s all too easy for you to believe your own words.

“A-Alright.” She coughs nervously, covering her mouth to muffle the sound. “Is your Dad buying you anything else, or do you only have the furniture in your room? It might be hard to decorate if you only have that furniture.”

“No, I’m getting some more furniture,” you say firmly. “Dad’s giving me the old bed he and Mom used to have, and I do have those bookcases. I want to get a bigger desk, though, and maybe some other stuff.”

Emma paces around the basement, eyeing it off. Watching her, you can’t help but feel a little thrill shoot through you.

When Emma gets involved in a task, she throws herself into it. This task is no different, except for one thing; every time she stops to think, she tosses her ideas out to you, getting your feedback on them. As she paces around the basement, examining the walls, her steps soon grow more energetic and her words grow more excited. Eventually, you just sit back on the basement stairs and watch her go, smiling contentedly and just offering up your thoughts whenever she asks you.

In the end, she determines you want four main parts to your room. First is the bed, obviously; that bit will go to the back of the room, where it’s least immediately visible from the stairs. You also want a study area—a long desk that can be pulled out from the wall, with seating for maybe four people. Then, you’d like a small seating area, maybe with a television there or something (“You won’t be getting a very good signal down here,” Emma tells you seriously as she studies your face, “but you could put a DVD player in, and maybe some game consoles or something, in case any of your girlfriends like to game.”), alongside your bookcases against the wall off to the right of the stairs.

Lastly, you’d like a clothing area. Emma hesitates at this one, giving you a sidelong glance. “… Do you really need a whole area for this one?” she asks. “You already have a wardrobe and a dressing table. Do you need more?”
You shrug. “I think I do.” You consider not elaborating for a moment, but she doesn’t inquire further, just waits patiently for you to continue. That’s enough for you to keep talking. “I want a place where all my girls can keep some clothing, too.” You watch her carefully. “In case anyone wants to spend the night.”

Her face falls, and you immediately begin tugging lightly—very lightly—on her happiness. It’s not enough to raise her mood, not really, but it does stop it from plummeting. “Oh,” she says simply. “I guess that makes sense.”

You’re going to need more than just the furniture, of course. The basement is made out of raw concrete, and while Dad and his friend will install a window, that’s not going to provide you with much light. There’s luckily a couple of power outlets down here already, so you won’t have to call in an electrician, but you’re going to need… aesthetics.

It’s nice to have a bedroom of your own, after all, but you refuse to have a cold, drab bedroom, even if it’s more than twice as large as your old room. You have standards. Just giving you more room isn’t enough for you.

Emma tosses in her own thoughts. “You probably don’t need much against this wall,” she says, pointing at the area your seating area is going to go. “Your bookcases should cover most of that wall, and they’re plenty colourful already. If you put some decorations on top, it should make things look nice. And over here, where you want to put your dressers—you could find a bigger mirror and put it over the dresser. That’ll help. It’s really the other two walls that you’re going to need to find something to cover them with. Maybe some posters, or something?”

Unfortunately, as she informs you, you can’t just buy some wallpaper and stick it on. For one, neither of you know how, and you’re not sure if Dad knows anyone who could put it on. But even if you did know how, it’s also true that putting on wallpaper is expensive. You need to buy the wallpaper itself, and that’s not cheap—and you need to buy the glue to hold the wallpaper on, which is even more expensive. You’d be out hundreds if you tried to do that.

The same problem goes with the floor. Carpeting that amount of floor would easily run you several hundred dollars, maybe even a few thousand if you wanted comfortable carpets rather than the cheap stuff you might find in most DIY stores. Your best bet, or so Emma informs you, are some large rugs. Some large, colourful rugs. You can hide most of the rest of the drab floor with your furniture, but the middle of your room and the area around the stairs needs some lightening up.

It won’t be cheap, that’s for certain. But you trust Emma’s eye enough to accept that the room will look good once it’s all said and done.

With your plan all sorted, you lead Emma back out of the basement and upstairs. Dad gives you a curious look as the two of you emerge out into the living room, but eventually just shrugs and accepts it.

“Do the two of you want to stay for dinner?” Dad asks, looking between the two of them. “I’ve got some chicken stew cooking.”

Alan shakes his head, clapping Dad on the arm. “Thanks, but no thanks,” he says with a smile. “We’re getting pizza tonight, aren’t we, Emma?”

Beside you, Emma nods, looking all too serious for the occasion. “Yeah. I’m getting pepperoni.”
Dad shrugs. You pout at Emma, but she just grimaces and points towards her Dad. You settle down, giving her a sad frown, which she mirrors. You do kind of want her to stay for dinner, but if her family has other plans, you can’t force her to stay. Yet.

As Alan and Dad finish saying their goodbyes, you pull Emma off to the side and into the kitchen, temporarily away from their prying eyes. Once you’re alone, you snake your arms around Emma, giving her a small hug.

“Thanks for your help,” you whisper to her. She sighs shakily and returns the hug, resting her cool cheek against yours. You turn your head a little at the same time she does, allowing you to press a kiss to her cheek—then another one, a little further along, a small kiss to the corner of her mouth. Then, heart pounding, you quickly step back out of the embrace, standing back just far enough that you can watch her cheeks flush faint red again.

“Any time,” she replies in a voice just as soft as yours. “Just send me a message if you want my help again. Any time.”

You nod. “I will,” you murmur softly.

Your heart is still pounding.

Emma and Alan don’t linger—it’s nearly six thirty by the time they leave, and they won’t get home until about quarter to seven, not leaving them a whole lot of time to order and eat their dinner before needing to settle in for the night. You accept that they have to leave, but you still can’t help but feel a little resentful that Alan pulled Emma away before you could get her to stay for dinner.

It doesn’t kill your mood too much, thankfully. After all—you can always invite her back over the holidays, and this time make sure that Alan knows she’s going to stay.

The rest of your time passes easily. Thursday night is nice and restful; you go to sleep a little early, falling asleep at half past ten, rather than eleven or later. You wake up the next morning refreshed and energized, just in time to go for your morning jog.

School itself chugs along just as it did yesterday. You meet up with Madison in the morning, and with Charlotte and Aisha at lunch. It’s mostly inane talk, today, although you do spend some time making sure that Madison understands that you seriously want her to spend her money on her own hobbies.

Nothing interesting happens until you get home a little after five, flushed with the knowledge that school is over for the term, and you have a full two weeks ahead of you.

Sophia is waiting for you on your porch. You give her a little wave, which she returns easily enough as she stands, shouldering her bag once more. “Hey, Hebert,” she greets you.

“Hi, Sophia.” You slip past her to open the door, holding it open so she can walk in. Once she’s in, you slip it closed and dart ahead, glancing around to see if Dad’s home yet. He’s not. “You’re early. I haven’t had time to make you anything to eat, sorry.”

She shrugs. “It’s fine,” she says dismissively. “Got a track meeting later tonight, I’ll eat there.
“Thanks.”

“Of course.” You smile at her. “Did you bring your Chemistry work?”

“Mm.” She shakes her head, following you as you walk through the house and into your bedroom. Once she’s in, you close your door, locking it behind you. “I did.” She hesitantly moves over to your bed, pulling her backpack with you. You study her for a moment, taking in her cautious movements. She seems to notice your appraisal, because she scowls at you for a moment before her face softens. You wait, and after a moment, she curls up on your bed, pulling her knees to her chest. “Hey, Hebert,” she says abruptly. “You any good at maths?”

You look at her, taking in her nervous demeanour. You’re tempted to make a joke about it, but you’re pretty sure she won’t take it well right now. “I’m okay at it,” you say, moving over to sit next to her. She hesitates as you move to take her hand, but she doesn’t pull it away before you can take it. She doesn’t reciprocate, though, just sits there, allowing you to hold it. “Do you need some help with Maths, too?”

Sophia sighs. “And History,” she says grudgingly. “I’m just—busy all the time, and everyone expects me to have all this time to do all this bullshit work and I don’t.” With her free hand, she savagely hits your mattress. The whole bed bounces a little. “And my grades are tanking because of it,” she concludes, frustration thick in her voice.

You hesitate. You don’t actually take any History classes at school. “I can help you with Maths,” you say carefully. “I’d have to spend some time catching up on History if you want my help with that, though. I don’t mind, but it’ll take me a while to go through the material for your class.”

She stares at you, then nods slowly. “That’s fair,” she says. “What do you want in exchange?”

“What-“ You balk at that for a moment, before you remember—right, the deal. You’d, you’d honestly almost forgotten about that. “Oh. Um. It’s okay.” You smile sweetly at her. “If you need the help, I’ll help you. I’m not going to blackmail you with your grades, Sophia.”

Raising her eyebrows at you, she sneers a little. “Right,” she scoffs. “That’s why we spend so much time here every week, is it?”

Your brow knits together as a little burst of pain stabs through your chest. You’d really thought she was into it. You try to disguise the hurt as you reply, “We can stop if you want.”

She sneers at you for another moment before leaning back, shaking her head. This time, you’re pretty sure her scoff is directed at herself. “No. No.” She waves a hand at you. “Just—sorry.” She throws her head back for a moment. When she looks back down, she looks a little less agitated. Not very much less, but a little. After a moment, she softens a bit more. Her hand in yours squeezes a little, the hand-holding actually reciprocated. “I know you’re not blackmailing me. Just payment for services rendered, right?” She smirks at you, the expression somehow still challenging.

But you still shake your head. “No,” you insist. “We can stop that, if you really want. I just—I just like… kissing you.” Your voice grows smaller as you finish your sentence, and you turn your head down a bit, starting at your joined hands. “But if you don’t want to, that’s fine. I’ll still help you with your schoolwork.” You look back up, giving her an embarrassed smile. “It might even give us more time to study, huh.”

The attempt at a joke falls flat between the two of you. Neither of you speaks for a moment.
Finally, Sophia nods, her expression a strange mixture of curiosity and frustration as she looks at you. “No, it’s fine,” she replies. “It’s—not exactly a chore.” Finally, most of the sudden frustration has bled out of her face, leaving her usual teasing tone in its place. “We’ll just make a new deal. You help me with Maths and History too, and I’ll...” She grimaces. “You can pick two more bits of clothing for me to take off when I’m over. Sounds fair?”

You slowly shake your head. That sounds—that does sound more than fair, but... “I want something else,” you say abruptly. “I’ll help you with Maths, that’s fine, but History is going to take me a lot of time to catch up on.”

“What?” You can sense the trepidation in her words.

“I want a date.” Sophia blinks, taken aback. “During the holidays. I want to ask you out on a date, and you have to say yes. If you do, I’ll help you with your History work. Does that sound fair?”

She eyes you warily. “When?”

You shake your head. “I don’t know yet. During the holidays, definitely, but I don’t know when I’m going to be busy. I’ll let you know closer to when I can do it, okay?”

There’s a significant pause. You sit there patiently as Sophia considers it for several long moments, as though searching your words for a trap. Eventually, she looks over at you with a guarded look. “I’m going to be busy a lot during the holidays.”

“That’s fine.” You give her a smile. “If you can’t make the first date, I’ll set a second one. But you’ll have to make time.” The message is clear; she’ll have to make time for you, like you’re making time for her.

She bites her lip, as though considering something. Then she exhales and nods, a jerky movement, as though she’s already regretting it. “Fine,” she bites out. “I’ll go on a date with you. But you’d better help me get top marks in History, Hebert.”

Yes! “Of course,” you tell her with a demure smile. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Good.” She nods roughly. “Now tell me what clothes I’m taking off, Hebert.” Her cheeks flush dark, a charming colour that makes you want to squeal and pinch her cheeks... not that you would. You’d like to keep your fingers unbroken.

Besides; you’re a little too confused to be squealing at her. “Uh...” you stall. What’s she talking about?

A moment later, it clicks, and it’s all you can do to stop your eyes from widening in front of her. Did—did she think you meant a date in addition to taking off her clothes? And she agreed?

You lick your lips. This is uncharted territory. You don’t want to waste this. You also don’t want to push her too far. “Um... take off your bra,” you instruct her, trying to hide the trembling in your voice. “And—and your socks.” You nod firmly.

Sophia’s confused look is adorable. “My socks?” she asks incredulously.

You nod. It’s not that you’re a foot fetishist or anything, although you bet that Sophia does have cute
little feet. It’s—it’s a vulnerability thing. Sophia, like Emma, uses her clothes like armour. The more you take off her, the more vulnerable she’s going to feel around you. There’s a certain appeal in having Sophia vulnerable around you—god knows you’ve had more than enough late-night fantasies about taking advantage of a vulnerable Sophia—but if you push her too fast too soon, she’s going to slam up her walls.

You don’t want to pass up on this opportunity, and taking off her socks *will* be another dent in her armour. It’s perfect—it’ll open her up more without pushing her right out of her comfort zone.

At least, in theory.

She stares at you for a moment, then shakes her head and rolls her eyes. “Whatever floats your boat,” she grouses, and begins taking off her shirt.

You can’t help but stare once she takes her bra off. You’ve felt her up beneath it, sure, and you’ve certainly imagined what they’d look like unbound—but you’ve never actually seen Sophia’s breasts before. You can’t help the little moan that escapes you as they bounce slightly once they’re free of their confines. She smirks up at you, a little of her confidence restored. They’re perfect for her.

All of your girls have perfect breasts, of course. You love playing with all of them—Madison’s small, pert breasts just give you a different kind of pleasure to Victoria’s larger, softer breasts, which in turn give you a different kind of pleasure to Sophia’s rounded breasts, each tipped with dusky nipples. You have to restraint yourself from leaning in and biting them.

You tremble a little as she reaches down and pulls off her socks. You’d—you’d fantasized about having Sophia in your bed like this, but it’d always been a distant fantasy. It’s hard to restrain yourself, now that they’re within arm’s reach.

Her cheeks are dark when you finally tear your gaze away to stare in awe at her face. All the frustration from earlier has melted away, replaced with shimmering desire.

Well—if she wants it as much as you do, why should you hold back?

In the end, you and Sophia don’t get much studying done that night. Or, more properly, the two of you don’t get *any* studying done that night. It’s hard enough to tear yourself away from kissing Sophia on a normal day. When Sophia is showing you her nude breasts for the first time, it’s practically impossible.

If Sophia hadn’t participated as eagerly as you had—hadn’t lifted your shirt up over your head and allowed you to pin her to your bed, wrestling her tongue into submission—you’d feel embarrassed as to how badly you’d just basically molested her. But she had participated just as enthusiastically, would have been running her hands over your body just as much as you did hers if you hadn’t pinned her hands together and held her down, so you can’t bring yourself to feel embarrassed.

Really, all you can bring yourself to feel is aroused, as you slip into bed that night with one hand practically down your panties already.

It’s a good thing you’ve already invited Madison over, because despite Victoria relieving you recently, you’re already building up a head of sexual frustration again. Having this many cute girls around is very good for your libido.
You fall asleep at midnight, hands newly washed and a new set of panties on. As you fall asleep, thoughts swirl in your head, plans for tomorrow—and the rest of the holidays.

There’s no school for a while. This is going to be fun.
Saturday morning brings with it the loud sound of swearing coming from next door. It’s too muffled for you to understand what they’re saying, but it’s emphatic enough to draw you out of bed at barely half past five in the morning, muttering your own little swear words at them in turn.

It also brings with it the knowledge that it’s the school holidays now, but somehow, that seems less important in the moment than getting away from all that swearing does. You stumble out into the kitchen, bleary-eyed and very, very annoyed. It’s not an auspicious start to your school holidays.

The coffee maker bubbles away merrily after you turn it on, preparing to spill its delicious innards into your mug. As you wait, legs crossed in front of the bench, you consider.

During the holidays, you’re not getting new assignments and homework to keep up with. You’ve pretty much finished this year’s textbooks and everything. The only school-related stuff you even could keep up with at this point is to reread the textbooks for the year, or to purchase next year’s textbooks and read through them. And to find out which textbooks Sophia’s class is reading and locate a copy of them so you can help her study for that, of course.

It won’t exactly occupy you as much as it normally would, though. Right now, for instance, you really don’t feel like heading back to your room and rereading through your textbooks. It might help, but that’s just not the kind of thing you want to waste your holidays doing all the time.

That does, however, leave you with a quandary; what are you going to do until your date with Amy?

You open the refrigerator and take out a stick of celery as you consider it, idly chewing as you pad back over to the coffee machine and begin pouring the liquid into your mug. None of your girls will be awake yet—if they are, they shouldn’t be—so you can’t talk to any of them about anything just yet.

You’re halfway through your third bite of your celery stick when a thought strikes you. Ah—with it being the holidays now, wouldn’t the Wards be participating in one of their programs? Not official PR programs, of course (there are complicated legalities involved with employing minors to appear in public; nothing insurmountable, but enough of a pain to not make it worth it all that often, and not on an ongoing basis), but they usually hold some events during the school holidays to raise awareness of the Wards program while the Wards aren’t having to go in to school every day.

And if the Wards are out and about in public, they’re going to have to post a public itinerary for it to do any good.

Considering it, you nod at first sharply, then more hesitantly. Well—well, okay. Maybe you shouldn’t look up their entire itinerary yet. You have a date with Amy later today, and you really don’t want to make yourself feel uncomfortable looking up Vista’s schedule when you’re going to meet your maybe-kind-of-girlfriend in just a few hours.

You grab your mug of coffee in the hand that isn’t currently carrying your celery stick and head over to the computer. You have to double back, again, and grab a towel from the linen closet to cover the modem so the sound of it booting up doesn’t wake Dad up. It’s really kind of annoying. On Earth Aleph, they apparently have modems that don’t make these horrifyingly loud screeching noises when they turn on. That’d be nice.
The chair isn’t the most comfortable, but you slip into it anyway, loading up the ParaHumans Online board and navigating as quickly as you can to the Brockton Bay subforum. From there, it’s easy enough to find Shadow Stalker’s thread; it’s nearly halfway down the page, but given how active the threads for Panacea, Glory Girl, Armsmaster and Battery are, that’s really not surprising.

It takes a surprising amount of searching through the thread to find any information on these events. After fifteen minutes of searching, you open a new window and navigate back to the PHO board itself, just in case you’d missed a general thread on it. As it turns out, you had, but it’s not a particularly helpful thread—just a notification that the Wards would be making public appearances during the holidays, with a note that the dates will be updated when they’ve been confirmed.

Incompetence in the PRT staff? There’s incompetence everywhere, you guess. At least this one only appears to be an administrative error.

It’s not like you don’t have the time to spare, so you settle back in to Shadow Stalker’s thread and begin reading backwards from the newest posts, searching for any hint as to when the events will be. After a while, you also open Aegis’ thread—he’s the leader of the Wards, so if there are any group events, they’re most likely going to be found here.

You do spend a few guilty minutes (and by a few minutes, you mean over an hour and a half) searching through Glory Girl’s thread, just to make sure that nobody has posted anything about the two of you. Luckily, you go back more than thirty pages and don’t see any reference to a Taylor, or even any new friends of Victoria’s—and there’s discussion of Victoria’s relationship with her boyfriend (apparently named ‘Dean’) in there, so you’re pretty sure that if anyone had posted any images of the two of you, somebody would be bringing that up.

So, alright, maybe it is kind of your own fault that it takes so long to find the information you’ve been looking for, but that kind of stuff really is important.

It’s approaching twelve by the time you’ve finally finished cross-checking Shadow Stalker and Aegis’ threads, looking for any confirmation of public events during the holidays. Your phone has been buzzing in your lap, texts flowing in every ten minutes from Amy as she confirms the time and place of your date; you give that your priority, which slowed down your search even more. Still, you’re sure of three different locations for events Shadow Stalker will be at; there’s one this Tuesday in the library, one next Saturday at the town hall, and another one the Tuesday after.

You commit the dates to memory as you rush off to the bathroom. Dad’s been up for a while, but apart from him quickly sticking his head in to check whether you were in the room, he hasn’t bothered you. You don’t hear the shower running, so it’s safe for you to go in and begin preparing for your date with Amy.

As soon as you turn the corner and the building comes into view, you find yourself regretting your choice of venue.

It’s not like you’re spoiled with choice, though. The only nice restaurants around town that you can get to easily are a small Mexican restaurant a handful of blocks away from your house… and the same restaurant you’d previously met Emma at; Moretti’s Dining. You trust the food at Moretti’s more than you do the Mexican restaurant. Maybe you could have looked around more, but there aren’t a lot of restaurants in Brockton Bay that offer good food for low prices. It’s not the kind of town where chefs come envisioning a career in quality, affordable food preparation. It’s the kind of
town where someone falls into a job as a chef and finds themselves trapped for the next forty, fifty years.

You probably could have gone to Madison’s father’s restaurant, but, uh—no. It’s going to be weird enough having this conversation with Amy. Having it in a restaurant owned by the father of another girl you’re dating is just bizarre.

There’s remarkably little noise in the restaurant, considering. Or maybe it’s not all that remarkable. It’s an affordable restaurant that offers decent food, but you imagine that most parents wouldn’t consider taking their children out to an Italian restaurant for lunch. Pizza places are probably getting a lot of business right now, though.

The server who greets you today isn’t the same one as the one who greeted you when you’d met up with Emma, unfortunately. This one is wearing a nametag that introduces himself as ‘Esmond’. He politely escorts you to your table and pours you a glass of water before retreating back to his position at the standing desk before the front door.

You idly amuse yourself while waiting for Amy by tapping on your phone. You haven’t actually ended up taking any photos, which kind of surprises you—the idea of photographing your girls still shoots a little thrill down you. Why haven’t you done it? The answer presents itself immediately; it’s just really awkward to imagine yourself standing in front of Sophia and asking her if she’d be willing to take her clothes off so you could take some nude photos of her.

“Hey.”

You jerk, accidentally bumping your glass of water and nearly sending it tipping over the edge as you look up at the person who just spoke. Amy smirks back down at you, obviously pleased at your reaction. “Hi,” you reply stupidly. “You’re, um. You look nice.”

She looks down at her dress, a simple but incredibly well-cut dress coloured powder blue, then looks at you with a shy smile. “You think so?”

“Mhm.” You nod decisively. “That dress looks great on you. It’s a nice colour, too. Where did you get it?” As you talk, you gesture for her to sit down at the chair across from you.

Amy smiles hesitantly as she takes a seat, looking around the restaurant and ducking her head. “I didn’t buy it,” she admits. “My sister bought it for me. I’m supposed to wear it tomorrow, but I wanted to dress up a little.” She flushes. “And now I feel kind of overdressed.”

You tilt your head. She is dressed nicer than anyone else in the restaurant. “Maybe a little,” you say mildly, “but that’s not a bad thing. You look really pretty, and there’s nothing wrong with wanting to dress up a bit.”

She glances around the restaurant again. “I think I stand out a bit,” she mutters. Her shoulders hunch defensively in on themselves.

There’s no response you can make to that but to wave your hands. “You always stand out,” you inform her. She hunches further in on herself. “You’re the cutest girl in the room, and you have the most adorable blush.” You lean your head on your hands, giving her a teasing grin that she catches as she darts her eyes back to you, causing the aforementioned blush to rise again. “People can’t help but look at you, I think.”
The reddish flush on her face darkens, and she ducks her head down. She mumbles something, but it’s too low for you to hear. Then, after a few moments, she looks back up, the red on her face largely gone. “That’s not really what I meant, but thanks,” she says wryly. Then, before you can tease her any more, “Have you been here before? Any suggestions for food?”

That half a spoonful of minestrone you’d tasted had been alright. “They make good chicken.” You pick up the menu and scan through it. “Some of their pasta meals are a bit heavy, but I like the farfalle with asparagus, too.” It’s been a while since you’ve actually eaten here, and you’ve only really had more adult meals a couple of times. Somehow, you suspect that Amy won’t take it well if you tell her that she should get spaghetti with meatballs.

“So.” She gives the menu a considering look. “I’m not the biggest fan of asparagus, but I’ll give it a try.”

Nobody’s ever a fan of asparagus. You hide your disgruntled look from her behind your glass of water. Why can nobody except you appreciate the greatness that is asparagus? Nevertheless, you raise your hand to call over a server.

It’s an older woman this time, someone almost as old as Dad. Her hair is starting to go grey, too. “What can I get for you today?” she asks professionally. There’s a slight accent to her voice still; French, you think after a second’s consideration. You look casually down at her nametag, which spells out her name as ‘Esmerelda’.

You just order a simple chicken-and-pasta meal, ignoring the look both Amy and Esmerelda give you as you fumble the name’s pronunciation. Amy, meanwhile, orders the farfalle with asparagus.

Beneath the table, your hands twist on the hem of your shirt, and you have to stifle a sigh before Amy can see it. You need to tell her, at least about your other girlfriends. It’s really unfair to keep that kind of thing from her. And it’s going to take them a while to cook your food. Better to just do it, Mom always used to say. Just tear the band-aid off. It’ll hurt, but you need to do it.

Then again, who actually tears band-aids off? It hurts a lot less to just slowly peel them off.

You shake your head, drawing a curious look from Amy. You let out a sigh, settling back into your chair and moving your hands back up to cup your glass of water. “This is our third date, isn’t it?” you ask her.

She nods hesitantly. “Yes.” She gives you a wary look.

Chewing your lip, you consider how to approach this. “I don’t really go on a lot of dates,” you admit, “so I’m not really sure about the protocol of these kind of things, but the third date is where you’re supposed to tell your date about things they need to know, isn’t it?”

Across the table, Amy stiffens. Her hand grasps tightly around the glass of water she’s holding. “I don’t know,” she replies. “I don’t go on many dates either. Why?” Her gaze darts nervously off to the side. Damn it, maybe you did leave this too long, if she’s already feeling anxious about what you’re going to tell her.

“Well, I just—” You let out a sigh. “There’s some—something you need to know, if we’re going to keep dating. Which, um, which I hope we are, because I really like dating you. You’re sweet. And it wouldn’t be fair to you if I’m keeping secrets that could affect us, but, um, I haven’t said anything
before, because you might get angry and not want to see me any more, and that would be really bad, because I like seeing you, and I—"

Giving you a soft, concerned look, Amy reaches across the table and grabs one of your hands with hers, pulling it away from the glass and gently rubbing her thumb over the back of your hand. “Breathe, Taylor,” she murmurs. “You’re rambling.”

You inhale deeply, ignoring the heat you can feel building in your cheeks. “Sorry,” you reply, looking down at your glass of water. You can see her reflection in it. It feels easier to look at that, somehow.

It’s surprisingly hard to just come out and say it, but with Amy patting your hand and giving you a concerned look, you can feel your heart calming down a little. It still takes you a few moments to work up enough courage to finally take the plunge, though.

You screw your eyes shut. You don’t want to see her reaction. You’ll hear it just fine. “I’ve—“ Your throat tightens at the words, but, no. You’ve come this far. “I’ve, um, you’re not the only girlfriend I have.” Cringing, you wait for her reaction.

… There’s nothing. No explosion. No yelling. God, did you put her into shock or something?

Heart filled with trepidation, you slowly open your eyes again, looking down at your glass. Your hands are shaking too badly for you to see her reflection in it, though. You almost gulp as you drag your gaze up, up, up—and finally meet Amy’s slightly annoyed look.

“What do you mean, I’m not your only girlfriend?” she asks, her voice low. This time, you actually do gulp. Your power stirs, but before it can lash out and wrap over her, you tighten your grasp over it. No—you’re going to do this without it. Even if you are feeling sick looking at her expression. You can’t help the way you cringe at her tone, though. “I’ve… I’ve got other girlfriends.” Rip off that band-aid, Taylor. “It’s, it’s, yeah. You’re the only one who doesn’t know, so far.” Technically true. Aisha doesn’t know, but Aisha also isn’t your girlfriend. Yet. “And I don’t want to try to hide it from you. That would be unfair.”

She stares at you for several long moments, straight into your eyes. You don’t know what she’s hoping to see in there, but you do your best to meet her gaze.

After nearly a minute, she subsides, settling back into her chair. She stares at you with a suspiciously blank gaze. “How many other girlfriends do you have?” she asks neutrally.

“Four,” you reply instantly. Then you hesitate. “Um. Kind of. Madison, Sophia, Charlotte, and Victoria.” Amy tilts her head curiously for a moment, then seems to shake her head, dismissing whatever thought just occurred to her. “And kind of Emma.”

She stares at you for several long moments, straight into your eyes. You don’t know what she’s hoping to see in there, but you do your best to meet her gaze.

After nearly a minute, she subsides, settling back into her chair. She stares at you with a suspiciously blank gaze. “How many other girlfriends do you have?” she asks neutrally.

“You’re lucky you’re so cute,” she grumbles, softly enough that you don’t think she meant to hear it. It takes a few seconds for her to say anything more. When she finally speaks again, it’s loud enough that you think you’re meant to hear it. “So how is this going to work, then? Do I have to, what, schedule dates with you?”

You blink. No—trying to schedule things is your job. “No, of course not,” you tell her firmly. “I can
be a little busy, but not like that. If you want to go on a date, then just ask me, or I’ll ask you.” That might change in the future, but at least for now, you don’t foresee any problems in trying to schedule dates with Amy in.

And if you do encounter any problems, well. You’ll just have to prioritize, as vaguely ill as the thought of prioritizing any of your girls over each other makes you feel.

She nods slowly. “Okay. I’m asking because, um. Do you remember how you were talking about that bookstore in Boston?” You nod, so she continues, her voice quickly growing more enthusiastic once again. “Well, um, Mom has to buy some more books for my homeschooling sessions, so she’s going down to Boston. I asked her if I could come with her, and I might have asked her if I could bring you too. Or, um. Not you—you, but I asked if I could bring a friend along, and she said yes.”

Ooh. Your interest must show on her face, because a smirk quickly flickers across her face, before a pensive look once again grows on her face. “That would be cool!” you exclaim. You go to reach across with your other hand—she’s still holding your left hand in hers; you’re not sure if she even realizes she’s holding it—but like a moron, you forget that you’re holding your glass of water as you do. Amy lets out a little shriek as the water spills across the table towards her, then lets out a relieved sigh as the tablecloth absorbs the little bit of water that had spilled from it before it can reach her.

“Be careful,” she chides you. “Mom’s going down on Thursday. I don’t know when, but I’ll send you a text to let you know the time, okay?”

“Okay!” Your voice is loud, probably far louder than is really acceptable. You see several heads at nearby tables turn to look at you, causing you to shrink back in your chair, ears burning. “Okay,” you mumble. “That would be nice.” She nods, the corner of her mouth turned upwards.

Before either of you can say anything more, though, the server returns, bearing with her two plates. “Here you go, little ladies,” Esmerelda greets the two of you, carefully placing two covered plates in front of you without disturbing your still-entwined hands. “Enjoy your meals.” She gives the two of you a practiced smile before walking away.

The conversation grows rather stilted after that. Now that the immediate topics of conversation have passed, you find yourself struggling for anything to talk about. You could ask how she’s doing with her lessons, but that seems kind of banal in the face of admitting your other relationships to her and being invited on an out-of-town trip. You could ask her about her work, but she always seems kind of stressed out about that, so that’s probably not a good topic.

Instead, the two of you just eat your lunch together in awkward silence. Even after finishing it, you can only sit there in an uncomfortable silence, staring at Amy as she finishes eating hers.

She’s cute when she eats. She hunches over the table slightly, and only ever takes small nibbles of her pasta, as though she’s afraid of dropping her food everywhere. Her tongue keeps flicking out over her lips, licking up the little bits of sauce that she can’t keep secured to the food. Finally, she finishes, and looks up to see you staring at her. She squeaks, blushing a little. “What?”

You shake your head, smiling. “Nothing! You just look really cute, that’s all.”

She stares down at her plate, then looks back up at you and pouts. Your grin broadens.

Conversation you might not be so good at, but teasing? That you can do.
It’s nearly three by the time you stroll out of the restaurant beside a mirthful Amy. Your cheeks are bright red, as are hers; hers because you keep teasing her about her predilection for flat chests (“I don’t like flat chests!” she’d said indignantly, only to hastily backtrack when you’d glanced down at your own; “N-Not that there’s anything wrong with them! I bet they’re pretty great, but they’re not, but, they—shut up, Taylor!”), and yours because Amy is really, really cute when she laughs.

There’s still a lingering air of uncertainty between the two of you, though. It’s certainly amusing to poke fun at her tendency to blush all the time, but ever since your confession about your other girlfriends, you’ve been afraid to say anything too serious. You’re pretty sure she’s noticed—and she conspicuously avoided talking about it too.

Still, she didn’t slap you in the face and storm off, as you were half-afraid would happen. You can take silence on the topic.

“Alright,” Amy says finally, as the two of you come to a stop at the street. “I had a good time, but Mom will be here to pick me up soon. I’ll see you on Thursday?”

You nod firmly. “Definitely. I’ll be there.” She smiles at you, although unfortunately, doesn’t step forwards for a hug or a kiss or anything. Maybe your relationship isn’t there yet.

Her mother arrives around two minutes later. Amy gives you a wave, and her mother gives you a short nod of acknowledgement. You return Amy’s wave, hoping that neither of the two of them can see that your face is still red after you catch a glimpse of Amy’s mother. That woman is absurdly attractive.

Once the two of them have pulled away from the curb and began driving off, you pull out your phone and send Madison a short text—“Are you free for dinner tonight?” Then you head back to the bus stop.

There’s something odd about taking two separate girls out on dates on the same day. You’re not opposed to the idea, not at all, but it still feels a little odd.

Madison texts you back once you’re on the bus. “Yes!! Where do you want me to go!! And what time!!”

You reply, having already considered it earlier in the day. “Remember your question marks. I want to eat at six. Do you like Mexican food?”

Her reply again takes a disconcerting length of time, well over twenty minutes. You’re used to her replying within five. “I’m not very good with spicy food, but I’m sure they’ll have some food I can eat.”

“Good.” You send that as its own text message, then rapidly type out another. “Don’t forget your pajamas, since you’re staying the night.” The address of the restaurant follows soon after.

The minutes tick down as you wait for your bus to get to the stop nearest to your house. Once you’re there, you head home, a small smile on your face as you go. The smile lasts until you open the front door, at which point it slides off your face almost immediately, transforming into a neutral look.

Dad’s in the living room, you find. He’s often in here—it’s where both the TV and the computer are. He turns his head as you walk in, giving you a rumbled “Welcome back, Taylor”.
You smile at him then. “Thanks, Dad.” You step into the room, taking a deep breath. “Would it be
okay if Madison stayed the night tonight?”

He turns to look at you at that. He’s not smiling, but he’s not frowning, either. “Sure,” he says
gruffly. “Do you want me to make some extra dinner for her tonight, or will she eat at her house?”

You shake your head. “I’m going out for dinner with Madison…’s family,” you lie glibly. He gives
you a strange look, but doesn’t comment. “I’ll be going at about five thirty, but we’ll be back before
eight, I promise.” You give him your most charming smile.

Dad nods slowly. “If you’re sure. Do you need me to drop you off?”

You pause. “Actually, that would be good,” you reply. “Um, I need to go have a shower first,
though, and get changed.”

“Okay.”

It’s lucky that Victoria bought you so many clothes during her shopping trip, or you might be forced
to dress less nicely for you dinner with Madison than you did for Amy. As it is, once you’re finished
in the shower, you’re able to pull on an entirely different set of clothes that still feel presentable for
having a formal dinner with someone in.

It’s not time to leave, so you head back out to the living room and sit next to Dad, bringing Victoria’s
Harry Potter book with you as you go. You’ve already finished it, but you’re giving it back
tomorrow, hopefully, so you might as well spend a bit of time rereading it.

A little before five thirty, Dad reaches over and grabs the remote. He turns to look at you, noting
your sprawled form as you hold the book above you, trying to read it without having to bend your
neck. His voice sounds amused when he asks, “Are you ready to go, Taylor?”

You nod, then wince as the movement causes you to hit your head on the arm of the couch. “Yes.
I’ll just go put this book back.” You hurriedly run to your room and put the book back on your desk,
then scurry back out to find Dad waiting by the front door, his car keys already in his hand. He turns
and opens the door, leading you out to his car.

The drive to the restaurant is mostly silent, except for you giving Dad directions and the low sound
of the radio. It’s not an unpleasant silence, just the kind of silence that grows between two people
who live in the same house and don’t need to talk much. You’re used to this kind of silence.

Eventually, he pulls up in front of the parking lot of Tommy’s, the Mexican restaurant you’d asked
Madison to meet you at. You kind of want to take Madison out to Moretti’s instead, but it’s probably
not a good idea to take two different girls out on dates to the same restaurant on the same day.

You wave goodbye to Dad, who calls out his goodbyes and asks you to call when you need to be
picked up as he peels away. Then, you head inside the restaurant.

It’s still ten to six, so unsurprisingly, Madison isn’t here yet. You pick a table in the quietest section
of the restaurant, up near the back; you have to shy away from the corners, as there’s a family sitting
in one and a large, fat man with a walrus-like moustache in the other. You pick one closer to the
family than that man, then sit and wait.
Thankfully, it only takes Madison a couple of minutes to arrive. And when she does, you can’t drag your attention away from her.

Madison always looks cute, but there’s something sublime about seeing her wearing the clothes you picked out for her in public—not just in school, but out where strangers can see her, in your presence. You have to swallow dryly. Suddenly, you’re almost regretting telling Madison that she’s not allowed to spend all her money buying more.

You can tell when she notices you, because a smile immediately spreads over her face as she begins hurrying towards you. You give her a little wave, giving her a bemused look as she slides into the seat opposite you with a soft “Huzzah!” Only then does she look up, her grin growing even wider as she greets you with, “Hello, Taylor!”

“Hello, Madison,” you return. “Did you remember to bring your clothes?”

“Mhm.” She nods, her grin diminishing until it’s back to its usual warm demeanour. “I left it with the receptionist. He said I could get it and my handbag back when we leave.”

You give her a pleased nod, causing her grin to widen once again. “That’s smart,” you praise her. “Did you remember to bring the clothes I told you to?”

She makes a pleased sound. “Of course. I even brought more of these to wear tomorrow.” She tugs on her clothes to demonstrate what she means.

You reach over the table, gesturing for her to give you her hand. She does so, her eyelids fluttering. “Good girl,” you purr. “But you won’t be needing them. I want you to wear my clothes tomorrow.”

“B—“ Madison inhales shakily. “Y—Yes. But, um, won’t your clothes be too big?”

“Yes.” You nod, giving her a sweet smile. “That’s okay with you, isn’t it?”

She nods quickly, letting out a breathy sigh. “Yes. Yes it is.” She shivers.

You give her a pleased smile. You weren’t sure whether she would take well to the idea. It’d struck you recently, when you’d remembered her reaction after you’d bought that jacket for the two of you to share. It’s not quite the same—wearing your clothes won’t restrict her movements, won’t bind her tightly against you—but your clothes do smell like you. And the idea of Madison going home in your clothes, being surrounded by your scent even while she’s away from you, well. You’re not going to lie to yourself; that’s an extremely appealing image.

You pick up the menu, humming a little. “You said you don’t like spicy food, didn’t you?” Then you lower it just enough that you can see her nodding her head.

“You’re not very good with spicy foods, sorry,” she says with a pout. “They sting my mouth.”

You hum, then quickly glance around the restaurant. Nobody is close enough to hear if you say anything, so you turn back to Madison and flash her a smirk. “If anything I bought you burned your mouth, I’d kiss it better,” you say stalwartly. “But you should just try the chicken enchiladas today. They’re not spicy.” With that said, you put up your arm, trying to wave one of the servers over to you.

It’s not all that easy to decide what you want for yourself—you’re not much for spicy foods yourself either. In the end, you settle on getting Madison some chicken enchiladas, and yourself a beef
The food doesn’t take too long to cook and bring out—a server is placing it in front of you barely fifteen minutes from the time you ordered it. You’re still busy asking Madison after her family (“Terry keeps asking me if you’re going to come over any time soon,” she complains. “I think he likes you better than me.”) and her job (“I just started this morning,” she informs you. “Dad has me cooking desserts, since that’s what I’m best at. He was impressed at how fast I was working, I think.”) when the plates are put down in front of you.

In between bites of your quesadilla, you continue asking after Madison’s personal life. There are some questions you’ve been meaning to ask her, anyway.

You wait until she’s finished most of her enchilada before you ask your first question. “By the way, Madison,” you begin. “I’ve been wondering, why don’t you hang around with your old friends anymore?”

She half-shrugs, the movement almost causing her to drop her enchilada. You grin a little, causing her to look down at her plate, abashed. “They weren’t my friends,” she mumbles. Neither of you has to clarify who you’re talking about—the gaggle of people that used to surround the Trio are clearly imprinted in both your memories.

“I thought they were,” you respond, slightly confused. “You used to hang around them a lot, didn’t you?”

She shrugs. “They used to hang around Emma, too,” she replies matter-of-factly. “But they weren’t her friends, either. They were all like me. They just wanted to hang around whoever was cool at the time.”

That’s a bit odd. They used to hang around Emma? Come to think of it, you haven’t seen Emma with anyone but Sophia lately at school. Actually, you haven’t even seen Sophia hanging around anyone except Emma. “And they don’t think you’re cool any more?” you ask, still a bit confused.

She shakes her head, glaring down at her enchilada. “None of them want to hang around a lesbian,” she sneers. The sheer amount of venom in her voice actually takes you aback a little. “They’re all too scared of the Brotherhood. They even told me to stop being with you if I wanted to stay friends with them.” Her anger has risen suddenly, a sharp, acrid rose blooming hot with rage and prickled with sharp thorns of contempt.

You blink at her, eyes wide. She’s still scowling down at her food, nostrils flared as she exhales angrily. “… What did you say?” you ask, with some trepidation. This might actually be the first time you’ve seen Madison angry.

“I told them to stick it where the sun doesn’t shine,” she replies, looking up at you. “And that they could go to hell if they thought I’d choose them over you.” She clenches her jaw shut, and you can both metaphorically and literally see her choke her anger back down. It coils back down into her stomach, but doesn’t disappear entirely. Finally, she unclenches her teeth and gives you an embarrassed smile. “I don’t actually know what that first insult means,” she admits sheepishly. “I just heard Sophia say it once, and it sounded cool.”

“It means to shove it up their butts,” you reply automatically. Your thoughts are whirling. How long ago was this? You noticed that Madison hasn’t been hanging around her friends weeks ago. When did they give her that ultimatum? Was it last week, or a week after you started working on her?
(When did she start feeling so strongly about you that she would willingly give up her entire circle of friends explicitly for you, without even telling you with the expectation of a reward?)

Madison wrinkles her nose. “That makes sense,” she says, her face screwed up into a slightly disgusted expression. “Ew.”

You chuckle a little, causing her to grin widely, the anger coiling around her dissipating back within her, retreating back to its usual place.

You’re touched, actually, that Madison would so willingly give up her former friends for you. She claims that they weren’t her friends, but there was a time when you would have given almost anything for that. That kind of loyalty definitely deserves a reward. You make a mental note, though, to encourage Madison to befriend Aisha and Charlotte. Or at least Charlotte.

Admittedly, the idea of Madison devoting herself just to you does have its own kind of appeal.

You move the conversation back to lighter topics as the two of you finish off your meals. Mostly, the conversation revolves around Madison’s new job. She’s very, very eager to tell you all about the delicious new desserts her father has her cooking while she’s working there, including some desserts you’ve never even heard of. What is a quesito?

Even as the two of you get up and make your way out, stopping at the front desk so you can pay and Madison can retrieve her bag, she continues regaling you with the stories of her adventures in the kitchen. You don’t understand half the things she’s saying, but you don’t have the heart to tell her so, not when she’s this animated about a topic. Instead, you just pull her over to the wall, tugging her close enough to you to allow her to snuggle against you, and call Dad to get him to come pick the two of you up while Madison continues chattering away in your other ear, lost to the world.

Then, while you wait, you busy yourself making understanding noises while Madison describes how she made some fudge brownies as you stroke your fingers through her hair.

Those brownies do sound delicious, though.

When you see Dad’s car turn the corner a good fifteen minutes later, you nudge Madison to get her to let go, then stand and offer her a hand up. She cuts herself off midway through her story about melting cinnamon and cooking chocolate together, looking around and spotting the car pulling up.

You pull her over to the car, opening the back doors to let both of you into the back seat. Dad looks in the rear-vision mirror curiously, looking over at Madison. “Hello,” he says mildly. “It’s nice to meet you, Madison.”

“H-Hello,” she replies uncertainly. “I-It’s good to meet you too.”

Dad nods, waiting for you to shut the door and buckle yourself in beside her before he pulls out again. He keeps his eyes on the road, but pitches his voice to reach back to the two of you. “Taylor asked me if you could sleep over today,” he calls back. “Is there any particular time you need to be home tomorrow?”

Madison looks hesitantly towards you and licks her lips. “U-Um, I have to go home by one o’clock tomorrow,” she replies. “Dad wants to show me how to make some more desserts.”
You grin at her, and some of the nervousness melts off her frame. “She’s working at her father’s restaurant,” you inform Dad. “She’s a really good cook!”

“Is she now?” Dad makes an approving sound at the back of his throat. “Well, I’ll have you know I am too. We’ll have to invite you over more often, Madison. Maybe we could trade some tips.”

“Maybe!” Madison gives you a grin filled with restrained enthusiasm. “I-I’m not so good at dinner things, but I could make some desserts!”

“I’m not very good at desserts,” Dad replies easily. “When we want some, I usually have to buy a frozen apple pie from the supermarket. It might be good to have some fresh-baked desserts for once, and you could try some of my world-famous beef casserole. What do you think, Taylor?”

You nod enthusiastically. Dad’s casserole isn’t actually all that good, but he puts a lot of effort into it. Nobody has ever had the heart to tell him that it’s not very tasty to anyone except him. “That sounds good!” you exclaim. And it does. You’d love to have Madison over more, especially if Dad is the one offering it. He can’t tease you if it’s his idea!

Dad and Madison continue tossing around ideas for what they could cook for various dinners during the drive home. Dad really wants to cook his casserole, but you suggested having some homemade pizza instead, and like a loyal girlfriend, Madison immediately backed you up.

Finally, the three of you pull up in the driveway. Dad edges towards the end of the driveway, then turns the keys in the ignition, cutting the power, and turns towards the two of you with a severe look. “No pizza,” he says emphatically.

“Yes pizza,” you and Madison chorus. You follow it up with a cheeky grin. “Sorry, Dad. Two to one. You’ve been outvoted.”

“I always knew democracy was bound to fail me,” he says sadly, pouting at the two of you. You’re not going to budge, though. You haven’t had pizza in ages.

Dad takes Madison’s bags for her, carrying them up to your room. You follow him with Madison in tow, although you’re not quite brave enough to take her hand right in front of him. You’d have to put up with his questions, and, eugh.

Once Madison’s bags are in, you make some shooing gestures with your hands, trying to get Dad out of your room as fast as possible. He gives you an amused smile and stands there obstinately for a few moments, watching as you grow more and more frustrated. Finally, he moves to your doorway. “My friend will be coming over tomorrow, so we’ll be installing your window then,” he informs you. “Sleep well, girls.”

After he’s left, you hurry over to your door, quickly pushing it shut and locking it behind him. Then, letting out a sigh of relief, you turn—just in time to see Madison beginning to pull her skirt over her head. You freeze for a moment as she pulls it off properly and drops it at her feet, then reaches back around for her bra clasp. “… What are you doing?” you ask.

The clasp is undone with a soft snicket, and she begins shrugging the straps off her shoulders. “I’m taking my bra off,” she says innocently. “You asked me to, remember? Whenever we’re alone together, I should take my bra and panties off.”

… You’d actually forgotten about that. “So I did,” you murmur. “Don’t worry about putting your
shirt back on, though. Just put your pyjamas on.”

She smiles and begins to tug down her skirt. “Okay.” She follows swiftly with her panties, then picks them all up and begins folding them neatly, placing them in her bag—and, probably not coincidentally, giving you an excellent view of her ass. It’s almost tempting enough to make you walk over there and grab it, but you politely refrain, giving her time to pull her pyjamas out.

“I wasn’t sure what kind of pajamas you wanted me to wear,” she murmurs eventually. Turning around, she holds out three different bundles of pink clothing. “I, um, I only have two summer shirts, and my other one’s in the wash, so I have to wear this one. But I have both of these.” She casually tosses the shirt over her shoulder so she can present each of the bottoms in one hand. She gestures with the left one first—a simple pair of comfy shorts that would stretch down to her mid-thigh, if you had to guess—and with her right hand, revealing a pajama skirt cut almost obscenely short.

You stare at that skirt, your mouth suddenly dry. “W-Where did you buy that?” you manage to stutter out.

A pleased smile spreads across her face, and she casually drops the shorts back in her bag. “Mom bought it,” she says happily, bending down so she can begin pulling the skirt on. “But it was a lot longer when she bought it. I had to… modify it some.” Her pleased smile turns somewhat naughtier, and after she’s finished pulling it on, she twirls, just once. The movement is enough to make the skirt flare up, revealing her bare mound to you. “Do you like it?” As she talks, she begins pulling her shirt on, very deliberately not doing the shirt’s buttons up.

“Yes,” you reply instantly, making her smile grow even naughtier. “But you can never wear this anywhere that’s not in our bedrooms, Madison. Promise me now.” Nobody else can ever see her like this, just barely covered in deliciously thin cotton barriers that shift and threaten to reveal everything to you every time she moves.

She nods easily. “Of course not,” she says agreeably. “Nobody except you has permission to see me like this.”

Your mouth goes even drier, and you have to turn your head to muffle a cough. She can’t just say that. This is unfair. You’d planned on holding her for a while and talking to her, not just throwing her on your bed and ravishing her.

Then again, it has been around a month since the last time the two of you had sex, and Madison doesn’t have a Victoria to give her some relief in the meantime.

Wow, thinking about it that way, you’re kind of impressed that she waited until the two of you were home and in a locked bedroom before she started trying to seduce you. It’d be cruel to make her wait even longer.

“I’m going to go get a bottle of water,” you murmur. Maybe two bottles. “My clothes dresser is over there. Pick out some pajamas for me while I’m gone. Whatever you think will be most comfortable for you to lie on.”

Madison acknowledges your command with a nod. You unlock your door and check carefully that Dad isn’t there to see Madison’s current state of dress before you step out and close the door behind you, heading to the kitchen to grab two bottles of water from the fridge. Dad keeps them in there to keep them nice and cool in case there’s a sudden heat wave.
When you return, Madison is sitting innocently on your bed. You walk over to her, passing her one of the bottles of water. “… You didn’t get any clothes out,” you observe neutrally.

She nods. A faint flush spreads over her cheeks. “You said whatever pajamas would be most comfortable for me to sleep on,” she murmurs. “But I like it when you’re not wearing any.” Her cheeks flush a darker red as she makes her lewd comments.

You’re struck by a sudden set of conflicting desires. You want to reprimand her for not following your instructions, but there’s a warm feeling in your gut that tells you to just strip and cuddle together with your girlfriend. Finally, you settle for what you think is an appropriate compromise, by which you mean giving in and not reprimanding her. “Fine,” you reply eventually, giving her a mildly scolding look. “Come dress me, then.”

She doesn’t even hesitate as she climbs up off the bed and shuffles across the floor to get to you. This time, it’s you who blushes a little as she pulls down your skirt. Even from up here, you can hear Madison’s stifled gasp as she reveals the green lingerie she’d bought for you so long ago.

“They look so pretty on you,” she murmurs. And, before she reaches up and begins pulling them down too, she leans forward and gives your panties an affectionate kiss. You have to bite your lips to restrain a moan at the gesture.

It’s slightly embarrassing to be undressed by your girlfriend, but the embarrassment disappears quickly beneath a building heat in your core. Madison has to kneel in front of you in order to effectively pull your clothes off, and you don’t make it easy for her. You don’t lift your feet until she makes an affectionate gesture—the first time, a kiss on your foot that you’re pretty sure was intended more to tickle you than arouse you. Either way, you reward her for the gesture by lifting your right foot up just enough for her to pull your skirt out from under it, quickly stepping down when she attempts to pull your panties out too. No—one item of clothing per kiss, Madison.

She’s smart. She’ll figure out the rules eventually. (If they were really important ones, you’d tell her anyway. You just enjoy watching her trying to figure out what you want without any verbal cues from you.)

You’re not sure if your refusal to lift your legs without a kiss is why she hesitates at your stockings—but when she instead stands a moment later without making an attempt to pull them down, you’re pretty sure that no, she just likes it when you wear stockings.

Similarly, when she tries to take your shirt off, you grab on to the cuffs of your shirt and hold on tightly. She pouts up at you, but you can see the arousal shining in her eyes, the way her breaths are coming slightly shorter. You can feel the lust condensing on her skin each time she gets it wrong and you refuse to let her take your shirt off. She tries a variety of things, kissing first your mouth, then your neck, then your stomach.

When she’s back to your feet, you have to shift. You enjoy her trying to figure it out, but your rules are arbitrary, and she has nothing to go on. It could take a while at this rate, and that lust can easily turn to frustration. “You’ve used up all your kisses,” you murmur. “Try something else, Madison.”

She looks up at you, a frown knitted on her face. “Please let me take it off,” she whispers.

You’d intended to let her finish taking your shirt off once she crawled behind you. That was it—a fairly simple condition, one she could have figured out without very many problems if she’d kept
going. It amuses you to make her figure it out, but you’re not cruel enough to make it hard for her to figure it out.

But if there’s one sight you find it impossible to resist, it’s Madison kneeling in front of you and begging.

The shirt slips easily off your wrists, and Madison allows herself a relieved sigh. “That was a mean game,” she says, pouting up at you.

“It was,” you acknowledge. You place your hand on her head for a moment, gently petting her, before you reach down and pull up on her shoulder. She hasn’t finished folding your skirt yet, but she just lifts it with her as she rises. “Thank you for going along with it.” You turn her so you can see her pout and give her a quick kiss.

She melts against you, all her stubbornness melting away at the first sign of affection from you. Her mouth parts easily, allowing you to slide your tongue in as you roughly take your skirt from her and throw it towards your dresser. You can deal with that tomorrow. After a moment, you pull away, leaving her red-faced and licking her lips.

“Come on, Madison,” you say gently. “You’ve been a good girl lately. It’s time for your reward.”

It’s almost eleven by the time you and Madison are finished. You really have denied her for too long, if she was able to go for three hours with barely ten minute breaks in between. You’ll have to make sure to invite her over more regularly.

You’re tired, and kind of sore, especially between your legs. You’re pretty sure Madison was the one who came off the worst in that deal, though; with how much you were kissing and sucking at her, you wouldn’t be surprised if she woke up tomorrow to find half her body bruised.

You have to stifle a yawn. Madison, curled nude half upon you, shifts restlessly at the moment, moaning in her sleep as she reaches back with the arm not curled beneath you to pull the blankets up higher over the both of you.

You settle in beside her, nudging her just enough to get her head to fall over onto your shoulder. A contented smile spreads over your face as you feel her hot breaths against your neck.

The last thing you register whirling through your mind as you fall asleep next to your Madison are your plans for tomorrow.
Waking up is a warm and surprisingly soft experience. Your mind struggles to make sense of it for a moment, until you grope around a little and you feel your fingers slip over Madison’s bellybutton. Then you remember, and the memories bring with them a sleepy smile. Barely conscious of the act, you snuggle closer to her, tightening your arms around her and pulling her back against you.

“Oh!” Madison sounds surprised, but happy. Not tired in the least. “Good morning, Taylor.” You blearily open your eyes as you feel the bed shifting, watching Madison squirm as she tries to turn around in your arms to give you a good morning kiss. You return it, although you keep your mouth closed so she doesn’t have to deal with your morning breath.

“What’s the time?” you ask, voice croaking with sleep.

She smiles cutely at you, pecking your lips again. “It’s a little after five,” she tells you, then gives you another little kiss before snuggling back against you.

You roll over a little, pulling Madison as you go until she’s lying half on top of you. “No,” you mumble at her, pouting slightly. “Too early. Sleep more.” You punctuate your words by pulling her up so her chin can rest comfortably on your shoulder.

She’s warm against you. Soft, and warm, and cute, and cuddly. Like your very own little teddy bear.

The last thing you feel as you fall back asleep is Madison’s lips, curling up in a smile.

Madison is still curled up on top of you the next time you wake up. Her eyes are closed, and her chest is rising and falling rhythmically with her sleeping breaths. It’s surprisingly comfortable, actually. Sure, her elbow is digging in your side a little, but her hand is wrapped loosely around your wrist, and she’s resting peacefully within the arm you have curled around her. And she’s so soft. You don’t want to disturb her, so you just lay there for the next half hour or so, idly petting her as she sleeps.

Unfortunately, as time goes on, your ribs start to ache more and more. Madison’s elbow is resting uncomfortably between two of the ribs in your ribcage, and while it wasn’t bad at first, it’s starting to ache every time you breathe in.

You kind of shimmy a little, trying to free your left arm from where it’s trapped beneath her, but give that up as a lost cause when you realize your hand is well and truly trapped beneath her hip. Cautiously, you raise your other hand instead, hoping against hope that she won’t wake up as you try to bend her arm as little as possible and get her elbow out of your ribs, but your hopes are dashed when you tug on her wrist just hard enough to pull her arm a little and her elbow digs harder into your ribs. The hiss you let out at that is hard enough to cause Madison to stir, opening her eyes blearily.

“Taylor?” she asks groggily. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” you murmur. Now that she’s somewhat awake, you feel a little more justified in tugging her arm up and away. “Go back to sleep, Madison.” You crane your neck so you can press a
kiss to her forehead.

She yawns. “What time is it?” she asks sleepily.

You glance over at your alarm clock. “It’s quarter past seven,” you reply softly.

This time, when she opens her mouth to respond again, her jaw seems to almost crack in half with the force of her yawn. “N-no,” she protests drowsily, but her head is already settling back onto your neck. “I’ll m-make some breakfast soon,” she mumbles against your collarbone. “Just gonna, ah, give me five minutes…” By the end, she’s slurring her words. You’re not sure if she’s even awake any more.

Either way, her elbow isn’t digging into your side any more, so you allow yourself to settle back into your bed, patting her as she makes incomprehensible noises before finally settling back down, asleep once again.

Before you can truly relax, however, your phone buzzes atop the bedside table beside your bed. You shift around a little, just managing to reach over far enough to pick it up without dislodging Madison from atop you. The cause of the buzzing reveals itself quickly; it’s a series of texts from Victoria. 

*Book club is cancelled for today. I have family commitments. See you at the library afterwards? I can come pick you up, if you want.*

You send a perfunctory text back, a terse “Good morning” followed by an inquiry as to the time. Your phone buzzes before you can even put it back, a short message back replying, *After 2. I’ll call you when I’m free.*

At least she can use proper grammar in her texts *sometimes.*

Placing your phone back on your bedside table now that you’ve received your answer, you close your eyes in an attempt to follow Madison back to sleep, but rest eludes you. It’s a comfortable rest, certainly, but as you lay here encircled by Madison’s warm body, you find your mind wandering, just a little.

It’s been a long time since you’ve slept together with anyone. You slept with Madison last month, obviously, but the time before that… god, it would have been years ago. When you were eleven, at one of Emma’s sleepovers. Not long after Mom had been diagnosed. Before you’d really realized what it was you were feeling when you cuddled up to Emma under the covers.

You’d forgotten how comforting it can be to have someone else here with you.

That’s a dangerous topic for your mind to be going down, though. You cut yourself off before you can go down that path, bringing yourself back to the present.

Idly, you wonder how long Madison had stayed awake after you fell asleep. The girl has a lot of stamina- even after her fifth consecutive orgasm last night, she’d still been willing and waiting for more, at least until she’d noticed the way you were gingerly rolling your wrist around.

That’s something nobody ever mentions in all the stuff you’d read about sex. Yes, you’d quite thoroughly enjoyed your activities last night, and by the way Madison is still limply splayed across you she’d enjoyed them every bit as much as you had, but god, your wrist is *sore.* You’d had to bend it to effectively slide your fingers inside her, and the constant movement as you’d slid your
You've been struggling with the aftereffects of your...activities. Fingers in and out of her had quickly made your whole hand ache.

As it turns out, sex involves a lot of very physical activity. It makes sense when you think about it, but you've never actually thought about it before. Until now, you'd always just acknowledge it in an abstract manner and shoved it to the back of your head.

There is some aspirin in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, so you're not too concerned—hopefully, taking a couple of pills should ease the worst of the ache, allowing it to heal in its own time. You'll just have to be careful over the next couple of days.

Still, you think ruefully, it taught you a valuable lesson; you might have read up on the topic a lot, and by Madison's enthusiastic response you're pretty sure that not everything you learned went to waste, but you still have a lot to learn on the topic of sex. For some reason, people just don't talk about the realities of sex very much.

Maybe Mom could have taught you, if she were still alive, but she's not. And you don't really have anyone else you can go to to ask about this kind of stuff. You could ask Dad, but, no. Ew. The same goes for Madison's father, and Emma's. Just, no asking guys about sex, really. Maybe you could ask Emma's mother, but that's kind of weird. And you're pretty sure Madison's mother would rather slap you than help you have safer and less painful sex with her daughter.

… And with that, you've effectively eliminated pretty much every adult in your life.

Maybe you could ask Amy's mom. The corners of your lips turn up at the thought.

You'll have to do some more research. Or maybe you could find somebody who knows more about sex than you, but—where would you even start looking, and how would you get them to agree to tell you? You could always use your power, of course, but that feels a little… frivolous, when you probably could just find a book at the library on the topic.

Well, you do probably have to meet Victoria in the library later, unless she wants to meet somewhere completely new. If she does, you'll just have to go afterwards.

Your thoughts drift aimlessly around for a while, bouncing from pointless topic to pointless topic. It's mostly just a way for you to kill some time, and it seems to be effective at that, because the next time Madison stirs in your arms and you look over at the alarm clock, it's already half past eight.

A few moments later, she lifts her head up, giving you a sleepy and slightly confused look. “Taylor?” she asks, blinking sleepily. She glances down, taking a long look at your nude chest as her cheeks flare red, then looks up with a wide-eyed expression. You can't help but smile widely at her cutely confused look, and the way she can't avoid looking down again, giving you a lingering look.

“Good morning,” you murmur softly. She doesn't resist as you pull her up slightly, just in range for you to give her a quick kiss on each of her cheeks. “Did you sleep well?”

She nods, curling up against you despite the need to shift her body to do so. “I did,” she replies, stifling a yawn against you. “Your bed is really comfortable.” She snickers at some unseen joke, still slightly loopy in her freshly awoken state.

Well, she slept more on you than on your bed, but okay. “I'm glad.” You give her another quick kiss, this time on her forehead, and another one on her lips, before leaning up slightly. She takes the cue, sitting up and letting her hair fall messily down across her shoulders. You stay there for a
moment, running your hands over her hips. She lets out a little contented hum.

Eventually, though, the moment is broken when you feel a slight pang in your stomach. Ah- there’s the hunger.

You rub your hands over her hip one last time, leaning down to press a kiss against her shoulder, before sliding your way around her and off your bed. “I’m going to go have a shower,” you inform her. You’re not entirely sure she’s listening; her eyes are roaming hungrily over your form. Ah- yes. You’re still naked. You’d better put a shirt on before you walk outside. “Madison.” Her eyes snap immediately up to you face. “Put some clothes on and make us some breakfast for when I get out, okay?”

“O-Okay.” She hesitates for a moment. “U-um- d-did you still want me to wear some of your clothes?”

“Of course.” You give her a warm smile, crouching down slightly so you can give the smiling girl another kiss. “Wear whatever you’d like, as long as it’s a skirt.” She pouts at your teasing grin, but nods in acquiescence. You feel your smile becoming a bit softer at that.

After a moment, as you begin to make your way to your dresser, she calls out, “What do you want?”

Shrugging, you reply, “Just make me whatever you think I’ll enjoy.” You make sure to grab yourself a set of clothes—and quickly slip yourself into your shirt and skirt before you leave your room, just in case—before you make your way to the bathroom. Once in there, you take them off again, laying them neatly atop the laundry basket where they won’t get wet when you climb out of the shower, and turn the water on as you begin brushing your teeth.

The warm spray of water feel really good on the slight aches in your body. You imagine that it’ll feel even better for Madison, when she finishes making breakfast for the two of you and gets in the shower herself. You tried your best, but it’s difficult to completely avoid bruising people when you have to hold onto them while they spasm—and it’s always so tempting to give her a little bruise on her neck.

It’s not like she doesn’t enjoy those little bruises, anyway. On more than one occasion, you’ve even seen her press on them a little, as though to remind herself that they’re still there.

Once you’ve thoroughly washed yourself, taking special if regretful care to make sure your hands are clean of any remaining stickiness, you step out and begin drying yourself before reclothing.

Your hair is still a little damp as you set out down the hallway, as usual. You really like your hair, but it does come with its downsides, and one of those downsides is that it’s a pain in the ass to try and dry it reasonably quickly. It’s a good thing you’re not in the habit of trying to wear white shirts regularly, because if you were, you’d probably have to take a hair dryer to it every morning to make sure you don’t accidentally give everyone looking at you a show.

… Not that they’d get much of a show, but you’d still prefer not to show anyone your body like that anyway.

The smell of toast permeates the air as you head out to the kitchen. When you arrive, you lean against the doorway, a soft smile spreading across your face at the sight that greets you.

Madison is wearing some of your clothing—the clothing you were wearing when you were thirteen.
She fits some of it better—her hips are wider than yours, filling out one of your old skirts better than you ever did, and your knee-length socks look much nicer over her rounded thighs than yours ever did. On the other hand, you can almost see her breasts stretching out the shirt she’s wearing. You suspect she’s actually wearing two shirts, because if she was only wearing one, you’re pretty sure you’d be able to see her nipples from here.

She looks up from where she’s standing at the counter, waiting in front of the toaster. You can see four slices of toast arranged on a large plate beside her, with three mugs stacked beside it. You blink at that, until you peer your head around a little more and spot Dad sitting calmly at the table, today’s newspaper spread around in front of him.

The floor must creak beneath you or something, because Dad turns his head to look at you as you look at him, giving you a friendly nod and a smile. “Good morning, Taylor,” he greets you. “Did you sleep well?”

You nod, giving him a small smile in return. “I slept fine, thanks. Are you making Dad some breakfast too, Madison?”

Standing behind the table, Madison nods, tapping on the toaster with the knife in her hand. “Mhm,” she says. “I was going to make some scrambled eggs on toast, but you don’t have any eggs, so we’re just having toast and jam. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine.” You turn your smile towards her, causing her to flush, but you don’t miss the sneaky thumbs-up Dad tries to give Madison. He drops it as soon as he sees you looking, which is a bit weird. You dismiss it almost immediately; he’s probably just thanking her for the coffee she’s making. “Do we have any jams you like?”

She holds up a small jar you’d missed on the bench—it’s hiding behind the toaster, where you can’t see it from your current position. “I like strawberry jam,” she says happily. You nod. It makes sense. Of course she’d like the sweetest jam you have; like attracts like, after all. “Um, is there any jam you would prefer in particular?”

For some reason, Dad shakes his head and gives her a disappointed look. She doesn’t notice, her expression focused solely on you.

“I feel like raspberry jam today,” you say, just loudly enough for her to hear you. Actually, you’d prefer apricot jam. You’re not sure why you’re telling her to use raspberry jam, but whatever. She pokes her tongue out at Dad, who waves his hand in a conciliatory gesture before leaning back in his chair.

It’s hard to squash the urge to go and cuddle her as she potters around your kitchen, trying her best to butter the toast popping out of the toaster while also pouring the three of you some coffee. She looks so cute in your kitchen, stumbling around in a shirt two sizes too large for her and attempting to lick the jam off the knife when she thinks you’re not looking at her. If Dad wasn’t sitting right there, you probably would have just done it already.

As it is, you just move over to the table and wait for Madison to bring the food out, ignoring Dad’s disapproving look as you do so. Once she’s handed it all out, she takes her seat beside you, allowing you to squeeze her knee gratefully.

It’s surprisingly frustrating to not be able to just touch Madison whenever you want to. You have to restrain yourself a little while you’re at school, of course, but with Sophia around you’re not too
concerned about just touching her. You’re not going to start tongue-wrestling with her in the middle of English or anything, but with Sophia around, nobody seems to consider it to be worth the effort of antagonizing her just to berate you for touching Madison at school.

It’s supremely irritating to not be able to just even so much as hug her while Dad is around, is all. Like now, when she’s wearing your clothes and making you a delicious breakfast and smiling around your Dad. That kind of thing deserves at least a hug, and more properly deserves some kisses.

But if you wanted to do that, you’d have to explain your relationship with Madison to Dad, and—well, um, no.

It’s hard to think of things you want to do less than sitting Dad down and telling him that you’re in a relationship with a submissive girl who enjoys it when you boss her around and make her do stuff for you.

You shake your head, trying to dismiss the sour thoughts. You shouldn’t be concentrating on frustrating things like those when you have a delicious breakfast waiting in front of you.

Raspberry jam is a strange jam. Or, at least, the raspberry jam Dad buys is. Jam from the supermarkets is kind of expensive, so Dad usually buys it from farmer’s markets when it’s available. The raspberry jam he always buys is made weirdly—they barely add any sugar, and they add lemon into it, too. It’s not nearly as sweet as most of the other raspberry jams you’ve tried are. You kind of prefer it this way, though.

You’re a bit jealous of Madison for getting the strawberry jam, but oh well. You should have just asked her for the apricot jam instead. She did get your coffee right, which is kind of impressive for your first try—most people put a single teaspoon of sugar in it the first time they make it for you. Then again, she has probably tasted your morning coffee often enough by now to be pretty sure that you enjoy a lot of sugar in yours.

Dad speaks up while you’re still working on your first piece of toast. “I’ve got most of the materials for the window in your new bedroom,” he says casually. “It should be done by this evening. How are you coming along with getting what you want for it?”

You hurriedly choke down the last bite of this slice of toast. A crumb catches your throat wrong, and Madison pats you sympathetically on the back as you cough loudly, reaching for your coffee. You manage to catch your breath soon enough, but you still sound a little ragged when you reply, “Alright. Emma helped me to figure out what I need for it, so I’m going to go and look in some thrift stores for some furniture soon. I’m going to ask her to come with me, since she knows what stuff looks good better than I do.” And she does. There’s no use in pretending that you’re better at figuring that kind of thing out than she is.

Dad blinks, then nods with a wry smile. “I’m glad to hear you’ve got some plans,” he says congenially. “If you need any help, just ask, okay? It could be a bit hard to get some of the furniture without a car.” You get the feeling that that’s not what he had expected to have to say, but whatever he thought he’d have to say, he seems happy that he didn’t have to say it.

You still nod, giving him a pleased smile. “Thanks, Dad.”

It doesn’t take very long to finish breakfast. Beside you, Madison waits dutifully for you to finish before she collects your plate, placing it atop her own, and heads over to the sink to quickly wash the
two of them, ignoring Dad’s protests as she walks. You quickly rise to your feet and follow her over, although she just brushes you aside when you attempt to help her. There isn’t much to do anyway, and by the pleased smile on her face every time she turns to glance at you, she isn’t upset at doing them alone.

You resist the temptation to go and hold her against you as she dries the dishes, acutely aware of Dad’s occasional glances towards the two of you as he continues eating his own breakfast, but you can’t resist the temptation to slip your arm around her waist and pull her against you as the two of you once she has finished drying up and putting the dishes away and the two of you are ascending the stairs. She settles against you with a happy sigh, more content to rest against you than to make a move towards the shower as you pass it.

Once you get back to your room, you settle on your bed for a few moments, pulling a satisfied Madison onto your lap as you do so. She happily burrows against you, soaking in your warmth. You slip your hands beneath her shirt—shirts; she is indeed wearing two of them—and rest your hands against her stomach. Silence settles between the two of you, a kind of warm silence that you’re happy to leave unbroken.

It can’t last forever, but you soak in Madison’s presence for a good fifteen minutes, enjoying the way her hands play with yours through her shirts, before you shift slightly and press a kiss to her neck to get her attention. “You should have a shower, Madison,” you whisper softly in her ear. She wiggles in your lap a little, turning to give you a teasing grin. “You just want to see me naked again,” she accuses you playfully, poking her tongue out at you. You make sure to bite it gently—and, of course, give her a quick kiss to soothe the shock—before you respond.

“I don’t think I need an excuse to see you naked,” you murmur, giving her a teasing grin of your own. Her eyes widen slightly as you remove your hands from her stomach and quickly move them down, pulling her skirt up awkwardly as far as you can, revealing her bare mound to your hungry eyes again. Your grin grows wider as you take in her shocked expression, and the lust beginning to rise through her again, before you reach down and gently brush your thumb against her slit before pulling her skirt back down. “Do I?”

She shakes her head, still wide-eyed. “N—no,” she stammers. “Of course not.”

“Good,” you reply. You make no move to get her to stand, though; your hands immediately re-settle beneath her shirts, and this time, you lay down and pull her tight against you rather than encouraging her to sit on your lap again. A shower can wait a while.

Madison stays until almost eleven thirty. It’s over an hour earlier than she really needs to be home by, but as she points out, Rick could need her home earlier than that, just in case there’s an emergency over at his restaurant.

She’s still wearing your clothes when you pull her into one last hug for the day. Her arms slip around your waist, and she settles against you with a morose sigh. “I wish I didn’t have to leave,” she says, and you can almost hear the pout in her voice.

You press a kiss against the top of her head before replying. Her hair smells like apples now. She used your shampoo. “I know,” you say glumly. “Maybe you can stay the night again in a few days?” You do have a lot of things you need to do over the holidays, but you’ll be able to make time for her. She’s busy as well, but you won’t be seeing her almost daily now. A frown tugs at the corner of your
lips at the thought, before you dismiss it.

“That’d be nice,” she says softly, leaning into you. You press another kiss against the top of her head, then just enjoy her warmth for a few seconds before you have to step away with a regretful sigh and gesture for her to follow you.

Dad looks up as the two of you come down the stairs. “Ready to go?” he calls out. Madison nods glumly, her hand seeking yours out for a moment so she can squeeze it. You do make sure to follow the both of them out, though, and you don’t let go of Madison’s hand until the two of you are standing outside of your house. You would hug her again, but you can hear Dad shuffling around inside, and you don’t much feel like being teased right now—there’s enough butterflies in your stomach already.

Finally, you stroke your thumb over the top of her hand before regretfully slipping her hand out of yours. “I’ll see you soon,” you murmur.

She nods, giving you a small smile. “Good,” she replies softly. She looks like she’s about to say something more, but before she can, Dad lets out a loud cough. You start a little, turning to look at him, and—yes, he’s standing there, raising his eyebrows at the two of you. You flush slightly, letting your hands fall completely away from Madison’s and to your sides.

Thankfully, he doesn’t comment. “Alright,” he says instead, stepping between the two of you and beginning to move towards your car. “If you’re ready, we can head off now.”

“Okay.” Madison gives you another smile, this one still a little sad but very warm besides, before finally moving to follow Dad into the car. When she gets there, she stops and turns again, giving you a little wave. “See you later!” she calls out.

You wave back, a smile tugging its way unbidden over your face. “See you,” you call back, causing another little smile to spread over her face. She stays there for a moment, just looking at you, before she opens the car door and slips inside. You have just enough time to see her place her bag by her feet before the door closes and Dad starts the car.

You don’t move until he’s driven the car out of the driveway and far enough down the street that you can’t see it any more. Only when that’s happened do you move back inside, closing the door behind you and giving the shoes stacked neatly beside it a disgruntled glare. Frustration and anger war in you for a few moments before you fight them down, letting out a tired groan.

It’s hard to let go of Madison, but she doesn’t live with you—can’t live with you, at least not for a few years yet. The both of you are only teenagers, and it wouldn’t be fair to her family anyway. It just… sucks to have to sleep alone, after getting to sleep beside her for a whole night. Abruptly, you shake your head. It’s no use thinking about it, really. It’ll only make you feel worse.

You cast around for something else to think about. Several topics flash through your mind—the topics of Aisha and Charlotte, thoughts of your textbooks upstairs, half-thought plans for the books you might buy on your next date with Amy—before you recall the texts you received from Victoria earlier.

You think about it for a moment, then move back upstairs and quickly pull some more suitable clothing from your dresser and move to the bathroom. There, you spend a few minutes changing into clothing better suited to going outside and applying makeup.
Victoria indicated that she’d call you, but Dad is already driving Madison home. You’d feel guilty asking him to drive back out again just to drop you off at the library, and come to pick you up later. It’s easier for both of you if you just leave him a note and take the bus down.

The note is a simple, terse message; “Headed down to the library. I’ll be back before dinner.” You dither briefly, then sign the message with a small smiley face and the best approximation of a thumbs-up you can draw. Good enough.

The bus schedule is different on school holidays. You’ve never really been sure why, although you think it has something to do with an initiative directed through the council a few years back, aimed at encouraging school-aged children to visit some of Brockton Bay’s facilities while they weren’t at school. It hadn’t worked, of course—you don’t know anyone besides yourself who uses the public transit system to get around, let alone to get to places like the library or museum during school holidays—but evidently it wasn’t worth the effort of reverting, because the buses still trundle up to the bus stop in front of your house every hour and a half, almost to the second.

Thus, you find yourself standing in front of the library at twelve thirty, a good hour and a half before Victoria had indicated she would be here. You could have taken a later bus, if you’d wanted, but Dad would have been home by then, and you’d have to argue him out of just driving you here himself.

Besides, it’s a library. It’s not like it’s hard to occupy yourself here.

You trudge your way up to the library, reaching into your pocket to get your library card. You probably won’t need it, but it’s reassuring to feel it there, just in case you find something you might want to read. The library always gets some new materials during school holidays, anyway. You would prescribe that to the same failed cultural programs aimed at school-aged kids as the bus initiative, but you’re pretty sure it has more to do with quarterly reports and transportation times. Or something. You don’t exactly have a comprehensive education on this kind of thing yet.

The librarian on duty, a red-haired lady who looks to be in her thirties, greets you with a fake smile as you walk in. You return it in kind, then wander over to the main aisles of the library. After a moment’s thought, you also reach back into your pockets and pull out your phone so you can turn it onto vibrate. The quiet of a library is a sacred thing, after all.

You spend nearly forty-five minutes browsing through the library’s fantasy and crime fiction collections before your phone vibrates in your pocket. You hurriedly pull it out and begin walking briskly back to the front of the library, giving the librarian an apologetic grimace as you pass. She frowns severely at you as she sees your phone in your hand, causing you to flush faintly and quicken your pace.

Once you’re outside, you hurriedly press the green answer button before the call times out. Silence greets you for a moment, then; “Hello?” Victoria’s voice comes through, amused and a little concerned.

“Hi.” Your grimace fades at the sound of her voice. “Sorry, I was in the library when you called.”

She takes a moment to respond again, causing you to frown a little. “Oh, you’re there already? Cool. That works.” She sounds a little out of breath. Concern rises through you at that. She’s a member of New Wave, after all. If she’d had a family engagement—has she been out on patrol all morning, dealing with some rising issue? “We’re not quite done here, still packing up. I was just calling to see if you’d need a lift or anything.”
You shake your head before remembering that she can’t see it over the phone. Embarrassment tinges your voice as you reply, “No, I just caught the bus. Thank you, though.”

She sounds a little more cheerful when she responds, “Of course! I’m going to be a little longer here, but I should be there in about half an hour, okay?”

“Alright.” You shrug, even though you know she can’t see it. It just feels appropriate for the response. “I’ll be waiting inside, then. Come find me when you get here?”

Someone shouts something over the other end of the phone. It’s loud enough to make you wince, and even Victoria lets out a little hiss. “Yeah, okay. Uh, I have to go, Mom and Dad are having an argument.” She groans a little. “Sorry. I’ll see you in half an hour.”

You try to reply; “That’s—“ But before you can even get the words out, the harsh dialtone of your phone rings in your ear. Your frown grows a little more pronounced. That was very abrupt. Whatever her parents are having an argument about, it’s got to be important to make her hang up like that.

Feeling a little unsettled, you pocket your phone and turn to walk back into the library. She didn’t sound injured, but, well. You hope she’s alright anyway.

It takes a short while to fight back the frown that had grown on your face as you walk back into the library and move towards the crime fiction shelf once again. There’s not really much that interests you here, but Mom had always had a penchant for reading some of the better-written crime fiction available. Most of it had been based on true crime, though. There’s still a few of them scattered around the house, although the few you’d tried to read never interested younger you.

It gives you something to do as you wait for Victoria to arrive, though, which is what is important. You grow so absorbed in reading their blurbs, in fact, that you almost miss her arrival until it registers on your senses that she’s here. Frustration is leaking from her, although it’s tightly contained, bands of patience wrapped around it until you can only faintly sense it. Nervousness lies beneath it, a pool that almost makes your stomach drop; and finally, as she turns around the aisle and peeks down it, a warm, happy feeling that flushes away the lingering butterflies in your stomach and grounds you, just a little.

She looks a little disappointed when you turn to greet her, which is weird, but you dismiss it after a moment’s consideration. “Hi,” you say quietly instead, as you move towards the aisle to stand closer to her. “How did your… stuff go?”

Shrugging, she leans against the bookcase beside her. “It went alright,” she replies. Her tone is dismissive, but you can feel her frustration pushing at the boundaries of her patience. “Just had to do some stuff for Mom, is all.”

“Ah.” You want to ask for more details, but even without you inquiring further, you can feel her frustration building. It sets your teeth on edge a little. Quickly glancing over her, she doesn’t look injured—but then, she is Glory Girl. You’ve heard reports of her being injured before, but they’ve always been disputed. She has a forcefield, after all, and the only people to ever claim to have hurt her have always had an agenda. Still, she’s annoyed at something, so you cast around for something to distract her from whatever is angering her.

“We should go sit down,” you say eventually, casting a critical eye across the aisle you’re in. “I
haven’t had much time to read lately, but I’ve read a bit more of those Harry Potter books you loaned me, and I have some questions. Like, are Ron and Hermione going to get together at some point, or is the author faking me out?”

As you talk, you take Victoria’s hand and begin to lead her through the aisles. She doesn’t resist at all today, although there’s still some hesitation in her movements for some reason. When you come to your usual table and pull up a seat, she doesn’t let go of your hand, and instead moves her chair close enough to yours that she can press your knees together while she holds her head.

Internally, you frown, although no trace of it shows up on your face. You hesitate for a moment, then reach out with your powers before quickly retracting them. Frustration is still leaking from her, but—somehow, it just doesn’t feel right to use your powers right now. At least, not to manipulate her emotions. You gently reach out with your power again, lightly grasping them.

It feels right to feel her emotions, at least.

As time passes and your conversation presses on through the topic of teen romances to questions of Dumbledore and his motives and on to questions about the setting, you continue to rub your thumb across Victoria’s knuckles. You’re not sure if it’s actually helping or not, but it’s certainly not hurting. Her frustration isn’t lessening, exactly, but it’s growing… fuzzier, somehow. Less present, although not any less strong.

You’re so distracted playing with her hand that you actually flinch when Victoria lets out an explosive sigh. The sight must have been noticeable, because she gives you an apologetic grimace. “Sorry,” she mutters.

“You’re fine,” you reply. You squeeze her hand a little tighter, giving her a small smile. Her frustration recedes a little at the sight, which makes your smile grow a little bigger. She answers it with her own small smile. “What’s wrong?”

You regret asking almost immediately as the smile falls off her face again and she lets out another morose sigh. “It’s nothing,” she mutters. You’re prepared for a spike of frustration, so when something heavier falls over her, you’re taken off-guard—a thin coating of something dark and smothering.

You shift in your chair, all talk of books forgotten. You wet your lips, but you can’t think of anything to say. Whatever her parents were fighting about must have been bad if it has her this upset. Thinking back, you can’t actually remember seeing Victoria like this before.

It’s not as though she’s angry, really. Yes, you can feel her frustration, but it’s tightly caged and barely leaking—and now coated by something darker, tasting slightly of worry, or depression. No, she’s not angry, but whatever she’s feeling, it’s clearly still bothering her.

So you shift your chair around further and slip your arm around her. She sinks into you with a grateful sigh, resting her head against your shoulder, and just—stays like that. It’s an uncomfortable position, as she’s almost as tall as you are, and you have to press yourself hard against the side of the chair in order to let her rest like that, but after a few minutes pass, you can feel the black curtain that had descended over her beginning to lift.

After about five minutes of sitting like that, you reach out with your arm and slip it around her chest, pulling her into a lopsided hug. She just burrows further into you, sighing.
For the first time in a while, you’re at a loss for what to say. You try to think of anything that could help—reassurances, questions, platitudes—but nothing comes to mind. She’s always been the talkative one between the two of you.

By the time Victoria shifts restlessly against you, you’ve been sitting there for nearly twenty minutes. Her emotions have mostly calmed down. The frustration she’s feeling has settled back down, only buzzing faintly between the bars of her patience, while the blackness that had descended over her has… not gone, exactly, but it’s become less oppressive.

“Feeling a bit better?” you murmur to her, squeezing her one last time before she begins to pull herself away from you.

She lets out an embarrassed laugh. You can feel that same embarrassment clawing its way through her, stomping over the nervousness, but it settles against the caged frustration after a moment. “A little bit. Thanks.” She pulls herself upright, subtly shifting herself to the side of her chair to gain a little bit of distance from you. A little pang of hurt shoots through you at the motion, though you quickly fight it down. The two of you fidget for a moment before she coughs quickly. “So, um. You were asking about the prison, I think?”

You leap gratefully back at the topic. “Yeah! So that’s obviously set-up for a fake out later, right? I think…”

The conversation doesn’t flow as naturally as it normally does. Both of your minds are clearly occupied—yours with the girl beside you, and hers with her fight with her parents. Still, as stilted as the conversation is, it’s something—at least she’s talking again, not merely curling up against you and shutting down.

You’re going to have to try and get her to talk. Somehow. Sometimes, you really wish you were better at talking.

Just talking to her about inane stuff in the books seems to help, at least. Tension eases from her frame after a few minutes as you interrogate her about the intricacies of the metaphor behind the Dementors of Azkaban, and she slowly settles back down into her chair, only moving away from you when somebody walks through the aisle behind the two of you. You miss the contact, but some of the sick feelings roiling around in your stomach ease when you see her finally smile again after questioning her about grindylows.

Eventually, Victoria lets out a small sound of surprise as she looks down at her phone. You look down at your own, and can’t help but give it a shocked look in turn when you see the time—nearly five o’clock already. It certainly hasn’t felt like you’ve been here for nearly five hours, although admittedly, much of your attention has been focused on the other girl.

The blonde girl looks over at you with a wry smile. Irritation and nervousness war for dominance through her core, leaving you feeling kind of shaky as the two of you stand. “It’s getting kind of late,” she says quietly. “Do you want me to fly you home, or do you have somewhere else to be?”

You shake your head in response. “I’d like a lift back, if you don’t mind,” you respond equally softly. “The bus won’t be here for another hour, and you’re prettier to look at anyway.”


You lead her out past the service desk, where the bitter librarian from earlier looks up from her books
to give Victoria a charming smile. You roll your eyes at her, muttering under your breath, and pick up your pace so you can be away from the woman quicker, hurrying on to the alley the two of you have unofficially claimed as yours.

And then, you are settled into her arms and she is lifting up off the ground, her pace slow and even.

Ordinarily, it’s a somewhat exhilarating feeling to be flying with Victoria. Her grip is strong and particularly secure, and while you prefer to just bury your head against her neck and enjoy the feeling of her powerful body pressing against yours, you can sometimes look out towards the Bay and admire the way the sun glints off the water there, and the sight of the Protectorate’s repurposed oil rig, a tall and imposing presence reminding the city of their vigilance.

But then, ordinarily you’re not trying to fight down a rising sense of queasiness caused by the warring emotions in Victoria.

You bite your lip, trying to work up the courage to say anything to her. It takes you a few moments before you can even lean up to her and murmur just a few words into her ear; “I hope you’re feeling better.”

She shrugs. It’s an awkward move with you in her arms, and to her credit she seems to realize it, as she immediately adjusts her grip to hold you securely against her once more. “I am,” she replies loudly. “Thank you, Taylor!”

If you couldn’t feel her emotions, you’d no doubt be fooled by the placid tone of her voice and the soothing apology. But you can, and you aren’t stupid enough to ignore it. Unfortunately, knowing what she’s feeling doesn’t tell you how to deal with it. In the end, all you can think to say is a simple, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nope.” Her tone is cheerful, but the word itself is delivered conclusively. “It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Well, that’s not helpful. “Of course I’m worried,” you say with a small frown. “You’re upset. Did something happen with your family?”

A loud, faux-aggravated sigh escapes from the girl. A few moments pass before she responds. “No, it’s not my family. Mom and Dad were arguing, but they do that a lot. I’ve just been trying to work up the nerve to do something.”

You tilt your head, then immediately regret it as the world spins. Okay, bad idea. Instead, you express your curiosity verbally. “What have you been trying to do?” Images flash quickly through your head, images of some very pleasant things she could be thinking of—no. Bad libido. You’re trying to be serious.

She shrugs. When no other response is forthcoming, you look up to find her chewing on her lip, a pensive expression on her face. It lasts until you settle your head back against her neck, frowning more heavily than before, and even beyond that, until she has settled down into an alley two streets over from your house. And only then do more words come out.

When she speaks this time, it’s strained, halting. “I’ve just—“ She cuts off again, and there’s a sharp spike of frustration and recrimination stabbing through her. “I’ve—been speaking to my boyfriend.” She must notice you blanch, because she hurries on, her hands waving placatingly at you as though to calm you down. “No, not like that! We’ve just been talking about… some things, and I’ve been
trying to work something out. But it’s not happening.”

You can’t help but feel confused. “What are you trying to work out?” you ask cautiously.

It’s the wrong question to ask. You almost visibly see her retreat into herself for a moment, before she forces herself to open herself once again, looking towards you. For a moment, you wonder if you would be able to see the strain on her face if you stood a little closer. “Just…” And she sighs again. “I’ll explain later. Okay?”

You’re tempted to let it go at that. She’s visibly nervous, fidgeting with the cuff of her jacket sleeve; pressing her too hard will only cause her to retreat into herself again. But she’s obviously upset by whatever it is, and you don’t want to leave her like that. You’ve left too many people feeling upset before, and it never turns out well. “Okay,” you acquiesce. “But soon, okay?”


“Okay.” You nod again, then press yourself tighter against her and lean up for a kiss. She responds, and not unenthusiastically, pressing herself into you with a soft groan as your tongue presses against her lips. You keep it up for several long moments before settling back down and taking a step back, smiling at her. It’s tempting to step back in and claim another kiss. “Will I see you on Wednesday?”

Victoria has to think about it for a moment. “Maybe,” she temporizes. “It’s school holidays, so I’m busier than usual, but I’ll try and make time.”

It’s not the answer you wanted, but you’ll take it. “Good,” you reply, nodding decisively. Then you lean back in for another kiss.

Really, there’s only so long you can be expected to refrain, after all.

It’s hard to keep yourself from growing agitated after your talk with Victoria. Yes, she may have assured you that the talk she wants to have with you and her boyfriend isn’t bad, but—really, how good can that kind of talk be? And that’s entirely ignoring how awful she was feeling about it.

You twist your phone nervously in your hands, frowning down at it. Madison has gone back to her house, and as much as you really want to call her and invite her back to spend the night again, you know she can’t do that. She has to spend time with her family as well, and she does seem to be genuinely enjoying learning how to cook with her father. You can’t call her up and demand she sleeps with you again just to help assuage your own anxieties.

But there’s a twisting knot growing in your stomach, and you can’t let it grow and fester. If you leave it alone, all you’re going to do is make yourself feel even worse about this whole thing.

Shaking your head, you lift your phone and tap it until your contacts list is revealed. For half a second, your thumb hovers over Amy’s contact details, before you shake your head. No—Amy might be aware of your proclivities now, but it’s still probably not a good idea to call her up and ask her to distract you from your girl problems.

Instead, you slide your thumb further down, until it lands on Emma’s contact details. You hesitate briefly, pondering on it—but really, there’s no choice. Charlotte’s most likely away with her family
right now, and you definitely don’t know Aisha well enough to call her up and ask her for girl advice. And Sophia… You do genuinely enjoy Sophia’s company, but somehow, you’re pretty sure that she’s not exactly an expert at dealing with relationships like this.

You bite your lip, building up your courage for a moment, before tapping out a text. “Can you come over to dinner tonight?” Then, after a moment’s hesitation; “And your mom and dad, too.” It’s been a long time since you’ve seen Emma’s mother. She has never been as close to your family as Alan is.

Alan met your mother while she was studying in college, and the two of them used to be close friends, from what you overheard from Mom and Dad saying when you were younger. After Mom started working and married Dad, the two drifted apart a little, but after Alan got married to his new wife, all of them got together for… something. Watching the football, probably. Anyway, that was around the time you met Emma—and the rest, as they say, is history.

You’re not quite sure if Emma’s mom will really want to come around now. It’s possible that she was never really Dad’s friend all that much. Still, it’s polite to extend the invitation.

Your phone buzzes a few minutes later with a response from Emma. “Mom is out of town, but Dad and I can come over. Do you want us to bring anything?”

Quickly, you pad out to the living room. You’re surprised to find it empty for a moment, until you remember—oh yeah, Dad was going to be installing that window for you today. You backtrack quickly and make your way to the basement, where you open the door to reveal the scent of concrete dust and the low murmuring sound of two voices. You don’t much feel like walking down in there in all the dust, so you just call down from the top of the stairs, “Dad, I invited Emma and her dad over for dinner. Is that okay?”

There’s a short pause before Dad responds, his voice pitched high. “That’s fine,” he calls out. “Ask them what they’d like. We might have to make a trip down to the grocery store, though.”

“Okay!” You quickly close the door before sending a reply to Emma. “You don’t need to bring anything. What would you like for dinner?”

It takes a frustratingly long time for her to respond, well over three minutes. When your phone buzzes again, you quickly open the door again even as you read through the text. “Anything’s fine. Dad hasn’t had chicken in a while.”

Once again, you call out into the basement, “Dad, they want chicken. Do we have any of that?”

“We have some frozen chicken breasts,” he yells back. “I’ll make some potatoes and beans to go with it.”

You nod, looking back to your phone so you can type furiously on it—or as furiously as you can, given how frustratingly tiny the phone’s keyboard is. A message that would have taken ten seconds to write on paper takes what feels like ten minutes on the phone. “Okay, we’ll make some chicken and vegetables. See you at five.”

Dinner probably won’t be until closer to seven or eight, but you’re not sure you can occupy yourself for that long with this anxiety gnawing at you. It’s already nearly four, though, so giving yourself an hour to set your room in order should be enough.
For once, your room does need a little bit of a clean-up. Madison took her clothing home with her, but she didn’t take everything, choosing to leave her small pair of panties behind. Your own clothing has been left on the floor too, where you discarded it last night with Madison.

You need to change your bed linens, too. It’s been a little over two weeks since the last time you’ve changed them, and you did just have sex on them. It’s not like they’re gross or anything, but it could get a bit unhygienic if you leave them unwashed. In future, it might be best if you got a towel, but that’s fairly unsexy. Then again, cleanliness should come before sexiness, at least in your opinion.

Doing all that occupies you for a good twenty minutes. Then you set about with a duster and cloth, quickly wiping over your furniture and bedroom windows to give them a little bit of polish. There’s only a faint layer of dust coating everything, but it’s there. You make a mental note to go over the rest of the house when you have some time, since Dad always neglects the dusting when doing housework himself.

By the time you’ve finished that, it’s only a few minutes before five, and you can already hear the crunching of Alan’s car on your driveway. You hurry back out to the bathroom so you can quickly put the duster back in the cabinet beneath the sink and toss the dirty cloth in the wash, then make your way downstairs.

Alan and Emma are already standing inside by the time you make it down, each standing loosely in the hall. Dad is standing in front of the two of them, his white shirt stained with streaks of concrete dust and green paint. You’re worried for a moment- should there really have been that much concrete dust anyway?- but dismiss your concerns after a moment when you see the string of a ventilation mask poking out from his pocket.

You greet Emma with a small smile and a wave, which she timidly returns. Beside her, Alan gently pats her on the shoulder, then pushes her towards you. She stumbles a little, then turns and gives him a scowl.

“Now, now,” he chides her. “Your face will get stuck that way, you know.”

It won’t. Dad used to tell you that too, so you went and looked up the science behind it a while back. It is possible to paralyze the muscles in your face, but it generally takes a lot more trauma than just scowling at someone will inflict. You’ve always been careful not to scowl for too long while travelling in a car or near a road though, just in case. It would be bad enough to be hit by a car; you don’t need to have a scowl permanently engraved on your face as well.

Maybe you could get plastic surgery to get rid of the scowl, though?

It’s probably easier to just avoid being hit by a car or anything like that.

Emma, meanwhile, has got in an argument with her Dad. She’s scowling furiously at him, having seemingly forgotten your presence for a second. You’re a little surprised at the vehemence in her voice as she says, “You shouldn’t push people, Dad! Ever! Even if they’re your children.”

He raises an eyebrow for a fraction of a moment, and you can feel confusion rising over him like a thin fog before a cold wave of comprehension crashes down over him, contrasting strongly with the hot waves of frustration waving from Emma. After a moment, he nods a little. “You’re right,” he agrees. “I’m sorry, Emma.” Stepping forward, he pulls her into a loose hug, which she hesitantly returns after a moment. Twin tones of comprehension and what feels like understanding wash out for him, quickly dousing the heat of Emma’s anger, leaving behind only the dull tones of sadness in her.
Dad looks just as confused as you do when you glance at him. Emma never seemed to have a problem with Sophia pushing you around while the three of you were at Winslow, so you’re not quite sure why she was so willing to scold her father about it now. Unless—something icy grips you in the gut.

That was a very strong reaction to a silly little action on Alan’s part, a simple push meant to get her to go to you so the two of you could go and do whatever it was. You wouldn’t expect her to care about that kind of thing, unless she has a personal stake in it—and you’re fairly certain that Alan doesn’t make a habit of pushing Emma around, or her anger wouldn’t die so quickly. But Emma isn’t the kind of person who gets upset at theoreticals. No, she’s the kind of person who would only get that riled up if she feels that someone she knows has been personally affected by that kind of thing.

Dad certainly doesn’t push you around, and so far as you’re aware, Emma only really hangs out with two people.

You really, really hope that you’re somehow misreading the signs here, but it really would explain a lot about Sophia.

You try to push it down as best as you can when Emma turns back to you, sighing softly in irritation. You instinctively step forwards, opening your arms just enough to signal to her that you want her to step forwards into a hug. She plays her part, allowing you to slide your arms around her as you wrap your power over her, already searching for her happiness. It responds almost… eagerly, the tendrils of it buried within her rising with minimal provocation as you run your power over her emotions.

“Hi,” you murmur to her, almost directly into her ear. She shivers a little, tightening her arms around you. “Are you okay?”

She nods, her hair tickling your neck a little. “Yeah, I’m fine,” she mutters. “A little tired, but I’m good. How are you?”

You shrug awkwardly within the hug. “I’m doing good,” you reply back. After a moment’s consideration, you retreat from the hug, but make sure to grab on to one of her wrists as she follows suit, allowing you to pull her towards your bedroom, ignoring the murmured conversation Alan and Dad begin as the two of you make your way into your room. Once you’re in there, you make your way to your bed, pulling Emma until she sits beside you.

She raises a delicate eyebrow as she sees the panties Madison left behind folded neatly on your pillow, but doesn’t comment on them. Instead, she lets out a little sigh. Then, abruptly, she speaks. “Thanks for inviting us over for dinner.”

Happily nodding, you lean over and give her another quick hug, which turns into more of a lingering embrace when Emma unconsciously leans into it. “You don’t need to thank me,” you hum. “I wanted to see you.”

A faint red flush spreads over her cheeks at that, and she ducks her head, hiding her gaze from you. When she speaks again, her voice is soft, almost whispered. “I’m glad to hear that,” she replies, giving you a shy smile. “I—” And then, just as quickly as her smile had arrived, it disappears. Instinctively, you tug on her happiness again before it can begin sliding away from her. She leans further into your hug, letting out a little sound of approval.

You just give her a small grin after that, but you let the topic drop. You’ve already dealt with
Victoria’s anxieties today, and as selfish as you feel just thinking it, you don’t feel up to dealing with Emma’s today. Instead, you squeeze her against you, silently reassuring her that you’re there. Then you change the topic. “So, do you have any plans over the holidays?”

She lets out a soft hum. “Well, I was going to ask you if you wanted to go looking for furniture still,” she says with a cheeky smile. It fades after a moment. “But not much beyond that. We were going to go to Boston for a week, but…” She tugs weakly at her sleeve, giving you a pathetic grin. “Well, um, I asked Dad to set up an appointment with a therapist, a couple of weeks ago.” Shock floods through you, an icy yet not unpleasant feeling. “And, um, he can only see me on Thursdays, which is when I would be gone. So we had to cancel that.”

You open your mouth, then close it again. She gives you a nervous look, but can’t seem to look at you for long, because she just looks away again. Nervousness floods through her, strong enough that you have to tighten your grip on her happiness to prevent it being washed away by the tide.

You—you had not expected that. You knew she’d changed lately, that she’d stopped bullying at school, had retreated into herself—but you had definitely not expected to hear that she had, voluntarily and of her own initiative (because of course it was of her own initiative—who else would encourage her to go, Sophia?), gone into therapy.

(A small part of you notes that a small spool of worry in your gut unravels at the thought, but the rest of you is too busy to pay it any attention.)

“I—” You lick your lips, thinking furiously. “That’s, that’s a very big step, Emma.”

You can’t help the wonder that stains your voice, and Emma seems to notice, because she looks up at you with a wan smile. “Yeah?” she asks quietly.

“Yeah,” you confirm. A smile touches your lips, just a small one. “I’m proud of you.”

She practically melts at the statement, shifting sidewards on the bed so she can press herself against you and lay her head on your shoulder, looking up at you. “Yeah?” she asks, naked vulnerability on her voice. “S—That’s nice. That’s really nice.” A faint flush steals over her features, the heat warm enough for you to feel through your shirt. The nervousness in her recedes, revealing beneath it an expanse of nervousness—and within it, a core of almost solid pride. Within your grasp, her happiness swells.

Warmth steals through you at the mix of emotions. For once, there’s barely an ounce of suspicion in you. You’ll have to confirm that later, somehow, but that… That really is a big step, if she’s not lying.

It’s enough that you don’t even hesitate to bend your head down and place a kiss on her forehead.

The night itself proceeds well. Emma seems too embarrassed to get into any more personal discussions with you after the revelation of her therapy sessions, which suits you fine; after your talk with Victoria earlier, you’re not really in any mood to get into deeply personal conversations either. Still, she doesn’t retreat from you once through the whole night, and for the first time in a very long time, the urge to push her away doesn’t rise in you. You do, however, make a note to speak to Emma about this on a day when you’re not already emotionally exhausted.
Dad seems to have a good time, as well—you’re glad you remembered to invite Alan alongside Emma. Your father is clearly exhausted from his work in building a window into the basement, but he’s laughing as merrily as you’ve seen him do in months as Alan tells tales of the politicians and lobbyists he’s been dealing with.

By the point it’s time for Emma to leave, much of the nervousness caused in you by Victoria’s early demeanour and Emma’s arrival has faded. Not all of it, by any means, and you’re pretty sure that most of it is going to come back after you sleep, but… you feel nice, for once.

When you stagger up to bed a little after midnight, still full from the brownies Alan had brought with him, all you can manage is to quickly change into your pajamas and lay there with a contented smile on your face.

Sure, you have a conversation with Victoria that’s leaving you queasy to think about, but beyond that, things are going quite well for you for now. You have several amazing girls that are all happy to be with you, plans to get even more, a paying job, and even several projects you can invest yourself in when things aren’t going so great.

Really, life hasn’t been this good for you since Mom died.

At that thought, you let yourself begin to drift off, still smiling that small contented smile. Vague plans drift through your head as you fall asleep, plans of what to do over the next couple of days.
It’s difficult to try and motivate yourself to go jogging even during the school holidays. Dragging yourself out of bed at an ungodly hour of the morning is difficult enough when you’re getting paid to do so; as much as you enjoy jogging, it’s much more difficult to try and work up the motivation to wake up before five so you can go jogging.

In the end, you settle for a small compromise; you’ll allow yourself to sleep in until closer to six, so you can still go to work, and go jogging after. It’ll be more uncomfortable, with the sun bearing down on you and everything being generally hotter than you’ve become accustomed to it being while you jog, but it’s still preferable to getting up that early.

It affords you more time to do your morning routine, anyway. It’s always pleasant to have a warm shower when the air is chilly around you— and as unpleasant as it is to make your way out of the shower and be hit by a wall of cool air, you’re able to nearly fool yourself into thinking you have something approaching actual breasts when you glance in the mirror and see your hardened nipples poking out just slightly.

When you’re standing in front of the bus stop, your hair nearly dry and your body bundled nicely in thicker jeans and a warm woollen sweater, you can only congratulate yourself on your fantastic decision-making skills. Pushing jogging off to later was definitely worth it.

Your contentment lasts you through the dull tedium of working at the cinema. Not that it’s all that bad—it’s just, well, tedious, as you’d thought before. You imagine most custodial work would be; all that is involved is sweeping and vacuuming the aisles, and occasionally removing the cover of the cinema’s many seats and replacing it so you could send a sticky cover off to be washed.

Given that, you’re feeling positive enough that when your boss treads his way out of his office to ask you to stay for several hours—apparently, there is a large party coming in to celebrate a dual birthday—you don’t even hesitate to say yes. You do make sure to head to the break room quickly so you could leave a message on your house’s answering machine, though. There is no point in worrying Dad over your extra hours.

In the end, it’s not really all that difficult to cater to the parties. There are enough people that they have booked out a full cinema to show two Disney movies—Toy Story and its sequel—for the gaggle of children that attend. There are certainly a fair amount of people that attend, and you are tasked with preparing the snacks and drinks that were pre-paid for, but it’s Haley who has to deliver them, so you’re okay with it. And yes, it takes you slightly over an hour to tidy the cinema afterwards (children are messy), but aside from a slight ache in your back and heels from standing and bending for so long, you don’t feel all that bad.

Admittedly, the money is a big part of it. You don’t really work all that much, just Monday and Friday mornings most of the time; four or five hours at most, with occasional extra bits of work when they need someone to cover a big event. This morning, you worked far beyond your usual hours, and your paycheque reflects that. You earned as much from your work today as you normally do in a week.

There are a lot of things you could do with this kind of money. Plans flash through your head, a quick, cascading list; you could buy some of the furniture for your new room, you could buy some new books to read, you could presents for some of your girls, you could put the money away and
save for a better phone than the one you already own… There are a lot of things you could do with this kind of money.

You’re still thinking it through when another thought strikes you. Madison had quite liked seeing you in your lingerie… and for once, you hadn’t quite felt ashamed of how you’d looked in it. Your ordinary underclothes are plain and boring, not the kind of clothing that bolsters your confidence to wear, but the lingerie had been different.

… And it’s your money. Nobody can tell you not to spend it on a present for yourself if you don’t want to.

You do end up calling Dad again, although this time it’s from your own phone, not from the phone in the theatre’s office. You’d told him earlier that you’ll be home by one, and you’re pretty sure that he’d at least notice if you didn’t come home after that. Not that he’ll send the police after you or anything, not without at least ringing your boss first, but it would be exhausting to come home and have to deal with that.

Once you’ve dealt with that, you hurry off to the staff washroom so you can change back into your regular clothes, then head out to the bus stop, hoping to catch it before it leaves.

You needn’t have worried about that, as it turns out. You end up having to wait a full twenty-five minutes before a bus finally trundles up and opens its doors to invite you in. Technically, you probably could have just walked in by that point, or at least most of the way there, but that would be a lot of effort compared to just taking the bus. (Cheaper, though, a small part of you notes.)

The bus is quite full today, but as far as you can tell, you’re the only teenager on there. There are a few younger kids and their parents, some elderly gentlemen who have crowded the back section of the bus to talk to each other, and a woman with pale skin and bloodshot eyes hugging herself and glaring at everyone around her. Everyone gives her a wide berth.

It’s too many people for you. Nobody makes an attempt to sit next to you, but just in case, you shift over until you’re sitting on the midpoint of the seat before leaning your head against the chair in front of you and turning to stare out the window.

The central business district of Brockton Bay is a bit of an odd place. Brockton Bay didn’t used to rely on technological start-ups and software-based companies to move cash through the city; there used to be a lot of small mom-and-pop stores around selling things like camping equipment, fishing equipment and the like. When the Mayor decided to invest heavily in software and electronics, he did manage to cause an economic shift in the town, but it left most of the smaller stores out of luck.

Now, there’s only small remnants of the old business district; a mostly-defunct strip mall half a dozen blocks away from the current mall, the shells of old, failed businesses, and the occasional hopeful storefront decorated with bright signs advertising sales and discounts and loyalty cards.

It contrasts strangely with Downtown proper, which was designed to look like a ritzy, almost glamorous place. Much of the lustre has faded from it by now, with weather and traffic and time stripping away the brightest colours and dulling the shine of the stone and glass used to construct many of the buildings, but it still looks like the kind of place where money flows.

There are also a lot of people here. It’s crowded enough outside the bus that, when the bus finally
comes to a stop in front of a sign bearing the words ‘BUS AND TAXI ZONE’, you have to wrap your arms around yourself and make yourself as small as possible so that the press of bodies on the pavement doesn’t crush you.

The side-streets of Downtown are thankfully less busy, you find, once you manage to push your way through the crowd of people. They’re still busy—far busier than you really like your streets to be—but there’s enough space for you to move around and in front of people without constantly having to brush up against them.

Still, the promise of safety offered by the lingerie store is enough to draw a sigh of relief from you once you manage to make your way to the building. It’s only a small store on the ground floor of the mall, but there’s a door in the back that opens up to an alley behind it. You slip in there, feeling the tension slip away as the sounds of the crowd fade when the door closes firmly behind you, the dull murmur drowned out by the soft crooning of a singer you almost recognize playing through the shop’s speakers.

You move into the store, glancing around. There’s another customer, a brunette woman in her thirties, browsing through a selection of nightshirts so risqué your cheeks flush a little as you look at them, and a younger girl—you recognize her, vaguely, as the same Middle Eastern woman who had served you the last time you were here—standing next to another college-aged girl, this one with red hair and wide, blue eyes. Aside from those three, there’s nobody else in here that you can see.

It’s a little overwhelming, having so much lingerie around you. You don’t really know where to start. You do know your measurements, but you don’t know what materials you should be looking for, or what styles would be good for you, or anything like that.

Really, there’s only one thing you can do. So you default back to the obvious thing to do in a situation like this: you ignore how red your cheeks are, clutch your card and money tightly in your pocket, and move with jerky movements to the front counter, where the two women behind it give you bemused looks. You flush harder at that, but try to ignore it.

“U-Um,” is all you can manage at first. You stop and lick your lips, trying to fight the nervousness rising in you. “I want to, to get some lingerie. But I don’t really know anything about it. Could you, um, come and help me?”

The red-haired girl smirks for a moment, until the other worker gives her a side-long glare and shakes her head, then turns back to you. It’s the Middle Eastern girl who gives you an actual friendly smile, settling the butterflies in your gut and replacing them with a new, different kind of butterflies. She has a really pretty smile.

“Yes, I can help you,” the girl replies, giving the other girl a warning look. “Jess, mind the register for me.” The other girl grumbles while the Middle Eastern girl moves out from behind the counter, unlatching a little door in the side and moving to stand next to you with a warm smile. “Follow me, please.”

She leads you over to one of the least overwhelming sections of the store— the same place you’d taken Madison last time, a simple panty-and-bra section of the store. There’s still an enormous amount of choice here, some of it bearing the brand of labels, and some just marked as having been made by Parian.

Finally, she gestures for you to sit down in a chair across from her. There’s two, so you choose the one that looks more comfortable, with a plush leather backing. She nods in approval, running a
critical eye over your frame, causing you to shift awkwardly beneath her gaze. You lash your power out over her briefly, just long enough to get a taste of her emotions. She’s not mocking you, which is good; mostly, there’s just an undertone of amusement and affection in her, with faint traces of lust cutting through the emotions. Understandable; if you worked in a lingerie store for women, you’d probably end up feeling turned on all the time too.

Still, it relaxes you enough that you’re able to settle back into the chair, offering her a small smile. She returns it, then taps her chin. “So,” she says thoughtfully, “do you know what kind of lingerie you’re after today?”

You stall. “Um.” Looking up at her helplessly, all you can really do is shrug, shrinking in on yourself a little. “Not really. I just, I bought some lingerie in here a few weeks ago, or my girlfriend did. And it was… fun.” You miss the small leer that crosses her face at that, too focused on your current embarrassment.

Before you can say anything further, though, she snaps her fingers together, a satisfied expression on her face. “Aha!” she exclaims, her voice modulated not to carry too far through the store. “That’s where I recognize you from!” A moment passes, and her voice is calmer when she continues, “Sorry. I don’t get a lot of lesbians in here, let alone ones as cute as you.”

Your face, which had been in the process of turning back to a normal shade, suddenly flushes hot red again. Your mouth moves, but for a moment, nothing comes out but a choked sound. Then, you take a breath, and finally, mercifully, you can talk again, just in time for you to realize that you really have no idea what to say to that.

She’s—she’s actually flirting with you. You! You really don’t know how to react to this except to continue to stare up at her, frozen, a dorky smile in your face and your face as red as it’s ever been. Luckily, she seems to find it more charming than anything, because she just smirks at you and turns back to the lingerie display behind her. “So anyway,” she says deliberately, glancing back at you, “do you have any ideas, or do you need some time to think about it?”

Finally, a safer topic. Discussing your tastes in lingerie is only slightly mortifying, compared to being reduced to a stammering mess in the face of a cute girl flirting with you. “I don’t really… know anything about styles,” you reply, giving her a weak smile. “But I, um. I liked the ones Madison bought for me. They were really soft. Kind of silky.”

“Hm.” The woman looks at you for a long moment, pursing her lips, then moves over to you and crouches in front of you so she can take your hand and look at it. “Okay, softer materials, then. Some rayon, then. Modal, probably. Maybe some vegetable cashmere…” She frowns, and internally, you mirror the facial expression. She wants you to wear a vegetable? Ew. “Do you have any preference in colour?”

You shake your head, eyes widening. You do, but—you really don’t want to mess this up with a bad choice in colours. “No,” you say hastily. “Could you pick?”

She nods distractedly. “Sure.” She examines your hand again. Her hand is warm in yours. “We can’t go wrong with pink and teal, of course. I think you’d look cute in pink.” Luckily, she isn’t looking at your face, so she can’t see you blush again at that. “But you’re definitely autumn-toned. Maybe some coffee, or beige.Actually, you’d look great in green, too.” This time, she does look up at you, wearing a teasing grin that only widens when your blush deepens at her words. “How much of a budget do you have?”
You shake your head, pouting a little. “Not really that much,” you admit glumly. “I can probably only afford one set.”

“Hm. We’ll see.” She stands finally, straightening her posture. “My name is Sabah, by the way. What’s yours?”

“Taylor.” You nod, then have to shake your head at your own silly movements, a movement which just makes you hunch in on yourself in embarrassment more. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Sabah pats you gently on the top of your head, smiling down at you. “Yeah, it is,” she agrees. “Alright. If you follow me, I’ll show you over to the dressing rooms.” She leads you over to a small room, with a sliding door and a curtain covering it. A small part of you is growling, but a larger part of you—a part of you that you don’t normally listen to—urges you to ignore the unease in your gut and follow her in, to just listen to her.

The woman thankfully does not follow you into the dressing room, an idea that doesn’t leave your head once you first imagine the scenario. It makes sense, you suppose—there are other customers in here, and even if they weren’t, that’d be illegal. You’re only fifteen, and while you’re not really the best at judging people’s ages, you’d say she’s in her early twenties. Not… that you’re really one to talk about age differences, but when you’re working in a store like this, you can’t imagine getting away with much more than mild flirting.

Luckily, you do know your measurements. You have been fitted for bras before, and you really haven’t grown too much since then. Sabah still makes you take your measurements again, an act that actually cheers you up some when you find that you’ve grown another whole half a centimetre around the chest since you last got measured. And from there, it’s just a flurry of activity.

Surprisingly, she takes an entirely different tack from the kind of lingerie you expected her to provide you with. Rather than handing you panties and a bra designed for your lack of a chest, the first item she hands you is a small chemise, coloured deep black and with a lacy black pattern across the low-dipping collar. It looks very nice, to your uneducated opinion.

A short procession of similar items follows; nightgowns, chemises and slips. You have to admit that you actually quite like the look of a lot of them—they don’t try and emphasize your non-existent bust, but they still flare out around your hips some. If the fabric clings to you as you think it will, then you might actually look somewhat feminine in them. And that’s a pleasant thought. It’s been a long time since you looked particularly feminine.

After about two dozen items, the procession of lingerie stops. You wait, clutching a particularly short beige chemise against your chest, until Sabah knocks on the door of your dressing room. “You can come out,” she says, amusement thick in her tone. You hesitate, but eventually unlock the door and move out, your movements stiff and unsure.

Behind you, you’ve folded everything she passed you and placed it neatly atop a small bench in the room. “I, uh.” Your voice comes out surprisingly soft. “I don’t know which ones to pick.”

The dark-skinned girl gives you a placating smile. “Were there any you liked in particular?” she asks. You can’t help but notice that her gaze is lingering on the chemise you’re holding to your chest.

You have to stop to think about it for a moment. “I liked some of them a lot,” you allow. The only problem is, they all look expensive. You can buy one, maybe two if you go for the cheaper options,
but Sabah is really good at picking lingerie to suit you. There were six or seven pieces in there that you really liked.

She blinks at you, as though unimpressed. “Which ones?” she asks, turning her gaze to linger on the pile of lingerie in the dressing room still. You wait a moment, then trot over there and begin pulling out the pieces you’d really liked.

Six seems like a lot, but when you’re holding them, it really doesn’t seem like all that much. The materials they’d been made out of are thin, though not sheer, and they’re luxuriously soft. You’d mostly stuck with darker colours, blacks and greens and purples cut just short enough to make you feel a little naughty while holding them, though there’s one pink nightgown in there too.

Your choices seem to meet with Sabah’s approval, if her smiles and nods are anything to go by. “They look nice,” she says, reaching over to squeeze your arm. “Alright. Do you need anything else before we head up and pay?”

For a quick moment, you’re absurdly tempted to ask for her phone number. She’s—she’s flirting with you, right? Getting the phone number of cute girls who flirt with you is a thing, you’re pretty sure. Unless books have been lying to you. And in fairness, they do that sometimes. Not really worth the risk. In response to her question, you shake your head. “No, thanks,” you reply softly. “But, um. I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to afford all of this.”

She just pats you on the arm. “Don’t worry about it,” she says glibly. “Call it a cute girl discount.” And she winks at you, causing your face to heat up once again. This girl has made you blush more today than you have in a month prior. “Just make sure to come back here if you end up needing more, and we’ll call it even, hey?”

You manage to nod. “Of course,” you say, surprise faintly colouring your tone. Then a thought strikes you, and after a moment to gather your courage, you manage to choke out, “I like to visit pretty girls,” and flash what you hope is a winning smile at her.

The lingerie doesn’t cost you all that much, surprisingly. You’re not sure how big that discount is, but it must have been pretty substantial, because it didn’t even cost you all the money from your latest paycheck. It makes you feel a little guilty, but Sabah just waves you off with an airy, “I run the place, I can give discounts to whoever I want.”

Again, that small part of you wants to lash out, to rebel. And once again, the rest of you rises above that part of you, nervous but also curious. That’s a lot of money she’s giving up, and you shouldn’t be as comfortable with it as you are. You tuck that thought away in the back of your mind, determined not to drag your mood down.

Either way, you say goodbye to Sabah, once again giving her a shy smile, and make a mental note that you should definitely come back—and not only because of her flirting with you. You can almost convince yourself of that last one.

By the time the bus arrives at the bus stop and can take you home, it’s already headed towards late afternoon. You have to hurry inside and up to your bedroom, only calling out a loud hello for Dad as you go, so you can change into other clothes to go jogging in. You place your new lingerie carefully away in your cupboard, hesitant to place it in your chest of drawers in case the confined space wrinkles the expensive clothing.

You already know that you won’t have much time to go for a run before it gets dark. The streetlights
along your street are mostly fine, but in the streets beyond that, almost one in three flicker or are dead entirely, and the council hasn’t sent anyone out to fix them in months. Jogging in the morning, with the sun peeking over the horizon and cars moving through the roads twice a minute or more, is a very different experience to jogging at night with the sun setting and nobody to accompany you. It’s not safe to be out that late.

Indeed, you’re only out there for forty minutes before you judge that it’s getting dark enough that you should head home. You’re a little disappointed, actually. You’d only just begun to work up a sweat, and you hadn’t yet hit that point where you could zone out completely as you ran. But, oh well.

When you re-enter your house, you poke your head into the living room, intending to tell Dad you’re home. For a moment, you’re confused when you see it’s empty. It doesn’t click until you move back into the hallway and see the flashing red light on the phone, indicating an unread voicemail. Then you understand- oh, yes, Dad would still be at work. He doesn’t get holidays like you do.

You play the voicemails as you move to the kitchen to get a cool drink of water, then make sure to delete them as you pass by on your way back to your room. From there, you move to get out your pyjamas. It wouldn’t do to go to bed sweaty, after all. At least, not alone.

Occupying your time until Dad gets home is relatively easy, once you have showered and refreshed yourself. You briefly consider calling Victoria, although eventually you settle on sending her another cheery text wishing her a good evening; then you settle in at your desk.

Sophia’s new history lessons will not write themselves, and it will be all too easy to simply put them off forever if you don’t invest the time now.

The next day begins much like any other. You shower, although the water is tepid—Dad must have showered before you, and the hot water has not yet had time to reheat properly—and you eat breakfast, although it’s a rather plain mixture of toast with butter and soggy cornflakes today. You don’t have anywhere to go in the morning, so you even have time for you to go for your jog without interruption.

As you proceed carrying out your daily routine, you find yourself rather distracted, however. Plans swirl through your head, formed and discarded moments later, only to be replaced by another poor plan. It’s really quite irritating, but you keep it up, because today is a rather important day; it’s the first time you are going to meet Shadow Stalker.

You don’t know much about Shadow Stalker, really. She’s not one of the most popular Wards in the city; she carries a distinctly bitter and cynical vibe to her, from what you have seen from interviews with her on TV, and it is no secret that she is dark-skinned, so a large number of the people who might have otherwise supported her crackdown in the seedier parts of Brockton Bay instead hold no small level of disdain for her.

You do know that she used to be a vigilante, until that came to a rather abrupt end… you’re not sure when, really; a few months ago, probably. Definitely less than a year ago. Nobody in her thread or at school knows exactly what the catalyst for her joining the Wards was, but one day she just disappeared off the streets, and turned up a week later in the employ of the Wards. A lot of speculation on PHO has lead you to wander if her family had been in trouble, but you can’t know for sure.
She’s not the most ideal recruit, you acknowledge—she’s already been employed by the Wards, so any participation in your hero team is going to be part-time at best, much like Victoria’s. But much like Victoria, you have a different reason for recruiting her; she just looks cute, and her powers look really helpful too.

The PR event isn’t being held at the library until a little after noon, so you have plenty of time to make sure you’re dressed nicely for the occasion. It’s a public event, so you don’t want to draw much attention to yourself, but now that you can actually dress up a little cutely, you think you want to make a nice first impression on your latest recruit.

Even so, your dress is a little wrinkled by the time you make it off the bus in front of the library. A rather large man had sat beside you on the bus, and while he had sat as close to the edge as he had dared, his bulk had still forced you to press yourself uncomfortably close to the bus window. It’s almost sad, really.

Still, it’s not too bad. You’re able to brush your dress once you get off the bus and have moved away from the sidewalk, getting rid of most of the wrinkles in your outfit. It’ll have to do. You can’t afford to wait for another bus, go all the way home, and iron your dress. It would take too much time.

The library itself is surprisingly busy—or unsurprisingly, you begrudgingly admit to yourself after a moment’s thought. Any meeting with the Wards is going to get a surprising turnout, if only because there are a lot of worried parents in Brockton Bay who would attend these meetings in case their children triggered. You wouldn’t be surprised if there were some members of the Empire in here, either, covertly gathering information on the Wards, although the Protectorate might be aware enough to stop that from happening.

Racks have been pulled back, opening up the already decently-sized reading area at the back of the library even further. There’s enough room for eighty chairs here, in neat rows; you manage to grab one of them before they’re all full, only to find yourself quickly sandwiched between a tall woman with a severe sneer on her face and a chattering, excitable child. All you can do is try to tune them out by focusing on the front of the area, a task made possible only by your height.

The first person to walk through a side-door you hadn’t noticed earlier is someone you hadn’t expected to see here today—Dauntless. He cuts an imposing figure in his metallic armour and wicked spear, although the colours of his armour—silver, with inlays and swirling patterns painted deep gold—do a lot to soften your initial impression of him, as do his easy movements.

He reminds you a little of an awkward teenager as he stands at the front of the crowd, sheepishly rubbing at the back of his head. There’s a microphone in front of him, but only a single speaker behind the crowd (though still in front of dozens of others, as the library has definitely filled to capacity right now), so his voice doesn’t carry far enough for you to distinctly hear what he’s saying. You can hear him say “Welcome”, but everything after that is half-heard at best, at least until a technician seems to move behind him and adjust the microphone. His voice comes clearer, then.

Dauntless talks for around three minutes before he slinks off. Somehow, you get the feeling that he hadn’t wanted to be the one to speak here today. You wonder why he did.

Your musings are cut short as someone emerges from the same door Dauntless had just exited through. You watch as a tall boy emerges, dressed in a rust-red outfit with silver trim. Aegis. He’s followed quickly by a boy in strange red and gold, his fists held clenched at his sides and his posture too straight—Kid Win. And finally, the two of them are followed by a girl dressed in a too-large
black cloak and a mask bearing the visage of an imperious woman. Those are all the details you manage to get before a wave of nervousness from Sophia hits you and steals your breath away.

You stare up at the stage, too aware of the paleness of your face and the fact that your breaths are coming more rapidly.

No. No, no. Hurriedly, you cast your powers out, settling them around Shadow Stalker. It doesn’t change a damned thing. All you can feel emanating from her is Sophia’s nervousness and wary anticipation.

You shrink back on yourself, trying to make yourself as small as possible, although it’s a useless effort. Shadow Stalker is only staring stiffly straight ahead, her gaze nowhere near you. Still, you curse yourself for not wearing a hooded jacket today—you’d feel a lot more comfortable if you could just hide your hair within a hood.

Damn it. Damn it, damn it.

Aegis begins speaking up on the stage, but you ignore his words, despite that they’re clearer than those of Dauntless. You’re too busy digging your nails into your palm, thoughts racing furiously through your head. Lots of little clues are falling into place in your head, and you can help but actually feel a little foolish.

Sophia being Shadow Stalker would explain a lot, really. It would explain why the only punishment she received for shoving you naked into that locker was a couple weeks of detention. It would explain why Emma dropped your friendship in favour of hanging out with her (hanging out with a bona-fide hero would always be more exciting than hanging out with you, after all). It would explain why she’s so confident in herself, why she doesn’t seem to even think twice about confronting gang members in Winslow’s hallways. Hell, it would even explain why her grades are falling so easily.

But it doesn’t explain other things. You can believe that a series of small kisses in the bathroom might be enough to satisfy a petty bully and leave her panting for more, but you have a harder time believing that a hardened vigilante would let up on a vendetta after just a few kisses. And you’ve been tutoring her for weeks, without even so much as a hint of this. Surely, if you know her that intimately, she’d have dropped some clues for you. And… well.

You know what a trigger event is. Your research online after your own taught you that much, at least. And if Sophia is actually Shadow Stalker, then she must have undergone her own. Something must have twisted inside her, torn her apart the same way—the same way that lying naked in front of all those people at school tore you apart. Something must have twisted her, changed her. And yet, she still shoved you naked into that locker, still allowed you to spill out, cold and half-dead, in front of a host of students.

It can’t be Sophia. Sophia can’t be Shadow Stalker. It makes no sense. And yet your power is telling you that she is.

You don’t know what to think.

Your head throbs, a burgeoning headache building. You glance off to your sides, but people are still surrounding you. You can’t get up and leave. Thus, you are trapped, and all you can do is listen as Shadow Stalker steps up to the microphone and speaks.

“Hi,” she says unenthusiastically. “I’m Shadow Stalker. Like Aegis said before, we’re here to
answer any questions you might have about the Wards program and our participation in it.” Someone in the audience throws up their hands, and you can almost see the girl stifle a sigh as she gestures towards them. “Yes?”

You turn your head to look. The person waving is a woman who looks to be in her late thirties, or thereabouts. “Hi,” she says, her voice carrying clearly across the library to you. “Sorry, I don’t have a question for you, I’d like to speak to Aegis. You’re the head of the Wards program, yeah?”

Shadow Stalker turns to Aegis, who inclines his head before stepping forwards and around a retreating Shadow Stalker. “I guess questions can begin now,” he says, a strong note of amusement in his voice. “I am not in charge of the Wards program, although I am the oldest member of the Wards as of Triumph’s retirement last month, yes.”

It’s a bit of an impromptu question-and-answers session. Kid Win and Shadow Stalker both seem a little taken aback at not getting to finish their introductions, although Aegis seems completely at ease as members of the audience fire questions towards him.

It’s actually quite an informative discussion, too. You’ve read up on the Wards before—you’d read their recruitment pitch on the PRT website back when you had first triggered, although obviously the fact that your powers revolve around mind-control had pre-emptively put an end to any desire to join them you might have had—but the pitch had been stiff and formal, more suited for a parent reading up for information on how to help their child.

Compared to Aegis’ warmth as he fields their questions, it seems poor.

Another person raises their hand, this time a man. He’s the fifth person to ask Aegis a question. “David Smith,” he introduces himself. He sounds brusque, enough so to ruffle your feathers, and he’s not even talking to you. Aegis seems unaffected by the man’s demeanour, though. “What benefits does joining the Wards have, insurance-wise and stuff? Just out of curiosity.”

Aegis looks at the man for a long moment, then offers him a nod. “We offer extensive insurance to all participants in the Wards program, on top of the pay rates discussed earlier,” he says, his tone a little stiffer than before. You tilt your head at him. Irritation burns through him now, strong and fierce. Huh. “Additionally, the Protectorate will match contributions to a member of the Ward’s college fund, up to sixty percent of their annual wage.”

David goes to speak up again, but another woman talks over him this time, her voice loud enough to drown out her companion. “Yeah,” she says, her brows drawn together angrily. “Especially if the Wards programs is taking in vigilantes!” Your gaze snaps to Shadow Stalker, who has stiffened at the words.

Aegis frowns down at her. “The Wards program is open to all,” he says, his voice mild but his frown severe. “We work closely together with the Brockton Bay Police Department, and the broader criminal justice system of America, to ensure that all juvenile offenders are dealt with appropriately.”
You can recognize a non-answer when you hear one. The woman just shakes her head, but before she can say anything, Shadow Stalker steps up behind Aegis and taps him on the shoulder. She says something to him, not loud enough for you to hear; similarly, his response is too low for anyone in the audience to hear. Then she steps back, allowing Aegis to talk again.

“"To refer back to your earlier question," he says, nodding his head towards the woman who had been interrupted, "we do have a psychiatric program for the Wards. There are several therapists and psychologists on staff who are trained in dealing with the stresses of being a parahuman and joining the Wards." He hesitates, looking back at Shadow Stalker for a moment. ""We are all mandated to see a therapist once a week at minimum."

Shadow Stalker nods at him, just once. He waves back, a small acknowledgement.

The question and answer session doesn’t last long after that; it was only scheduled as a half-hour session, though it runs a little over. You’re too distracted to really pay attention to anything more that they say. You file the words away in case you need to think on them later, but you’re too distracted with thoughts of Sophia right now.

As soon as everyone gets up and out of the chairs, you make your escape, moving just slowly enough to avoid drawing attention to yourself. You deliberately don’t look at Shadow Stalker any more, and you rein your emotion senses in so you don’t have to feel Sophia’s emotions any more.

You wish you hadn’t come here today.

Sophia is—could be—Shadow Stalker, a vigilante-turned-hero. That doesn’t bother you too much, except that you know that Shadow Stalker joined the Wards months ago, long before you were shoved in that locker. If Sophia is Shadow Stalker, then she must have been in the Wards when she did that to you. And that just doesn’t make sense. The Wards wouldn’t be so permissive as to allow their members to conduct ongoing bullying campaigns against other students at a public school.

They wouldn’t. They’re the good guys. They wouldn’t do that.

It makes sense, but it doesn’t. There’s so much that would be explained if she was the Ward, but it would raise so many more questions, too. Like… how would her supervisors have missed what she did to you? Why would Winslow still be such an awful school if it had a Ward attending it? And… why would a hero like Shadow Stalker let a nerdy girl like you hold her down and molest her?

It just doesn’t make sense. Your powers can do a lot, but you’ve been restrained with them.

Your thoughts are still swirling at night, when you’re laying in bed.

The longer you think on it, the more you think you’re right. It makes a lot of sense that Sophia is the former vigilante—it explains so many small things that you’d never thought about before. It also raises a lot more questions.

Luckily, you already have a date planned with her. It probably won’t do you much good to bring it up then, but you might be able to watch her, see if there are any more clues. Maybe some subtle questioning will give you the answers you’re after.

You do need those answers. It’s been distracting you all day, even though all you’ve been doing is
working on Sophia’s lesson plans some more.

But now that you’re lying in bed trying to fall asleep, you have to try and dislodge those thoughts. You have something a little more important to think about—namely, what you’re going to do tomorrow.

You have a date with Victoria planned already, but you have much of the morning and afternoon free. You’ll just have to make sure that whatever you do, you keep it short so you can be home in time to meet with her.

So what are you going to do tomorrow?
She remembered the last shuttle ever launched. January, 2003. She had watched, with classmates, as the live coverage counted down, and the tower of metal fell away to the power of the craft screaming its way into the sky. She had mocked and joked with the others, pretending that she was jaded to the sight, having watched at least two other launches before that, but couldn’t quite hide the squeak of excitement as the camera struggled to track the trip into orbit. Despite the state of the world, children's dreams for the future could not be denied.

And then, with a strange flicker on the screen, the entire thing exploded into a white cloud, fragments spinning off, trailing fire and smoke.

The entire room had fallen silent, even as the teacher rushed to turn off the TV and distract the students from the image they’d just seen. Mrs. Green had struggled to herd the children away, even as she remembered a similar shock from her own youth. Nature's cruel reminder that there’s no such thing as 'perfectly safe'.

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It was two days later when the first reports started surfacing of something far more menacing than the dangers of space travel. An astronomer in Hawaii had gotten permission to use one of the older telescopes to keep watch on the newest addition to the earth’s skies — the Simurgh — and he had noticed an oddity: it had moved. A casual flicker of one large wing, before returning to a restful pose.

Timestamping the event transformed it from an oddity to a forboding omen. The moment that the Simurgh had moved was the same moment when Columbia had exploded.

Chaos erupted on the news and online, rampant speculation abounded, and demands for government answers flooded every event. Thinkers and precogs had been brought in to consult with NASA, and the ultimate answer had hurt. This had just been a warning, a shot across the bow. It was a message that, from now on, mankind’s path into space had been unilaterally revoked. They were trapped, on earth, with the Endbringers.

Some sought to deny the pronouncement, to prove that there were still ways for man to travel to and live in space. A scientist, Alan Gramme, worked with the failing remains of NASA, becoming famous for the ideas he had for creating self-sustaining biospheres, with goals of both ending world hunger, and gaining a foothold on the moon.

The Simurgh’s second warning shot was not nearly so limited as the first.

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"... Bailey! Miss Bailey! Can you please pay attention!"

Sherrel jolted upright, trying to pull her thoughts together, pushing away the memories of the past. She scrambled to figure out where in the lesson they were, even as the classroom around her laughed. Unable to answer the question, the teacher just scowled at her and moved on to the next
student, leaving the girl hunched over and blushing in embarrassment.

She shifted her book, and a shiver ran down her spine. On loose pages were drawings. She didn't remember drawing them, but she knew they were hers nonetheless. Clean and precise lines marked the edges of a device designed to kill her and drown her in regret — a space ship. Grand, elegant, and fuel for her nightmares.

For years it had been her dream to travel to the stars, to fly through space in futuristic vessels, to hop from planet to planet, to seek out alien civilizations. Stories from the golden age, before the Golden Man appeared — cruisers and fighters and battleships, and both hope and war, but always with mankind striving to reach out to the limits of the universe. With the coming of superheroes, some thought that that future had been catapulted in front of them, simply waiting for the next Reed Richards to take that first leap forward.

And Sherrel wanted that so badly that, when it was all taken away, so decidedly and completely, her mind couldn't seem to accept the loss, until the day when it had opened up to something greater. Ideas pouring into her head, shapes poured out on paper. The greatest future that she could ever want — and never have.

Over the last couple weeks, since she had awoken to her own parahuman power, the urges had been getting stronger and stronger. The raw need to create. And that terrified her, because she knew that the only end to her creations was to be crushed and broken by Earth's self-appointed sentinels.

She barely slept at home, and had started to slip up at school as well. She was using extra makeup to hide the dark circles under her eyes, avoiding her family, and trying hard not to draw attention that might cause someone to recognize her power.

As class ended, she clutched her books to her chest, moving from room to room. Focused on shutting out the images that spun through her mind every time she looked at one gadget or another, she nearly tripped over a group of boys that were laughing and quietly passing a small plastic bag around. She only caught a glimpse, but the image of the tiny white pills was burned into her mind, remaining there the rest of the day.

Despite her grades, she certainly wasn't stupid. There was a lot of gang activity in the school, lots of peer pressure, and more illegal trade than any of the staff would admit. She had too much pride to give in to the Empire pushers, though. There was too much... hatred hanging over them. An uncomfortable sternness in demeanor, and the feeling that they'd ridicule her family background regardless of the color of her hair and skin. She'd need to be really desperate before she went to them for help.

But a nerd that tried to avoid the crowds got to see those who avoided the 'official' channels. Hanging around the edges were the losers and slackers, people who were far less likely to stress over following the 'rules'. Less straightlaced, more relaxed. And she most definitely needed to relax.

Out the back stairs of the school, and around some newly planted greenery, intended to give the school a fresh look, Sherrel's breath hitched as she saw what she was looking for. A vaguely handsome young man, with the arrogance only a teenager with too much money can show, lounged among several others, holding a sort of court among the disaffected youths of the school. Soon one, then another, noticed her presence, and in a moment they had all turned to look at her.

Sherrel shuffled hesitantly forward, and in a voice too high-pitched for her frame, asked, "Do— do you know anything that might help with... too much stress?"
The young man at the center smiled broadly, teeth practically sparkling. "Oh, I think I know exactly what someone who needs to... relax... might want to try."

***

Sherrel's hand twitched nervously, repeatedly trying to check for money that she knew she didn't have. In the last few months she had burned through her meager savings, as well as what money she could skim from her parents' wallets, before the screaming accusations got to be too much. The soft little pills finally allowed her to sleep at night, and not drift into dangerous daydreams at school, even if her grades had suffered a bit for it. Given that she was only an average student at the best of times, her parents likely wouldn't notice.

But her attempts to ration the pills, and thus her money, had finally reached their limits. The peace of a dreamless night had faded, and the cravings to build had returned. She imagined she could see a winged form in the heavens, watching her, and waiting for her inevitable firey trip into the sky, and then back down to earth. She needed it gone. She needed to be able to forget it ever existed. She needed to erase these cravings so that she didn't feel like tearing the skin off her flesh and ripping her eyes out just to make it all go away.

"Adam?" she asked nervously, getting his attention and drawing him slightly away from the crowd. She lowered her voice, half-pleading, "I don't— money— money is kinda tight right now, y'know?"

"Hey, hey, hey. No worries, yeah?" Adam answered, quickly moving to reassure her. "If you can't afford it, we can always work something else out," he told her with an easy smile. "You're OK with that, right?" A finger gently caressed her cheek.

Sherrel squeezed her eyes shut, unable to look at either the face leaning over her, or herself.

***

A week later, half the school knew about her new nickname: Squealer.

***

Sherrel blinked blearily, waking up with an oil rag draped over her, lying beneath the latest truck she'd been working on. The years hadn't been kind to her. The cute and somewhat attractive teenager had mostly faded to just a trashy young adult, with makeup to cover over the blemishes. Not that Adam had fared much better. He still loved to throw around his winning smile, but the damage to his teeth made it more gruesome than winning nowadays.

She'd never graduated from high school, but the drugs meant that she never really worried about that, either. No regular office job she could get would ever allow her to afford what she needed to stay relatively sane. Instead, all she really needed to do was play the good little slut for Skidmark, and maybe build a few things for him. Even in her drugged-up state, the pitifully trivial work needed to throw together a stealth screen or ion canon on some truck or boat barely fazed her, and it was even a little fun to allow herself to work on 'safe' vehicles.
The garage was dark, other than one lamp on a workbench. There were no windows that weren’t boarded up, ostensibly to avoid being caught by the PRT. Her office-cum-bedroom upstairs also had heavy curtains — to keep the sunlight from waking her up in the morning, and making her puke up her guts on the sheets.

But mostly it was so that she didn’t have nights like this, where, with no one else around and her mind far too clear, she was drawn to open the front door and stare up at the night sky, filled with twinkling stars.

The tears rolling down her cheeks carried her dreams with them.
You wake up later than usual on Wednesday to a short text from Victoria; *I’ll be over at five today.*

It had been hard to fall asleep last night. You’d been in bed by ten, but your thoughts swirled and tumbled into a confusing mess, and you’d still been awake at quarter past one in the morning. It’s not like you feel bad about it, exactly, but you’re normally awake by eight at the latest, and it’s nearly half past nine now.

There is one good thing about waking up so late, you soon discover once you have climbed out of bed and headed into the bathroom. With Dad already out of the house, you don’t have to worry about the hot water at all. He’s already showered, so you should have enough hot water to last you for half an hour, if you wanted. It’s not a decision you have to think long and hard about.

You make sure to extend your daily run a little longer than usual. By the time you return, sweat actually dripping down your brow despite the chill in the wind and the sun’s presence being hidden behind the clouds, it’s after eleven in the morning—you’d ran for nearly an hour and a half now. Honestly, you’re a little proud of yourself. A couple of months ago, the thought of going jogging for an hour and a half would have given you a cramp just thinking about it. Now, you’d only had to slow down and alternate jogging with walking for the last half hour, though your jogging prior to that hadn’t been very strenuous.

As you strip in front of the shower, you take the chance to admire your legs. You need to shave them, you note with a faint grimace, but aside from that, they actually look quite nice. You don’t have the muscles of a professional athlete, you most likely never will, but you’re beginning to get some strong definition on your legs. Even your stomach is beginning to show results—you’ve never been fat, you don’t eat enough to get fat, but the thin layers of baby fat that used to reside there have disappeared.

The heat of the shower feels incredible on your sore muscles. You spend several minutes just luxuriating in the heat of the spray before finally, reluctantly, beginning to wash yourself.

Serendipitously, it’s not until you finish cleaning yourself and step out of the shower that your phone rings. It’s in your bedroom, but the bathroom is close enough that you can hear it. You have enough time to wrap a towel around yourself before you have to rush over to answer it.

You’re taken a little by surprise when you pick up your phone and see Charlotte’s name there. You don’t hesitate at all to hit the green answer button, though. “Hello?” you say mildly, padding your way back to the bathroom, and your clothes.

“H-Hi.” Charlotte sounds a little nervous, for some reason. “I’m not bothering you, am I?”

It’s difficult to dry yourself off one-handed, but you make a valiant attempt. “No, not at all,” you reply, giving her a reassuring smile that drops as soon as you remember she can’t see it. “Did you need something?”

“Um. Not really.” She hesitates for a moment, an almost audible sound. “Just, um. Everyone else is busy, and I don’t have much to do. I was hoping you wouldn’t mind if I called you? But only if it’s not a bother…”
A smile tugs over your face as she babbles. It’s kind of cute, but her voice is starting to rise, almost driving herself into a panic. You wait for her to trail off for a moment before you interject, “It’s not a bother, Charlotte.” It doesn’t take much effort to keep yourself sounding calm, but you can’t help that you sound a little out of breath as you dry yourself off. “You can call me any time. I don’t mind.”

Charlotte’s voice sounds a little choked as she responds. “O-Okay,” she says after a moment’s pause. “Thank you.” There’s another pause, this one much longer, before she lets out a soft laugh. “Sorry, sorry. Uh, I didn’t actually think of anything to talk about before I called.” You don’t need your powers to sense the embarrassment filling her at that admittance.

You hum, tossing your towel into the laundry hamper and bending down to pick up your panties. After thinking about it for a moment, you frown. “That’s okay,” you say absently. Okay, you might be able to get dressed while talking on the phone, but it’s going to be tricky, and you don’t really want to risk slipping over. “Um, give me a moment. I’m just going to try and figure out how to put you on speaker.”

Her tone is curious when she replies. “Oh, um, okay. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“It’s not a bad time,” you reply dryly. “I just got out of the shower, is all. Okay, one moment.” You think you hear her making a choking sound as you move your phone away, but you don’t have the time to be curious. You’re already being rude enough.

A problem soon presents itself; you don’t actually have any clue how to put the call on speaker. Unfortunately, there’s no ready ‘speaker’ button on the dialpad of your phone. You poke at a few buttons, taking deliberate care to stay well away from the ‘End Call’ button. It still takes you a few moments to locate the button, hidden off to the right of the dialpad and shaped like a cross with a line over one side.

You hold the phone as far away from your face as you can get it. “Hello?” you say, taking care not to pitch your voice too low.

Charlotte’s voice emanates clearly from your phone, the sound bouncing through the bathroom. “Hi! Did you get it working?”

Placing the phone carefully down on the edge of the sink, you nod to yourself. “I did,” you reply. “Thanks for being patient.” On the other end of the phone, Charlotte hums a small sound of acknowledgement. “So, uh. You’re on holidays, visiting your family, right?”

“Yes.” There’s an unhappy tone threading its way through her voice, causing you to frown a little. “We’re visiting my uncle in Vermont. My grandparents are here too.”

With your hands free, you’re able to actually begin sliding your clothes on, although there’s a small part of you that feels a guilty thrill about talking to Charlotte in the nude. You pause for a moment at the thought, considering—the idea of just staying undressed quite appeals to you. On the other hand, it’s cold, and you’re not sure when Dad will get home.

Probably a bit too risky. Maybe if it were Madison or Victoria.

Instead, you shake your head and focus on the conversation once again as you get dressed. “That sounds like fun,” you say, your voice strained again for a quick moment as you bend down to pull your panties on. Your legs still ache a little. “How is that going?”
There’s silence for a moment, then she responds, a pout somehow audible over the line. “It’s boring,” she whines plaintively. “My uncle doesn’t have any children, so there’s nobody for me to talk to. We went for a walk in the park yesterday, but apart from that, they just keep sitting out in the living room talking about grown up stuff.” Her voice lowers for a moment, her tone conspiratorial. “They keep talking about politics. Like that stuff about the singer who was a cape, they’ve been talking about her for hours.”

You know the cape she’s referring to, sort of. You’ve heard something about a singer who was put on trial after Mastering her boyfriend, anyway. For obvious reasons, you’ve avoided looking up anything about the case—it won’t do you any good if you’re caught looking up what happens to Masters once they’ve been caught—but from what you remember, the case has passed into a civil one now, and she’s looking to face a big lawsuit from her ex-boyfriend and his family.

It’s not the kind of thing teenagers like you and Charlotte spend a lot of time talking about, anyway. You hum, trying to sound vaguely interested. “And you’re not interested in talking about that with them?” you ask.

“Noo.” She draws the sound out, her disgust evident. “I don’t really understand that stuff, but they keep talking about it and it’s gross.” She makes a soft blech noise. You can almost imagine her poking her tongue out wherever she is. “But it’s all they keep talking about. I can’t even watch TV because they’re all out there.”

You coo sympathetically. “Do you have any books you can read?” you ask brightly. “I would have loaned you some if you’d asked.”

“They have some, but they’re all old people books,” she moans. You raise your eyebrow at that, turning your gaze to your own bookcase. “I should have brought some of my own, but I forgot.”

“Hm.” You consider it for a moment, doing up the buttons on your shirt. Then, fully dressed, you pick up your phone and begin padding back to your bedroom. You might not exactly be talking to her in the nude, but nobody can stop you lying down on a comfortable bed as you do, at least. “Well, it’s lucky you brought your phone then. I’m not the most interesting person, but maybe I can distract you.” You talk over the little distressed noise Charlotte lets out at some point during that sentence. “You’re only there until Friday, right? Do you have any plans for the weekend?”

You don’t bother taking your phone off speakerphone as you climb atop your bed and lie down. You can hear her plainly enough, and she can evidently hear you just fine. It’s a lot more comfortable to just lie there without having to actually hold the phone to your ear.

She’s in a very talkative mood, you find. Once you manage to set her on a topic—such as her plans for the rest of the next holidays, or her family—she rambles on for well over half an hour, only occasionally pausing to let you ask a question or encourage her to continue rambling. It’s nice, really. You’re not always the most talkative person. It’s good to be able to just close your eyes and listen to someone spill their heart to you.

Apparently, her plans for the holidays aren’t very grand. Some of her friends have arranged to go to the carnival while it’s on, but—and she confides this to you in a somber, almost sad tone—she doesn’t think most of them actually want her along. She’s looking forward to it, though. So are you, actually, although you don’t have any definitive plans to go yet. Aside from that, Charlotte is planning on spending a lot of her time repainting her bedroom.

She’s halfway through describing how she wants to buy a DVD set of a new Earth Aleph series
when your phone beeps. You frown, rolling over to look at it. You don’t like it when your phone beeps. Beeps are usually bad.

You manage to choke back a sound of surprise when you see a text from Aisha sitting there. It’s only short—Hey, what’re you up to?—but even that much is surprising. Honestly, you hadn’t though the two of you were close enough for her to want to text you out of the blue like this. As Charlotte continues to describe the series she’s been watching recently, a piece of procedural crime fiction starring an author and a detective, you open the text and type out your own short response. I’m not doing much. Just sitting around at home. What are you doing?

Aisha doesn’t respond immediately, so you focus back on Charlotte, who is… still talking about this crime show. Apparently, she really likes it. From what you can gather from her excited rambling, it stars an actor who had portrayed a character in another television series she had watched in the past, a science-fiction show.

“—though it’s kind of obvious that they’re going together,” she continues to talk, her voice almost soothing to your ears. “A lot of these shows feel like they don’t know where they’re going, which can get kind of annoying, you know?”

“Yeah.” Your phone beeps again, a notification of a reply from Aisha. You casually tap it open. “Although I thought you said you were watching season three and they still aren’t together. Maybe the show’s writers are just drawing it out.” Your words are only half-thought, distracted as you are by Aisha’s message; Just hanging around. Brother’s out, kinda bored. Been doing much?

Charlotte’s response is indignant. “Hey, they’re just taking it slow, you know? All that build-up as they get to know each other. It’s sweet, really.”

She sounds almost petulant, which causes a sly grin to tug at the corner of your mouth. You don’t put much consideration into your response, as distracted as you are by trying to figure out how to reply to Aisha’s text, instead just almost absentely replying, “Well, I do enjoy a lot of build-up. Still, that’s a very long time to deny you your satisfaction.”

You’re so distracted that you miss the way Charlotte chokes for nearly a full five seconds before managing a response. “Th-That’s true,” she replies weakly. “It, um. It works for the show though? B-But it could be mean in, in other shows.” You aren’t so distracted that you miss her stuttering, and despite the fact that she can’t see you, you raise your brows at her.

Still, before you respond to Charlotte, you finally finish a short reply to Aisha; I’ve just been hanging around at home. What about you?

Then, you turn your mind back to Charlotte. Your brows have lowered, although your lips are still curved up into a small smirk. You’re not sure what caused her stammering there, but dear god, she is adorable when she stammers like that, so… breathy, and almost nervous. “That’s true,” you allow. “But this is your favourite show, isn’t it? So you must like that kind of thing.” It’s a logical enough conclusion, after all. If it annoyed her, she wouldn’t be watching the show, let alone be describing it to you in such detail.

“But this is your favourite show, isn’t it? So you must like that kind of thing.” It’s a logical enough conclusion, after all. If it annoyed her, she wouldn’t be watching the show, let alone be describing it to you in such detail.

“B-But-“ And there she goes again, stammering almost breathlessly. Your smile grows somewhat, an expression that anyone would call predatory if they could see you, although there’s nothing but faint lust and a growing appreciation for how cute a flustered Charlotte is in you. “I-I never said it was my favourite show!”
You hum, a sound that draws a faint sound from Charlotte. “That’s true,” you concede, mock-frowning down at the phone. “But that doesn’t change the fact that you like the build-up, does it?”

There’s only silence from her end for several long moments, broken only by the faint hitching of her breath. The silence drags on long enough that the smile drops from your face. You’re about to speak up, to ask if she’s okay, or apologize, or something, when she finally speaks up. “It doesn’t.”

Her voice is small and breathy. Even you, as emotionally stilted as you are, can hear and understand the faint trembling in her voice. You’ve heard the same kind of trembling before, though from a different brunette. In the very same bed you’re lying on now, in fact.

But you’re pretty sure you haven’t said anything that would cause her to be turned on. You rack your brain for a quick moment, but all you can remember teasing her about is her taste in television shows and the romances developed therein. Unless she’s the kind of girl who gets turned on by being teased?

You blink, your mouth suddenly dry. That thought is way too erotic. You have to lick your lips for a moment before you can formulate a response. “Th—That’s good to know.” Your voice is softer than you want it to be, but you don’t care enough to try and raise it. You can imagine Charlotte straining to hear your reply anyway, and that mental image is nice enough to make you want to lower your voice further. “You’ll have to, uh. Show me, one day.” That was a mess of a sentence. Damn it.

Still, by the fact you can hear her breaths, you’re pretty sure she doesn’t mind. You wait for a moment, two, before she responds with a choked, “O-Okay.” You wait patiently, but she doesn’t say anything else, just keeps breathing heavily.

Well, that’s fine too. Your phone beeps—another text from Aisha—but you ignore it for the moment. “I’m looking forward to it,” you murmur. You wait for her to make a sound—which turns out to be a small whine, followed by a sound of agreement and a harried “Yes”—before you open the text from Aisha. “Anyway,” you say finally, “you were telling me about how the author was writing books about the detective?”

It’s a safer topic, at least for you. You’re not quite sure what you had done that had turned Charlotte on in the first place, but… well. As cute as Charlotte is, you can’t help but remember the disgust she’d felt at school when looking at you and Madison. You really have no idea what she had found erotic about your conversation, but whatever it was, you… you don’t want to risk saying the wrong thing and reminding her of that disgust when you aren’t there to damp it down.

And besides; it’s hard to concentrate on texting Aisha when you know the girl you’re speaking to is aroused.

Victoria doesn’t arrive at five. Dad still isn’t home by then, though you have dinner for the two of you bubbling away on the stove—just a thin tomato soup with two handfuls of frozen vegetables defrosting in a smaller pot to the side. Your conversation with Aisha, such as it is, is still technically ongoing, although the rate of messaging has slowed down even further—you’re lucky if she responds within fifteen minutes of a text now. Somehow, you get the feeling she was looking more for a distraction than a proper conversation.

Charlotte, on the other hand, had kept talking to you about nothing in particular until nearly exactly three o’clock. Except for your flirty exchange with her, the conversation had largely been superficial
—you’d talked about your favourite TV shows, your favourite books, your classes at school, and other such small topics. You are not sure how long you would have talked if her father hadn’t interrupted her on the phone, rather abruptly informing her that she had to come down and help prepare dinner.

It’s kind of troubling how abrupt her father was, actually. Not in a serious way—he didn’t seem like she was in trouble—but you do remember how hesitant her initial call had been. It seems that her family isn’t much more interested in talking with her than they have been.

Oh well. You can’t do anything about it for now. You could try calling her, but you’re pretty sure that if you spent that long on the phone every day, she would wake up to a phone bill in the thousands. You’ll just have to… figure out a way to cheer her up when she returns. Perhaps with the series she agreed to watch with you?

Your thoughts are interrupted by a loud knock on the front door. You look up at the clock with a faint frown. It’s past five now, closer to quarter past than on the hour. She’s late. That’s unlike her.

The first thing you notice about Victoria after you open the door are the faint bags beneath her eyes. On most people they would be so small as to be unnoticeable, almost ignorable—but on her, they stand out, a sharp flaw on her otherwise almost perfect features. You can see faint smudges to the side, where she has attempted to hide them with eye shadow. It hasn’t worked.

“Hi,” you say quietly, standing to the side. You try not to make your staring too obvious, but by the way she grimaces, you don’t succeed. “How are you?”

She moves past you, her movements almost sluggish. “I’m fine,” she murmurs. The energy that usually pervades her has disappeared, leaving her moving slowly. She’s almost plain like this. As plain as Glory Girl ever gets, anyway. She stops after a moment, then turns to you, eyes searching your face for a moment before she slowly steps forward, arms widening.

You recognize and accept the movement, allowing her to fall into a grateful hug. You don’t say anything, just stand there for a few long moments, softly stroking her back. You keep it up until she steps back, some of the energy restored to her movements. “Feeling a little better?” you ask, arching your eyebrow in what you hope is a teasing manner.

She smirks at you. You can’t deny the relief that flows through you. You’re not used to seeing Victoria tired like that. “A little,” she says, waggling her own eyebrows. “A good hug always helps, you know? Especially when it’s from a cute girl.”

You nod. It’s true, if a little self-aggrandizing. Hugging her did cheer you up. You’d meant to ask if it made her feel a little better, but whatever. As long as she’s smiling, the details aren’t important. “Hugs are always good,” you say approvingly. “Come on in. Did you want to stay for dinner?”

There’s enough in the cupboards today that you could boil up some rice to go with it. That would allow you to spread the soup for three people.

She shakes her head, but holds her hand out for you to take and lead her further into the house. “No,” she replies, looking a little mournful. “I can’t stay for very long today, actually. Mom wants me home by seven so I can test out some new gear.” She rolls her eyes, a little sneer taking over her face. “Some tinker over in San Francisco developed a new testing dummy or something. I’m supposed to test how safe it is, so Mom can see whether she wants to endorse it or not.”

Huh. You tilt your head a little. That… makes a kind of sense, you suppose. If you were going to test
a product that was potentially dangerous, you’d probably test it with a machine first, but if you couldn’t for whatever reason, then Glory Girl is probably the best cape you can imagine for that kind of thing. She’s survived a car exploding beside her without being injured before—you’ve seen it on TV. You hadn’t imagined hiring her out for that before, though. It’s kind of undignified, but then, you’ve considered the costs of the kind of programs that New Wave has ongoing before. Every bit of extra cash would help if you were funding those sorts of programs.

Yet Panacea provides her healing without expectation of payment. Hm. Maybe there’s a governmental contract there? Or is that just another charity act?

Victoria’s hand is unusually warm in yours. You look over at her as you lead her through the house and into your bedroom, trying to see her face. Although she doesn’t look as exhausted as she did when she turned up on your doorstep, her shoulders still hang slack, and the mirth on her face doesn’t reach her eyes quite like it usually does.

Your own good mood deflates a little. Right. She’s still stressed about whatever had stressed her out on Sunday, then.

Your bed is rumpled from the time you’d spent laying on it today, but Victoria seems to take the messiness in stride. You lead her over to it, seating yourself awkwardly on the edge and waiting for her to follow you over. She does, but sits gingerly, until you give her an annoyed poke on the thigh. Then, finally, she sits normally, allowing you to shuffle over and pull her into a half-hug.

You can feel her twisting to rest her head against your neck then, her mouth curving up into a small smile. You haphazardly stroke her hip as she lets out a small sigh of contentment. Then, you wait.

Whatever has been eating at her has clearly taken its toll on her, emotionally. You can’t remember ever seeing Victoria like this before. Not… emotional, or at least not so clearly wrung out. And you don’t know what to do for her to fix it.

A frown steals over your face, unseen by Victoria. Honestly, you don’t know her that well at all, do you? Not like you do Emma, or even Madison. You’ve really tried to keep out of some parts of her life. For a good reason, of course—you don’t want her thinking that you’re just some Glory Girl fangirl, there to sleep with a famous cape… though that is partially true, but it’s still not the kind of thing you want her thinking of—but it isn’t doing you much good now.

You really don’t know what’s making her feel so upset.

Damn it.

The minutes tick by slowly while you hold her. Ten, fifteen, twenty—neither of you move for a long time. You’re content to just sit there holding her, and it seems she’s content to be held, because she barely even wriggles in your arms. It’s a bit uncomfortable, really, but you’re very quickly growing used to these kinds of uncomfortable positions.

It feels nice to sit here like this. Homey. As much as you do like the library, you think you prefer having Victoria here, in your own space.

Neither of you stirs until nearly quarter to, over half an hour after her arrival. Even then, it’s just for Victoria to snake her hands around the arm not curled around her, then pull herself up slightly so she can look at you.
“Hi,” she says softly, quirking her lips up. You return the smile in kind, brushing your head forward slightly so you can kiss her on the corner of her mouth. She smiles a little wider, then turns her head to give you a more proper, albeit close-mouthed kiss. Then she settles back down onto the bed, mouth turning down again. “Thanks for that,” she adds, quieter this time. “I needed that, I think.”

You turn your head down to lay a dainty little kiss on her mouth, then her chin, causing her lips to turn up momentarily again, then break out into a wider smile, as though she’s unable to hold on to her dour mood in the face of your kisses. “Of course,” you say softly. “What’s wrong, Victoria?”

The wide smile that had broken out on her face falls somewhat at the reminder of her problem, turning her expression somewhat pensive again. “It’s…” She lets out a small sigh. “I’m just… trying to work out some things, you know? And it’s not working very well.”

You stroke her hair, giving her another quick kiss on the mouth before you respond. “If you need to talk about anything, I’m right here,” you murmur.

She burrows into your side again, as though seeking comfort. “That’s… thanks.” You can feel her mouth moving against you, as though she’s not sure whether to smile or frown at your words. Rude. “It’s… it’s a long story.” She exhales, then pulls back again from you. She’s moving entirely too much, in your opinion.

Nearly half a minute passes before you realize she won’t be continuing. You drop your head beside hers, giving her a small pout. “You can tell me,” you say, your voice so soft it’s almost a whisper.

Victoria shudders slightly in response, letting out a soft noise. “I will,” she murmurs. You wait a moment, then go to say something, but she continues just as you open your mouth to talk. “Just… you’re not the only person involved. I have to think about what to say.” She takes a deep, shaky breath. “I’ll… Saturday. We’ll talk on Saturday. Okay?”

Her voice has a questioning lilt by the end of her words, almost a nervous tone to it. That’s the only thing that stops the anxiety that surges into being in your gut at those words from consuming you. Still, you don’t reply for a long moment, long enough that Victoria actually lifts her head from you to look at you. She actually looks nervous.

“That’s fine,” you say eventually, your voice only slightly louder than before. That anxiety seethes in your gut. You try not to let your mind wander too far. You’ve read enough romance novels to know that when one person in a relationship wants to talk, it’s usually not a good thing. Of course, you don’t live in a romance novel, and you know they don’t reflect reality that much, but—

—well, nobody could blame you for thinking that she’s going to break up with you, given how your relationship with her started.

(But that’s fine, a small part of you whispers. She can think about breaking up with you all she wants. That doesn’t mean you have to let her.)

You close your eyes, fighting back a heavy sigh, and pull Victoria down into a more horizontal embrace. Her eyes widen as she topples down, and you feel a moment’s resistance as though she almost stopped you, but she falls with you in the end.

Great. As though you hadn’t had enough to worry about with Sophia and Shadow Stalker already.

You hide a pout in Victoria’s hair. It’s ridiculous to feel like this, you know that. You do know that.
You’re fairly sure that if Victoria was going to break up with you, she wouldn’t be over at your house, cuddling with you in your bed and accepting your silly kisses. There are a lot of things she could want to talk to you about—you’ve read a lot of romance fiction, but a lot of that has been trashy cape romance fiction, and there’s always the cliché ‘You’ve got to understand the risks’ speech. That could be it. Or she could want to introduce you to her family, or another talk about sex, or… there are a lot of things. It just doesn’t help you to stop feeling like she’s going to break up with you.

And you just really hope she doesn’t, because if she does, you’re not sure what you’ll do.

Victoria ends up not leaving until nearly ten to seven. You hadn’t protested much, enjoying cuddle time as you were, but as she had pointed out, it doesn’t take her that long to fly home when she’s on her own. Her forcefield protects her against most of the nastier effects of flying at high speeds, and she doesn’t have to worry about detouring around buildings.

Really, though, you think she just wanted to be cuddled some more. And you’re okay with that, which is why you didn’t argue when she didn’t leave at half past.

Unfortunately, her leaving did nothing to quell the anxiety in your gut. If anything, it only made it worse the longer you dwelled on it.

It’s hard not to dwell on it, though. Your thoughts keep circling back around to it the more you try to distract yourself with anything else—TV, books, even striking up a conversation with Dad over dinner doesn’t do it. It’s only when you’re sitting in the living room with Dad, curled up on the armchair and watching the evening news, that you remember that you’re supposed to be going to Boston with Amy tomorrow.

“Dad,” you say softly. He looks inquisitively over at you. “Is it okay if I go to Boston with Amy tomorrow? Her mom will be there too,” you add hastily. “We’re just going to a bookstore.”

He gives you a stern look. “I was wondering when you were going to bring that up,” he says. He doesn’t look unhappy, though. “Amy’s mother already called me about it. You shouldn’t wait until the last minute to tell me about these things, Taylor.”

Your fingers tighten around your legs, and you have to suppress the absurd urge to tell him to shut up. That’s—no, you’re not going to tell your own dad to shut up. He’s right. That’s the kind of thing he should know. “Sorry,” you mutter. You can’t help the slightly resentful tone that enters your voice, but you try and give him an apologetic smile so he knows you’re not angry with him. “I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

He stares at you for a moment, as though checking for something, then nods and relaxes a little. “You should keep those things in mind a little better, Taylor,” he says gently. “A trip to Boston isn’t a small thing. It’s not the kind of thing you can do on the spur of the moment, okay?” You nod, albeit still a little sullenly. “And yes, you can go. I’ve spoken to Carol—Amy’s mother—about the trip. I’ve got some money for you to buy some books—“

“I don’t need money,” you try to protest, but he just streamrolls over you.

“—and Carol will be picking you up from here at eight tomorrow,” he finishes. “And you do need money, Taylor. Books are expensive.” He looks down awkwardly now, the confidence from his
You stare at him. He’s—managed to pick up more work? But the council has been steadily cutting down on the funds allocated to the Dockworker’s Union for years. How did he manage that?

Finally, he looks up at you with a tight smile. At that expression, your questioning glance withers. Okay. It wasn’t a good negotiation then. At least it explains why he hasn’t had the time to leave you notes around the house or anything. Instead of asking, you unclench your arms from around your legs and stand, your legs a little wobbly from sitting in the chair for so long. Then you move over to him, and give him a hug. It takes him a moment, but he finally loosens, just a little, and wraps you in his arms in return.

Neither of you are having a good time lately, it seems.

By the time you head up to bed at nearly eleven, you’ve mostly managed to push back the issues of Sophia and Victoria. You’re barely even thinking about Dad’s work, as thorny an issue as that is for him.

You have something far more important to think about, after all. You have a date with Amy tomorrow! An actual, fun date!

Nobody could blame you for feeling a little giddy as you change into your pyjamas and slide into bed. This isn’t even a let’s-go-to-the-movies date, or a let’s-go-out-for-lunch date. Not that there’s anything wrong with either of them, but… you’re going to Boston!

You drift to sleep that night thinking of buildings that scrape the sky, concrete that rolls for miles, and a mousy girl with curly brown hair.
It might not have been the best idea to wait so long to go to sleep last night.

You’re determined to get a proper seven hours of sleep. Ordinarily, it doesn’t make much of a difference if you wake up an hour or so after your usual waking times, as that just means you’re up at seven instead of six or thereabouts, but most days you don’t have to be prepared to leave by seven thirty.

And, yes, okay, Dad had said that… Carol? had told him that she would be here at eight to pick you up, but some parents like to be early to this kind of thing, and you really don’t want to make a bad impression on Amy’s mother during the first date the two of you are having around her. That just seems like a bad idea.

That just doesn’t leave you very long. You hadn’t managed to fall asleep until half past eleven, as excited over your trip as you felt last night, so you don’t end up staggering your way out of bed and into the kitchen until nearly quarter to seven. And your hair is just so long that it won’t possibly be dry by half past. Ugh. Plus, you definitely don’t have enough time to go for your run before you shower.

Dad is still out in the kitchen when you walk out there. He raises an eyebrow at you as you make your way to the fridge, greeting you with a quiet, “Hello, Taylor.” You respond with a tired grunt and a nod as you dig around for anything for breakfast. There really isn’t much; it seems that Dad focused on buying dinner-foods this week. There’s a surprising amount of fresh vegetables and even two packets of raw chicken breasts in there, but somehow, the thought of slicing up raw capsicum or zucchini for breakfast doesn’t much appeal to you.

You dig around a little more, but there’s not really much of a choice. You’re not in the mood for jam this morning—it always makes you feel a little too giddy after a long car trip—so your only real choice is to take some of the slices of cheese wrapped in plastic. (Well, okay, technically you could have some thin porridge if you wanted to really stretch the milk out, but who are you, Oliver Twist?)

Once you’ve taken the bread out of the bread bin and set it within the toaster, Dad lets out a loud cough. You turn towards him, startled, but before you can ask him if he needs any cough medicines, he points towards a mug on the table. “I made you a cup earlier,” he says, blinking rapidly as if in shock at his own cough. “It’s still warm, if you want it.”

Huh. Usually, he doesn’t make coffee for you until you actually wander out into the kitchen. Then again, you usually aren’t heading on a trip to another city after breakfast either. “Thanks,” you reply out loud, giving him a small smile. He returns it along with a small nod, then returns to the newspaper in front of him. You can barely see the title from here—“DOWNTOWN BRAWL LEAVES DOZENS INJURED”. You tilt your head curiously, but give up on the idea of reading it after a moment. Dad doesn’t like reading those kinds of news stories out to you. You’ll just have to read it later. When you get home.

Behind you, the toaster makes a small thunk, alerting you that your bread has finished toasting. You start slightly, then hurry back to it. There’s nothing worse than cold toast, in your opinion. Except lukewarm coffee. Cold toast and lukewarm coffee. Yuck. You make a face as you quickly butter the bread and plate it up.
Dad gives you a friendly smile as you walk over and seat yourself at the table, though he doesn’t say anything for a moment. When he speaks, his voice is mild and soothing, the way an adult can only ever manage when they are talking to someone much younger than them. “Are you excited for your trip?”

You raise your eyebrows at him incredulously. “Of course,” you say, almost drawling your response. “I’m going to Boston.” With Amy! And her mother! What’s not to love?

He chuckles softly. “Yeah, I suppose that is pretty exciting.” He gestures at your coffee as he talks, as though urging you to drink it. “Your friend’s mother mentioned that she was taking you around to some bookstores in Boston. Do you have any plans for what you’re going to buy?”

“Kind of?” you hedge. Honestly, you haven’t put all that much thought into it, and you’re not sure how much you want to talk about the few vague plans you do have with him. And now that you’ve actually acknowledged that thought to yourself, you feel kind of bad. Not bad enough to talk about all your plans, though. “I was thinking about buying some cookbooks, maybe. And I might check to see if there’s been any new releases from authors I like recently.” You drum your fingers along the side of your plate, debating whether you want to say anything about some of your other plans. Probably not.

He still gives you an approving nod. “Good,” he says warmly. “I’ve transferred what I could over to your bank account, okay? Just make sure to check your bank account before you buy anything so you don’t overdraw.”

Well, that’s a little surprising. You know that he knows your bank account details, of course—he’d been with you and Mom when you’d gone in to get it created, and he’s the one that files your bank statements, though he respects your privacy enough not to look at what you spend your money on—but you’d just assumed he’d give you any money in cash. It is easier this way, though, you have to acknowledge.

Still, you have to fight back a grimace. He could have at least asked you before putting money into your bank account.

The absurdity of the thought hits you a moment later, and you mentally scoff at yourself. God, what a stupid thing to think.

You make a small sound of acknowledgement, then begin munching on your toast before it goes cold. The cheese is already rapidly cooling the food, so you can’t let it sit on your plate for too long.

Dad doesn’t stay for much longer, though he does make a point of walking around the table to where you’re sitting and pulling you into an awkward one-armed hug before he leaves. “Have fun in Boston, Taylor,” he murmurs above you, giving you a slightly anxious grin. “I’ll be working in the office all day, so if you need anything, just give me a call. Even if you need me to come and pick you up.”

It’s just Amy and Amy’s mother. You’re not sure what he’s imagining could possibly happen when you’re with the two of them, though you do appreciate the thought. You offer him a smile as you reply, “Okay. Thanks, Dad.” It’s a bit awkward to twist yourself so you can hug him as he moves to leave, but you manage to do it without causing yourself too many aches.

He doesn’t quite leave immediately, though. His keys are in the living room, and he has to backtrack
once into the kitchen with a sheepish smile to pull an apple out of the fridge. A midday snack? Hm.

And then, you’re alone. And it’s only seven. Ugh.

The last small bites of your breakfast don’t much appeal to you now. You briefly consider putting them away for later, but it’s toast, it doesn’t really last well. You just throw it out, though you feel a little guilty over wasting food like that, before heading upstairs to shower and change.

The question of what to wear is a complicated one. You don’t want to overdress, and not just because Amy and her mother might not dress up themselves, but neither do you want to look like a mess in front of them. Not that you really have fancy clothes, but you still have a lot of nice clothes now, thanks to Victoria.

You deliberate for a short while over exactly what you should wear, then. You’re not a jeans-and-t-shirt kind of girl, and those kinds of clothes don’t flatter you at all, but that’s really the only kind of casual clothes you know. You prefer skirts anyway, though usually on girls other than yourself.

Eventually, you narrow your choice down to a nice pair of relatively subtle flared pants, and either a blue or a dark red button-up shirt. You can’t decide between them, so you leave them spread out along your bed in case you manage to make up your mind while in the warm shower. The deliciously warm shower.

(You don’t end up being able to decide between them in the shower, so you have to resort to the simplest method of just flipping a coin. It lands on heads; red it is.)

And only once you’ve showered and dressed do you wander out to the kitchen again, making yourself a cooler cup of coffee than you normally drink. You don’t want to leave it half-drunk, but if you make it too hot, you might not be able to drink it before you have to go. It is… twenty to eight now, after all. So when the doorbell rings nearly ten minutes early, at seven fifty-two, nobody could begrudge you a bit of childish glee. You knew it was a good idea to be prepared to leave early!

Amy’s mother—Carol, you think Dad had called her—is waiting for you in front of the door, an expectant look on her face. You’re not trying to use your power on her, but there’s enough anxiousness and… anticipation? in her that you can feel it anyway, wrapped taut like wire around her. She moves smoothly through it, ignoring it like it isn’t there as she greets you with a strained smile and a small nod. “Good morning,” she says in greeting.

You look at her stupidly for a moment, only barely fighting back a blush as you try to formulate a response. Every time you see her, you’re taken aback by just how hot Amy’s mother is. “Um… hi.” You can’t fight back the blush at your own laconic response, though. Thankfully, the embarrassment jump-starts your brain a touch. “Did you want to come in, or-“ You cut yourself off, looking over at the car now idling in front of your house. Amy is sitting inside, though she isn’t looking over at you right then. “Or, um. I only need to get my jacket and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Okay.” Carol shifts herself slightly in place, rocking back slightly on her heels and settling back in a more comfortable position. “I’ll wait here.”

You nod, a little intimidated by the way she’s just standing there, then turn and hurry back inside. You’d left your jacket lying across your bed, so it only takes you a moment to dash back to your bedroom and pick it up, but you spend a moment patting it down to make sure you still have the rest of your things in there too. Your house key and your purse are both in there. One of these days, you should invest in a handbag. On the other hand, you don’t really carry that much around with you
most of the time.

And you’re getting distracted again. Shaking your head at your own silliness, you quickly pull your jacket on and head out towards the front door again, making sure everything is turned off behind you. No need to drive up the power bill unnecessarily.

Carol leads you over to her car, a sleek and slender vehicle that somehow looks even more expensive than Madison’s father’s car. It’s quieter than that one, too. You try to look around it as you climb in it, but you can’t see any distinctive markers that would tell you if this is a new model from your world, or a car imported from Earth Aleph. Amy has never told you much about her mother, but the impression you’ve always had from her is that her mother’s job is very profitable, so you could see her owning a car imported from another reality. Which just sounds ridiculous phrased like that.

Even the inside looks expensive, you discover as you open it up. There’s dozens of small lights on the dashboard, unlike Dad’s car, which only has a light that turns on when the car is low on gas or battery power. The seats are made of what you think might be genuine leather, and the whole car smells like pine, despite not having a little tree dangling from the mirror of the car.

Amy is sitting in the back seat as you climb in, the same as you, dressed in a light blue button-up shirt and dark, loose jeans. She gives you a wide smile, her cheeks reddening as she takes in your clothing, and you see her twitch slightly, an aborted hug. You give her a smile equally as wide as you climb in to the car, though you quickly give up on waving to her after you try to combine the action with climbing into the car when you slip and almost fall onto your face. Flushing, and hoping Carol didn’t notice your clumsiness, you just climb in and pout at Amy a little. Your girlfriend just chuckles silently to herself as she slides her hand over to the middle of the seat, running her fingers atop yours. “You look nice,” she whispers.

“So do you,” you whisper truthfully. You sneakily twist your hand around so you can grab hers in a surprise gesture as Carol climbs in, twisting the car’s key a little more. The smooth sound of jazz fills the car as the woman does up her seatbelt, then adjusts the rear-view mirror to check that both of you have your seatbelts on before she finally pulls out of the driveway.

The car is soon filled with the sounds of meaningless chatter between you and Amy. It always feels easy to talk to Amy, in a very similar way to how it always feels easy to talk to Madison. You’re not really talking about anything in particular, just drifting from topic to topic in the loose manner teenaged girls often do, when the dulcet tones of the radio announcer reach your ears.

“… and in other news, there was another skirmish between the forces of the Protectorate and the local group of villains, the Empire Eighty-Eight. The new body armour deployed by members of the Protectorate’s forces were put to commendable use as members of the organisation set about minimising collateral damage sustained through the attack.” Amy says something to you, her face turned to look out the window, but you can’t listen when a sudden burst of red-hot annoyance surges through Carol for just a moment, before she hurriedly fights it down, tamping it beneath her cool veneer of self-confidence. You stare at the woman, startled. “Unfortunately, the first respondents to the scene were unable to capture the aggressors. Members of the Parahuman Response Team reportedly suffered serious injuries, although our sources tell us that Velocity and Miss Militia are expected to make a full recovery soon.”

Your shock must show on your face, because when Amy turns after your short silence to look at you, she immediately sympathetically pats your hand. “Aww,” she coos. “What’s wrong, Taylor?”

“N-Nothing.” You stare at the radio, your thoughts whirling. “I was a little shocked by the news, I
guess.” The thought of Miss Militia being injured is a sobering one. She’s a superhero, of course she’s been injured before, but not… not often. And Velocity, too? He’s a speedster—he shouldn’t be sustaining injuries.

(You’re glad you only heard about this on the radio. If you’d had to see the injuries on Miss Militia, well. You’re not sure what you would have felt, but it would have been significantly less pleasant than the overwhelmed shock you’re feeling right now.)

Amy hesitates for a long moment, then gives you a small glum nod. “Yeah, it’s… not great,” she says quietly. “Everyone’s supposed to recover soon, though. Don’t worry about it.”

“That’s not it.” You let out a little sigh. “I’m not worried. It’s just…” You grimace, trying to find the words to explain what you’re feeling. “They’re… They… I’m not used to seeing them get hurt, I guess. The heroes, I mean.” Which doesn’t really convey what you’re feeling. You have seen them injured before, you’ve even seen them get in some pretty big fights before—you vaguely recall watching a video of Armsmaster and Miss Militia fighting off a bunch of Teeth members that had tried to set up in Brockton Bay a few years back.

You just feel… you don’t blame yourself, or anything like that. There’s nothing you could have done. Your vague plans for setting up a hero team are still a ways from being complete enough to do anything about, and it’s not like you can be expected to topple the entire Empire alone. You hadn’t even known there was a cape fight.

It’s just a little odd to realise just how disassociated you are from the cape scene of Brockton Bay.

Amy pats your hand again, giving you a small, sympathetic grimace. “Yeah,” she says quietly. “It sucks seeing heroes getting hurt.”

There’s silence in the car for a moment, broken only by the soft sounds of jazz emanating from the radio. Then, an unexpected voice pipes up from the front, accompanied by the smooth, gentle feeling of reassurance emanating forth from Carol. “I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” the woman says, her voice stiff. “It’s just a power play.”

Hurriedly, Amy speaks up, her voice higher pitched than normal. “That’s- that’s- thanks, Mom.” She deflates some, as though anger had drained out of her like helium from a punctured balloon. Then she turns deliberately back to stare out the window. “Mom’s a bit of an expert on that kind of stuff,” she says. She’s clearly attempting to sound nonchalant, but her voice is still too high for her to sound normal. You give her a concerned look, but before you can do much more than just squeeze her hand, Carol pipes up again and your attention is dragged back to her.

“The Empire’s capes are just striking back,” Amy’s mother says steadily. “They saw that the Protectorate’s forces had been dispatched to deal with another robbery by the Undersiders, and struck while they had the opportunity. It’s nothing to worry about. This happens all the time.”

Your mouth turns downwards. “Yeah,” you say, a little frustrated. “But they’re not usually injured by it, are they?”

“Not all the time,” Carol concedes. “It does happen occasionally, though. It’s nothing serious—well,” she amends hastily at your look of confusion, “I suppose the injuries are quite serious, but the situation isn’t. Nobody was killed, and members of the New Wave movement will help to keep the city stable while they recover.”

Amy rolls her eyes. “Yeah, sure they will,” she mutters sullenly.
“Hm.” You deliberately don’t say anything else, just lean back into your seat and think a moment. Carol is just a lawyer, so you can’t place too much stock in what she says, but what she said does make a lot of sense. It just doesn’t ring quite true, for some reason.

It doesn’t take too long to connect the dots in your mind and realise what Carol has missed. From what you’ve gathered during your research on their members, the Protectorate is already severely understaffed compared to the villainous presence in town; between the Empire and the Brotherhood, the Protectorate has been struggling to keep their presence from expanding, and from what you’ve seen at Winslow, they’re failing at that. If the Empire managed to take out two of the limited number of heroes, that’s only going to give them more room to expand for a while, before Miss Militia and Velocity are ready to help stop them again.

You frown unhappily. Great. That means Winslow is going to be even less safe for you now.

You might have to step up your plans for dealing with Rune. That might counter the effect of their spreading, if only a little. Preventing them from gaining more influence in one school probably won’t help much, but as Mom used to say when you helped her around the house, every little bit helps.

But it’s no use thinking about it now. You shake your head a little, trying to dislodge the troublesome thoughts, then turn determinedly to Amy, hoping to distract yourself from that morbid train of thought again.

“So, Amy, have you ever read Interview With The Vampire? I haven’t, but I’ve heard good things about it…”

Brockton Bay isn’t all that far from Boston. North America is a very large country, but New Hampshire is right beside Massachusetts, and the town of Brockton Bay is close to the southern border of New Hampshire. As the crow flies, it’s a little under a hundred miles between the two cities. It should take less than an hour and a half to drive between the two cities, but factoring in traffic, it takes you a little over two hours before Carol finally pulls up in a small carpark.

You look around, feeling fairly underwhelmed. This place… doesn’t really look anything like you’d imagined Boston would look. It looks even less impressive than Brockton Bay, which is an impressive feat.

You mustn’t have disguised your lack of enthusiasm about the town very well, because Amy sounds amused when she first speaks. “I think we forgot to tell Taylor we were coming here first.”

“Oh.” You can see Carol’s reflection blink in the rear-view mirror as she looks back at you. “Sorry.”

Amy rolls her eyes, giving you an unimpressed look at her mother’s reticence to expound any further. “We’re in Newton Highlands,” she explains, somehow sounding both annoyed and amused at the same time. “The town with that really big bookstore in it. It’s not in Boston itself, but I think we’re going to be going there after we’re done here.”

Huh. You’re pretty sure it was in Boston, but you were a lot younger when you last came here, and you’d mostly been overwhelmed by the sheer number of books. “Okay.” It doesn’t take much to accept what she’s saying. “I wonder why they don’t just set themselves up in Boston itself, though. I think they’d get a lot more customers if they did.”
It’s Carol who answers that one. “Maybe they would,” she says laconically, then falls silent for a moment, deliberating on something. “Boston is a very big city, and it’s still growing. With the Protectorate presence there, and the relatively low crime rate, it’s a good tourist destination, but it’s also undergoing a housing crisis right now.” She pauses, looking at you to make sure you’re still listening. “After Leviathan attacked New Hampshire, a lot of people were left homeless and scared of the Endbringer’s return. Thousands of people wanted to move to a bigger city, and Concord could only house so many, so most of them ended up moving to Boston. Housing prices shot up as a result, and the prices still haven’t stabilized.”

Huh. You look over to Amy, but she’s only giving her mother’s back a stunned look, for some reason. She’s not being much help, so you just cross your arms and think about it for a moment. So… there are more people who want houses than there are houses to be sold. “So… the opposite problem of Brockton Bay?” you venture. Brockton Bay has the opposite problem, you’re pretty sure—a lot of people died in Leviathan’s attack, but the property damage was surprisingly light. There’s a lot of empty housing there now, housing that just sits there unsold unless the owner sells it for a pittance.

“Exactly.” Carol gives you a smile you could almost call warm. You smile widely back, feeling absurdly proud of yourself for guessing right. “A store this size can’t afford to set up in Boston, because they’d pay more in rent than they could make from selling their books.”

You hum. That makes sense. The store is big; even from here, you can see that. You’ve never actually been to a football field, but from what you’ve seen of them when Dad watches the football, it’s not much smaller than one of them. That’s… the size of a lot of houses. If you had to pay rent for that much space, you’d probably be paying tens of thousands a month. And if housing costs are high in Boston… yes, you can see why you wouldn’t be paying that much.

You tuck that train of thought away in the corner of your mind so you can study it later. That’s actually very useful information. If housing costs are low in Brockton Bay, then it might be good to look into property there. You know, in case several hundred thousand dollars falls out of the sky and into your pockets.

Shaking your head at your own silliness, you unbuckle your seatbelt and get out of the car, Amy and Carol quickly following your example. You hurry over to stand beside Amy as she climbs to her feet, offering her a silly smile while her mother locks the car. Your hand twitches at your side, wanting to take her hand, until you finally stick it in your pocket. Not with her mother right there.

The bookstore really is enormous. That’s the first thing you notice when you step inside, and it seems to strike Amy as well by the way her steps falter for a moment. The store stretches ahead of you, almost as long as the entirety of the mall back home in Brockton Bay—although sadly, this bookstore is only a single story tall, compared to the three-storey mall there.

You bite your lip. This might take longer than you had thought.

Before you can grow too overwhelmed, Amy steps forth, brushing against your side. You instinctively lean into her. She’s warm, and her body is soft against yours, not bony at all. You take a deep breath, steadying yourself. She smells vaguely of apple and cinnamon.

“Where do you want to go first?” Amy asks softly. She smiles at you, barely visible from the corner of your eye until you turn your head to look at her.
You bump your hip against hers, returning the smile in kind and fighting the temptation to lean over and press a kiss against her cheek. Not that it really matters; by the cheeky grin her smile turns into, she seems to notice your sudden desire. Your cheeks heat up, and you quickly say, “I don’t know. Uh…”

It’s a good question. A store this size surely has thousands of books, maybe even tens of thousands. You’re pretty sure they’ll have a lot of books that are pertinent to your interests, but—as much as you might enjoy the thought of spending the rest of the day in here browsing the store’s book selection, you don’t know if Amy would be willing to do the same, and you’re fairly certain that her mother would not.

Amy thinks about it for a moment. “Maybe we could start over at the fiction section?” she asks, though there’s a doubtful tone in her voice. “Maybe we could find something interesting over there?”

You shrug half-heartedly. It’s as good a plan as any, really. Before either of you can take a step, though, Carol speaks up behind you. “I’m going to go and look through the gardening section,” she says disinterestedly. You get the feeling she’s trying not to sound disinterested, but it’s not working. “Come and find me when you’re done.” You stare at her as she wanders away, before Amy shakes her head beside you, drawing your attention back to her.

“Right,” you say, shaking your head. Out, inappropriate thoughts. You reach over and take Amy’s hand, now that Carol isn’t around, and begin marching through the store.

The warehouse itself might be well-designed, but what you quickly discover as you move through the store is that their classification system is not. You’d expected their fiction section to be neatly categorized, but it’s sorted more into haphazard categories that seem almost to resemble an online store’s browsable categories. Just passing by what seems to be the fictional romance section, you walk past no less than six separate categories; teen romance, adult romance, erotic romance, romance audiobooks, romance audio-visual materials (which seems to be just a fancy name for a DVD section, much to Amy’s consternation), and classical romance.

It’s tempting to stop in the erotic romance section, but then you imagine standing beside Amy, looking through the covers of erotic lesbian novels, and your cheeks flame red once again. One day, maybe, but you think you’d like to at least be able to kiss Amy whenever you want before you try to read lesbian porn with her.

Eventually, the two of you come to a stop in front of the classical fiction section. Your eyes wander past, but the only sections that seem to lie beyond your current position is the children’s book section, which clearly doesn’t hold very much interest to you—at least, until you remember Madison’s little brother. Actually, maybe you could stand to take a look through there. Except you don’t know what kind of books he likes to read. Damn it.

“Well, it’s as good a place to start as any.” Amy’s voice jars you from your thoughts, making you jump a little. She smirks again at you, causing you to pout a little at her, though you almost immediately reettle yourself by letting go of her hand, reaching an arm around her hip briefly and pulling her to rest against you. She lets out a small, startled noise, but before you can pull your hand away, she rests her own hand over yours and snuggles into your side, making a soft, contented sound.

Suddenly, your vague annoyance with the absurd size of the bookstore just completely fades away. “Come on,” you say, turning your head so you’re almost whispering directly into her ear. “Let’s see what they have.” Amy quickly snatches up a wheeled basket as the two of you pass a stack of them.
And so that’s what the two of you do for the next several hours. There’s a wide range of books—a huge range, really—but you’re more focused on the girl you have your arm wrapped around. It’s a liberating experience to be able to walk around with Amy like this. It’s just innocent enough that you think you can explain it off as just being thankful if Carol spots the two of you touching like this, but it’s decidedly romantic enough that you can’t help but give half the people you walk past a big, stupid grin as you go, as though silently telling them, "This is my girlfriend. My girlfriend!"

Not that the walk entirely distracts the two of you from the books around you. If anything, it gives you something to talk about as you wander around the store, occasionally browsing through the shelves or looking through the stacks that interest either of you. As it turns out, Amy hasn’t read Wuthering Heights, while you haven’t read either of the original Frankenstein or The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde; and it’s completely unnotable when the two of you simultaneously pull a copy of a book called Neverwhere from the shelves. Similarly, she doesn’t question it when you spend ten minutes searching through a stack of cookbooks for information on cooking on a budget, nor when you see a particularly interesting book on the history of unions; and you don’t question it when she stops for a book on literary theory.

Your luck doesn’t hold up quite so well when you spot a small, bundled series of magazines on fashion design, sold for two dollars apiece for nearly thirty dollars, though when you explain that it’s a present for Madison, you don’t feel any anger from her, and she doesn’t try to move away from you. Progress, at least of a kind.

Similarly, your luck doesn’t extend to your purchasing of a variety of materials in the teacher’s aisle, though you think that is more born of the fact that you pick up a large handful of materials besides just books—highlighters, pencils, notebooks, stick-it notes and graphing paper, alongside three small books on effective teaching methods and tutoring styles.

“I run tutoring sessions for some of my girls,” you tell her softly as she raises a questioning eyebrow. “Madison and Sophia. They’re good students, but they’re smart girls, and I think they could do better with a better teacher.”

Amy smiles at that, a soft smile. “They’re lucky to have you,” she says quietly, and leans up to place a kiss on your cheek. Your cheeks burn, but she just settles herself back down, a sad smile on her face. “It can be a big help to have someone tutor you sometimes.” Her tone is wistful enough that you slow down for a moment and spin her until you can give her a more proper hug. She stiffens violently for a second, then relaxes into it with a wry twist of her mouth. She’s tense for a minute, then you feel her beginning to slowly relax.

“I could help you with your studies,” you offer after a moment, stroking her sides. She shifts slightly against you, protesting the movements for a moment until your hands settle back against her back and she’s once again encircled in your arms. “If you tell me where you’re up to, at least.”

She shakes her head against your neck, though you feel her lips twist up into a happier smile. She doesn’t immediately turn down your offer, though. “I’ll think about it,” she says instead, snuggling against you. “Thanks.”

You nod, content to allow her to pull herself as tightly against you as she can for a moment. “Of course.” There are people around, but you can’t bring yourself to care much about them. Let them think what they will about you. Comforting Amy is more important, even if you’re not really sure why she’s suddenly feeling wistful. And it doesn’t seem like Amy minds, to you.
Indeed, Amy doesn’t seem to mind staying close to you like this at all, because a good ten minutes later, she’s still tucked tightly against you. Her breaths are steady and cool against your neck, where she’s currently tucked herself. All you can bring yourself to do is to slip your hands slightly under her shirt to press them against her naked skin, an act she feels as well, by the sudden gasp she lets out. She feels… really soft. And abruptly, you’re thankful that Amy can’t see your face right now, so she can’t ask you why you’re suddenly so embarrassed, though admittedly that’s probably the least embarrassing thing you can imagine her calling you out on. Nobody could blame you for imagining Amy naked.

“We should head back up to the counter.” Amy is speaking even softer than she was before, now, speaking the words directly against your neck. You shiver a little. The words almost feel like little kisses. “Do you have everything you wanted?”

There’s a lot of things you want, but very few of them are helpful right now. Tactfully, you refrain from mentioning them. And everyone calls you unsubtle. Ha. “I have everything I want right here,” you reply, leaning your cheek against the top of her head. You look down at the books in the basket sitting passively by Amy’s side. Okay, you probably could spend another few hours (or weeks) in here browsing their selection, but you don’t need anything. You’ve already found a small present for Madison, and you’ve bought yourself a selection of materials to help with tutoring, so you should be fine.

Amy just shifts against you a little, pressing closer for a moment before backing away again. “Good,” she says, finally pulling away a little so she can give you a heady smile while looking right at you. Your arms are still wrapped around her, so she can’t move completely away, but she doesn’t seem to mind, and you do enjoy being able to look at her face. “It’s nearly one, though. We should find Mom so we can get some lunch.”

You pout at her, turning her smile cheeky again. “But I don’t want to,” you whine. “I’m comfortable here.” You stroke up her spine as best you can with her shirt still on to emphasize your point, pouting even harder at her.

“Maybe you are,” she says agreeably, “but Mom won’t be. And,” she adds, poking at your arms slightly, “don’t think I don’t notice you feeling me up back there.” She doesn’t sound upset, though, and there’s a teasing smile on her face as she says the words, though you also notice a faint flush of red creeping up her cheeks. You wait, but she doesn’t say anything else, just stands there with her hands resting on your forearms. You hadn’t even felt her up at all, really. You’d only touched her back, you didn’t even touch her ass once.

Well, if she doesn’t tell you to stop, you’re not going to. Though she has asked you to go and pay for your books, so. Ugh. You reluctantly slide your arms away from her waist, though as a small act of protest, you don’t actually let your hands slip out from under her shirt until you’re stepping away. Her stomach is even softer than her back. “You didn’t mind,” you mumble petulantly.

Before your hands can slip away completely, Amy quickly reaches down and captures one of your hands in hers. She gives you a small smile, though you catch her gaze darting away anxiously around the store as she does. “I didn’t mind at all,” she admits, turning back for just a moment to poke her tongue out at you. “Come on, let’s go find Mom.”

Your bag is heavy once you’ve lifted it out of the small cart Carol had put it on as the three of you had left the bookstore. It’s not heavy enough that you struggle to lift it at all, but it’s heavy enough
that you can’t ignore the strain it puts on your arms. Maybe you should try and find some exercises to
do for your arms, you consider ruefully. Your legs aren’t tired at all, despite your traipsing around a
massive warehouse for nearly three and a half hours, but your arms are burning after carrying a bag of
books for thirty seconds.

Amy smirks at you when you let out a quiet sigh of relief after Carol takes your books and places
them in the trunk of her car. You pout at her, but it only makes her smile wider, a teasing edge to it.
She shuffles her way over to stand behind you, leaning close so she can whisper in your ear,
“Having a little trouble there, Taylor?”

You give her another glum pout. “There were so many books,” you mutter back, your petulant voice
almost as quiet as hers. “I couldn’t leave them there all alone. It’s not my fault they’re so heavy.”

That doesn’t make her stop smirking at you, but you like to imagine that it’s more of a fond smirk
than a teasing one now. She pats you on the hip after checking to make sure Carol isn’t watching
you, then takes a step away, instantly making you miss her presence again. “At least you found a few
you wanted,” she says. “I’m looking forward to reading Neverwhere. It sounds interesting.”

It actually does. “It sounds fun,” you reply. “You’ll have to tell me what you think of it.”

“Of course.” Amy hesitates, glancing over at Carol for a moment as though to make sure she’s out of
earshot. “You’ll have to…” She takes a deep breath, then looks off to the side. “Never mind. Mom,
where are we going for lunch?” You give her a questioning glance, but she determinedly ignores
your gaze. It couldn’t have been anything important, though you’re still feeling a little puzzled when
her mother turns around.

Carol’s mouth is drawn in a tight line. If you couldn’t feel the calm ebbing through her, you’d almost
mistake her expression for one of mild frustration. She thinks for a moment, glancing at you, then
back to the car. “I was thinking we’d stop in at the new McDonalds,” she says finally. “The one Eric
was telling us about.”

Amy’s mouth twists down. “McDonalds?” she complains. You actually like McDonalds, but by the
sound of it, Amy doesn’t, and you’re pretty sure you’re supposed to have an obligation to agree with
your girlfriend, so you just nod along as she talks. She doesn’t say anything more, though, so you’re
just left standing there nodding your head like a goof.

Her mother looks between the two of you, wrinkling her brow, before stepping back and drawing
her shoulders together defensively. Smooth, forced calm rolls through her, settling over small spikes
of frustration that spike merrily through her gut. “Is there somewhere else you’d like to go?” she
asks.

Almost immediately, Amy nods eagerly. “Yeah!” Her face lights up, enough warmth flowing
through her that you involuntarily turn to look towards her so you can see her a little better. “There’s
a café up near, um. I can show you where it is. I’ve been there before. They make really nice
lunches. And, um.” If you hadn’t turned to look at her, you’d miss the way her gaze flits towards
you, and the way she bites her lip briefly when she notices you watching her. “I think Taylor would
like it too.” Her mouth curls up into a shy, almost vulnerable smile.

Carol looks briefly at her, the irritation smoothing out almost immediately, melding into a smooth
core of acceptance. “Okay,” she says simply. “Just give me directions.”

The car isn’t the smallest, but Amy doesn’t let that serve as an excuse to stop her from climbing into
the middle of the back seat anyway, close enough to you that her leg presses against yours. As she explains, it’s the perfect seat for her to be able to see through the windscreen and tell her mother when to turn, not that you were complaining. You’re never going to complain if Amy wants to press herself against your side.

You take the opportunity to rest your hand on her thigh, perhaps just a little higher than is entirely appropriate with her mother in the front seat and clearly able to see what the two of you are doing. Amy squirms a little when you do, but after a moment, just spreads her legs slightly so you can slide your fingers down the inside of her thigh a little. Not too far, of course—you rather doubt you’d be able to get away with rubbing the top of her thighs, let alone their apex—but definitely high enough to make her squirm a little more.

The sights of Boston might have been interesting, but you’re more fascinated by the girl sitting beside you. This is a side of Amy you haven’t seen before; the mildly teasing, almost sexual side of her.

(Or, maybe, you have seen it before. Maybe it’s not about not having seen it before. Maybe it’s just about comfort. About the two of you coming to Boston—getting away from Brockton Bay, and the stresses of your lives there. Getting away from the memories of your bullying, of your Dad, of your Mom, of everything that’s gone wrong in the Bay. Letting down your hair, and snuggling with a girl who likes you for you in a place that smells of old paper and dust and the sweet vanilla scent of Amy.)

(But if that’s why you can relax, then why is Amy relaxing too?)

Amy doesn’t move your hand through the entire car trip, even though you daringly slide your fingers further up her thigh three times during the half-hour drive into Boston itself. Admittedly, after the first time you slid your fingers up her leg, she does place her arms over her legs, simultaneously giving you a makeshift shield from her mother’s view and making it much more difficult for you to really do anything. Still, you persevere.

You’re nearly finished writing your full name out on her leg when the car finally comes to a halt. You blink, looking up and away from Amy’s leg, as the car is shut off. You reluctantly pull your hand away, though any disappointment you might have felt is muted as you look towards Amy and see the same faint disappointment on her face.

As you undo your seatbelt and climb out of the car, you casually talk to Amy without twisting your neck to look at her. “So what is this place?” you ask.

She grunts, the sound followed by a loud sound as she pushes the car door closed behind her. You follow suit, and only then turn towards her again. “Arrioli’s,” she replies, casting a critical gaze over the building in front of you. “It was cleaner last time. Uh, it’s a small café. I was… The last time I was here, I went here for lunch. The owner knows me, kind of. They make really nice coffee, and I know you like your coffee.” She shoots a small smirk at you. The red has faded from her cheeks by now. Aw. “And their wraps are good.”

Carol perks up a little at that from her position behind Amy. “We should head in then,” she says. Her tone doesn’t reflect the low excitement thrumming around her. “Come on.” She doesn’t move immediately, though. She waits for the two of you to fall in step beside her before she moves to walk into the store.

Arrioli’s—Arrioli’s Fine Dining, as the store’s dark blue signage states proudly atop the entrance,
and across the board behind the counter—is a quite welcoming restaurant. There aren’t too many other people in here at this time of day. There’s a family sitting at a table on the far end of the building, a mother and a father sitting with two young children, a toddler and a baby. At the counter, a man with a patched jacket is eating a burger, and at a table beside a window, an asian woman in her early twenties is sipping at a cup of coffee and staring at a laptop with wild, frazzled hair.

It’s a neat environment, all in all. The faint scent of cinnamon and rich coffee wafts over you, soothing you and agitating you in equal measure. There’s a small TV hanging from a pillar in the middle of the room, showing some kind of soap opera—you catch a title sequence displaying the name *The Days of Our Lives* before you look away, refocusing your gaze on Amy.

“Hm.” Amy hums a little, looking around. “Where do you want to sit, Taylor?”

You quickly glance around, looking for a space you can sit without having to sit near the other people in here. “Uh, over there,” you reply, pointing at a small four-seat table beside the front door, hidden from the rest of the café by a small partition. It looks a little crowded, with two of the seats comprising of a low-rising L-shaped seat backed with leather.

Amy shrugs, then nods. “Sure.” She moves to lead you over to the table, but you quickly step in front of her with winning smile and gesture for her to follow you. She rolls her eyes, but doesn’t fight it, just follows behind you.

You slide in on the leather-backed seat, then shuffle over and pat the seat beside you. Amy rolls her eyes again, but this time with a little affectionate smile, as she squeezes herself into the seat beside you. You give her a wide smile as she comes to rest against you, the two of you pressed against each other, Amy’s warmth soaking into you. You’re close enough that you’re pretty sure you’d only need to turn your head and maybe dip forward a couple of inches to kiss.

A polite cough tears your attention away from Amy. Looking up, you see Carol standing there, giving the two of you an expectant look. “Do you want me to order lunch?” she asks tartly.

Amy flushes, the smile sliding off her face. Without a word, she reaches to the table and lifts a piece of paper you hadn’t noticed before—the café’s menu.

Without Amy’s smile to bolster your own, your smile quickly fades from your face as well. With a mournful expression, you reach over and take the other menu from the table, giving a hesitant glance up at Carol, who is just standing there patiently.

You try to read through the menu quickly. Thankfully, it’s not exactly a complex menu, carrying largely the standard items a café like it does; tea and coffee, sandwiches, muffins and cakes, and so on. There is indeed a wrap section, although it doesn’t have very much in it; two styles of chicken wraps, three styles of beef wraps (one with a spicy sauce), and a black bean wrap.

Beside you, Amy runs her finger down the menu, blinking thoughtfully. You lean over, tapping her on the shoulder. “Any recommendations?” you whisper.

She bites her lip. “I haven’t been here in a while,” she admits sheepishly, turning her head towards you—and away from her mother at the same time. “Not for about five months, actually. I usually just order a chicken wrap, though. Their chicken is really nice.” She looks down at the menu again, scanning it another time. “Maybe try the black bean wrap?” she asks uncertainly. “And you drink coffee, so… a cappuccino, maybe? I know you like the froth.”
“I do like froth,” you agree. You consider it for a moment, then nod. “Okay, sure.” You’ve never had a black bean wrap or anything like that, but you’re not really in the mood for chicken or meat right now.

Amy nods, hesitating only a moment before turning back to Carol, her posture guarded. “I- Can I have a spicy beef wrap?” There’s a small quaver in her voice as she talks, though it smooths out as she pushes on. “And a strawberry smoothie? And Taylor wanted, uh, a black bean wrap. And a cappuccino.”

Nodding her head in a businesslike manner, Carol turns towards you, her expectant expression turned almost bored. Sick nervousness lashes at the edges of your senses, trying to curl around the woman, as though trying to crush her; faint enough that you barely register it without actively using your powers, but also strong enough that you can feel it regardless. “Okay,” she says, no hint of any of those emotions in her voice. “How do you have your coffee, Taylor?”

“Uh—“ You scramble to think of a response, having been too caught up admiring Carol’s profile to follow the thread of the conversation. “Full cream, and two sugars.” You absently rub your stomach beneath the table, but, no, you’re not quite fat enough that you need to start drinking lite milk instead of full cream. Your jogging is doing enough to prevent the need for that, at least.

Carol nods, then turns without a word. Beside you, Amy lets out what almost sounds like a sound of relief before finally turning back to you. “Okay,” your girlfriend says, her mouth quirking up once again. “So, how are you liking Boston?”

Shrugging, you tilt your head back a little, then quickly sneak an arm around her waist—well, around her lower back, really, but it’s close enough to count, and low enough that Carol shouldn’t be able to see where your arm is beneath the table anyway. “It’s… nice.” You frown at how uncertain you sound. “There are a lot more people here than at home,” you try again.

Amy’s smile turns into a smirk, but she concedes the point with a nod. “There are,” she admits. Her tone turns wistful again. “I like it here. It’s more, I don’t know. It’s bigger.” Her smile fades, and she shuffles a little until she’s once again pressing against your side. “Brockton Bay is really… it’s a big town, but it feels small, you know?”

You hum. “Yeah,” you say vaguely. And it’s true, really. “I haven’t really seen much of Boston yet, though.”

“That’s true,” she concedes. A moment passes, and her brow scrunches in thought for a second, before smoothing back out, and she lays her head on your shoulder with a huff of laughter. “We’ll just have to come back at some point, then,” she murmurs. “So I can show you what I like about it.”

She jumps as you squeeze her hip a little, but relaxes again immediately after, though she does poke your leg in retaliation. Momentarily, you wish the seats were long enough that you could have Amy just turn around and lay her head in your lap so you could see her face without having to push her away from you. And that her mother wasn’t going to return any second now. “Sure,” is your reply, as you once again lift her shirt to place your hand against her bare skin. She shivers, but like she had in the bookstore earlier, she just accepts it after a moment. “I didn’t know you’d been here that often.”

In fact, going a step farther than accepting it, she reaches down and lays her hand over your own, gently caressing the back of your hand with her thumb. “I come here sometimes for work,” she mumbles. “Just every couple of months. I like to go exploring a bit while I’m here. It’s different from
You start drawing small circles on her hip, enjoying the shivers you draw from her as you do. “You’re repeating yourself,” you inform her. You can feel her pout, but before she can respond, you lay your cheek atop her head and continue talking. “I don’t leave Brockton Bay very much. Dad works a lot, and we can’t really afford to stay in a hotel for long. Grandma and Grandpa live in Texas, which is a bit too far away.” Tactfully, you don’t mention the various bigoted things Grandma had said about other people the last time you’d visited, when the conversation had invariably shifted to politics.

“We don’t travel very much either. It’s mostly just me.” Amy shifts against you, lifting her head to scan the café, causing you to automatically do the same. When neither of you see Carol, she relaxes again, laying her head back down. “We have gone to New York a couple of times, for Mom’s work, but after Dad… Well, we don’t do that much anymore. We’ve gone to Canada before too, but only once that I remember.”

You shift your hand down as far as you dare, teasing your fingers at the hem of Amy’s jeans. You don’t actually try to slip your fingers beneath the waistband of her pants, but she startles anyway, hissing slightly—though, interestingly, she doesn’t push your hand away. Hm. “You’ve gone to Canada before?” you ask, voice mild. “That must have been nice.”

She makes a movement that you think was intended to be a shrug, but she’s still startled from you moving your hand, and she just ends up bumping her head directly against your shoulderblade. “Ow,” she pouts. You pat her head sympathetically with your free hand. “Yeah, I guess. It was a while ago. I was only eight at the time, so I don’t really remember much, and it was in the middle of winter. Mostly, it was really cold. And Dad wouldn’t let me go ice-skating.” She laughs quietly. “The ice was too thin on the lakes, he said. I thought he was just being a worrywart, but I couldn’t get out of the hotel to go down and test it for myself.”

“Ice-skating is fun.” You nibble at your lip, considering. Maybe you could get away with slipping a finger under Amy’s waistband. But then, your hand is only at the side of her waist, not at the front, where you could actually do something fun enough to justify making her uncomfortable. It’s probably best to leave your hand where it is. You’ve pushed your luck far enough for today anyway, you think. “I used to fall down a lot when I tried, though, back when Pollet’s was still open. I can be really awkward sometimes,” you laugh softly.

Amy nuzzles your neck, the movement dislodging enough of her hair to cause it to cascade down your front. Almost unconsciously, you reach up and begin stroking your hands through it. “I was never very good at it.” She reaches up with the hand not covering your own, a move that looks awkward even from here, and pulls her hair aside quickly to peer around. She doesn’t seem inclined to adjust her posture at all, though, and evidently sees nobody, because she lets her hair fall back and settles back down. When she speaks again, her voice is forcibly casual. “We could go to the rink back in town. There’s a new one there that opened last year. They offer a couples discount, if your other girlfriends wouldn’t mind?”

Huh. You didn’t know another rink had opened. Then again, you’d been avoiding town as much as possible by that point. “Nobody will mind,” you reassure her. She nods, though not very confidently. “If you’d like to go, then we can go. I’m pretty busy, but we can find a time that works.” “Okay.” Amy manages to shrug properly this time, completely avoiding hitting her head. “Or we can do something else. I don’t mind.” You can’t see her, but you get the impression she’s smiling.

Before you can respond, the loud sound of a cup jangling on a metal platter echoes from outside your
little partitioned area. Amy hurriedly pulls herself off your shoulder and straightens, though there’s only so much she can do when you have her pulled against your side—and, to your credit, she doesn’t seem inclined to try and pull away, rather than just make her posture less intimate.

Carol makes her way around the partition a few seconds later, bearing in her arms a large circular platter, atop which is piled three wraps covered in aluminium foil and three large drinks. She doesn’t look at either of you, concentrating on placing her feet appropriately, until she’s standing in front of the table and has placed the platter on the table. Finally, she looks down at the two of you with a hint of a smile on her face.

“Enjoy,” she says neutrally as she pulls out one of the chairs across from the two of you.

Well. Perhaps you can’t enjoy the same intimacy with Amy while her mother is sitting across from you as you were before, but this is still a pleasant way to have lunch. And it’s quite a pleasant lunch. You’ve never had a black bean wrap before, but contrary to what you’d assumed from the name, it’s not literally a pile of boiled beans inside a wrap. It’s actually got quite a few different ingredients in it; you can taste lettuce, carrot and corn immediately, and there’s something mildly spicy in there as well.

Amy makes a face after her first bite of her wrap. You give her the ghost of a smirk around a mouthful of your wrap, then quickly swallow it so you can taunt her with, “Too spicy, Amy?”

She gives you a sullen look, but she doesn’t respond—can’t respond—until she takes a big mouthful of her drink and swallows it. Then she pouts at you. “There was a lot of jalapeno in that,” she protests. “I can hold my spicy food, it was just a lot spicier than I expected!”

You continue to smirk at her. “Sure you can,” you say, raising your eyebrows in what you really hope is a taunting expression. “I’ll have to keep this in mind, I think.” You cackle a little, imagining it.

Amy’s mouth sets into a stubborn, determined line. “You try a bite then,” she says darkly, though there’s a slight smirk to her face as well. Your own smile instantly disappears. Oh dear. “Come on, Taylor. It’s not that spicy, right?”

You eye the wrap with a measure of trepidation. Damn it. Why do you ever open your mouth? “I…” And you can’t back down now, at least not without conceding the argument to Amy. Damn it. You look up at her, as though pleading for mercy, but she just stares back down at you, unyielding. The wrap lies before you, your doom proffered. “Okay,” you whimper.

Across the table, unseen by either of you, Carol just rolls her eyes and lets out an amused sigh.

You take the wrap from Amy, holding it uncertainly in front of your face. Teasing Amy like this was a bad idea. You’re pretty sure she’s talked about enjoying spicy food before, and regardless, despite what you might claim to other people, you’re not very good with spicy foods yourself. There’s only so long you can delay taking a bite with Amy staring unflinchingly at you, though. You let out a mournful noise, then finally take a bite of it from the same corner Amy had.

It’s spicy enough to make your eyes water, and you immediately hold the wrap out for her to take it back. You struggle to chew it, and by the way Amy’s smirk is growing wider, you’re pretty sure she can tell. But still, you persevere, managing not to spit it out all over the table in an effort to relieve your mouth of the burning sensation. You even manage to delay reaching for your coffee to take deep mouthfuls until after you’ve swallowed the mouthful of the wrap.
Amy leans her arms on the table and rests her chin in her hands, giving you the widest smile you’ve seen her make to date. “Too spicy, Taylor?” she asks, her voice thick with glee. You can only offer her a wide-eyed mournful look as you hold your coffee up, taking sips of it and swishing the liquid around in your mouth in a doomed effort to try and relieve the burning. Across the table, even Carol is giving you an amused look.

That wrap is spicy. You let out a pathetic little whine, the only sound you can make. Amy continues to look proud of herself for a few moments, before finally letting out a quiet giggle and leaning over to give you a hug. “There, there,” she says, still fighting back laughter. “I did tell you it was spicy.”

You nod miserably, still sipping at your coffee. The burning is slowly receding, although you’re not sure if the coffee is actually helping or just spreading the spices over your tongue. Still, either way, you haven’t recovered quickly enough to respond with anything except another aggravated pout, which only draws more soft giggles from Amy.

Not that you mind. Amy’s laugh is really cute.

The next couple of hours pass in a blur. After finishing your lunch—or as much of it as you could; although the burning in your mouth had subsided after a while, they had filled those wraps to the brim, and a guilty glance at the menu had shown that Carol had indeed paid a suitable amount for such an exorbitant amount of food—she bundles the two of you back in the car and drives you to a strip mall, a good eighteen minutes away from the café.

The first three bookstores Carol takes you two are a disappointment, insofar as you’re willing to call any bookstore a disappointment. You can feel her own disappointment at the meagre selection provided, as well, although you’re not sure why she’s feeling so disappointed when she spends most of her time waiting by the counter and perusing each store’s collection of trinkets. She only makes a token attempt at browsing the store’s wares in the second store you go to, and gives that up quickly enough when she finds the store’s selection of self-help books to be quite lacking. You think.

It’s nearing four thirty when the three of you approach the final bookstore in this particular strip mall. You can only note the store’s opening hours glumly; 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m is embossed upon the door in peeling letters, Monday to Saturday, and it closes at noon on Sundays. The same has applied to most of the stores you’ve bothered to look at, of which there have been quite a few.

And sure enough, Carol confirms your thoughts. “This will have to be the last one we visit today,” she says, her voice rich and smooth. She actually does feel a little disappointed, though no traces of the emotion have made their way to her face.

Amy grimaces, but nods. “I’m going to go and see if they have anything in their historical section.” You glance around, grimacing. The historical section is at the far end of the store, far removed from the fiction section. Seeing your grimace, Amy laughs softly, patting you on the arm. “You don’t have to come with me. We’re not going to be here for long, and we can always talk during the car trip.”

“I’ll come,” you protest, but even as you argue you’re not really sure why you’re arguing. You don’t have an overbearing interest in history, and particularly not right now, given how much study you’re going to be doing on the topic for Sophia in the near future.

Amy must have caught on to your reluctance, because she just pats you on the arm again. “No, it’s
fine,” she repeats firmly. “I’m not really looking at anything that interesting anyway, I’ve just been a bit curious about some Renaissance scholars since my homework mentioned them.”

You grimace. Now you really just want to go with her, but she’s making such a big deal about it that you can’t argue without making such a big deal of it that her mother might overhear. Instead, you let out a mighty sigh. “Fine,” you grumble. “I’ll just be over here if you need me, okay?” She raises her eyebrows. “Okay,” she says, though her eyes soften after a moment as she searches your face. “Okay,” she repeats, softer this time. “Thanks.” And with that, she turns and begins moving over to the non-fiction section.

You drag your eyes away after a moment—her jeans aren’t the tightest, but they still do a lot to emphasize her figure, and you never really get much of a chance to enjoy it with her always following you around—and move over to the fiction section, still feeling a little disgruntled. It’s completely irrational, you know. You do know that. It’s just still annoying to not be around her on your date with her.

Still, you have no interest in the Renaissance outside of school assignments, so however unjustly annoyed you feel, it’s not enough to actually drag yourself over to stand by her side for the next half an hour while she browses books on the topic. Instead, you begin looking aimlessly through the books stacked on the shelf in front of you.

Your sulk lasts for a good three and a half minutes before someone coughs by your side, dragging your attention over to them. Carol is standing beside you, a bemused look on her face as she glances between Amy and yourself. She waits for a moment, her mouth tightening as thin strands of curiosity drape themselves over her, before she turns to look at the same shelf as you.

Seconds pass, and you can see—almost physically, though in reality through the edges of your power—Carol gathering herself to try and speak. A spark of worry emerges in your gut—shit; did she see something that would make her notice what’s between you and Amy?—but before it can grow large enough to worry about, she shakes her head with a groan, barbed wires of irritation winding themselves in around the curiosity she’s wearing like a cloak. Then she looks directly at you, trying to affect a casual air. “Have you found anything interesting?”

You give her a small, confused smile. “Um, not really,” you reply, looking back down at the book in your hands. You haven’t even turned to read the blurb on the back, but The Amulet of Samarkand isn’t a title that inspires much confidence in you. It might still surprise you, you guess. “Not in here, at least. That first store we went to had a lot of really interesting books, though.”

She nods, glancing over at Amy. “It did have quite a broad collection,” she says. Irritation tightens around her, making you feel almost uneasy enough to want to take a step backwards. It’s sharp, vicious enough now that you almost do despite how rude it would seem, except that none of the pointed barbs are facing you; they’re all facing inwards, towards herself. Even from here, it doesn’t feel pleasant. A moment passes as she turns back to the shelves in front of the two of you, then she speaks again. “Amy hasn’t told me very much about you.”

Tilting your head, you give her a confused nod. You’re not sure if she’s actually looking at you or not—her emotions are wrapped tightly enough that all you can feel are the strands of her curiosity, and the barbs of irritation choking the air around her—so you try to think of something. “There’s… not really much to say,” you finally say sheepishly.

She flashes you something you think is meant to be a reassuring smile. Honestly, it’s hard to tell. Some of the irritation bled from the air around her at your answer, but there’s still enough of it there
that it’s screaming out to your power. It’s hard to concentrate on anything else. “I’m sure that’s not true,” she says quietly. Her eyes are studying you, causing that nervousness to return to your gut, a writhing ball causing you to feel faintly ill. What does she want?

You hesitate, trying to think. You’re really not sure what you’re supposed to say here. You’ve already answered her. There’s really not that much to say. You’re just an average high school girl, if one who’s done a little more than the assigned schoolwork, so far as anyone around you knows.

Before you can work yourself completely up into a tizzy, Carol offers you another small smile as though she has sensed your nervousness. She relaxes, somehow. The brambles around her darken for a moment before she reins them in, forcing them back down. They’re not gone, not completely, but you can feel the pressure she’s putting on them so they don’t choke her again.

Silence stretches between the two of you for a long minute. Without the spectre of her irritation looming over you, the nervousness fades, but you’re still not quite sure what she expects you to say here.

Finally, her mouth twists down into a grimace as she twists her head away from you for a moment. Then she lets out a loud sigh, one obviously intended for you to hear. “Sorry,” she murmurs, a wry twist to her mouth as she turns back to you again. You’re not sure what she’s apologizing for, but you nod anyway. She continues on, picking her words carefully. “Amy… doesn’t bring many people home. I’m curious. That’s all.”

Understanding dawns on you. Oh. That’s perfectly normal, then. Your shoulders relax a little. “Oh,” you breathe. “Well, there’s still not much to know.” You shrug, your face heating a little. “I volunteer at the clinic sometimes. I met Amy there, but you probably know that already. Um.” You can only shrug feebly again. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Hm.” She runs her eyes over you doubtfully. “Okay. How often do you volunteer at the clinic?”

Her questions follow similar lines. Why do you volunteer at the clinic? Because you wanted an extracurricular activity after school hours. What school do you attend? Winslow High. What subjects are you studying? And so on, so forth.

It seems odd, until a thought strikes you, and the only thing you can do is giggle internally. She’s questioning you like a lawyer. You know she’s a lawyer, of course; Amy has mentioned that before, though you still don’t know what kind of lawyer she is (“A criminal lawyer, I think?” Amy had replied nervously. “I don’t think she handles civil cases, at least.”) or what kind of cases she handles.

You’ve seen people act like this before. Back when Mom was still alive, she was always uncomfortable when meeting new people. She didn’t know how to act around them, so she would revert back into what you used to fondly call “teacher mode”—someone with a strict, no-nonsense attitude and always led the conversation. It was nothing like she acted at home.

It takes an effort to not physically shake your head as you mentally do so. Okay, sinking into thoughts about Mom is not going to be helpful right now. Refocusing on Amy’s mother, you offer her a small, reassuring grin. You don’t know why Carol feels so uncomfortable, but now that you understand why she’s acting so stiffly, it’s actually a little charming.

Of course, understanding why she’s so nervous doesn’t actually help to make the conversation flow any smoother. At least it settles the nervousness in your stomach.
By the time the clock on the wall strikes five, you’re not sure if the woman is satisfied or not. It’s hard to read her, even with your power; she holds a tight grip on most of her emotions, and you’re not quite willing to actively use your power to detangle her emotions when you’re on a date with her daughter. Maybe next time.

Still, if nothing else, she knows a little more about you now. Nothing about your powers, of course, and definitely nothing about your girls—the one time she’d asked about your relationship status, you’d quickly steered the conversation away from the topic, drawing only a momentary self-satisfied smile from her. She knows that you’ve worked ahead in school now, and that you’ve been studying business in your own time, though you hadn’t told her why; and she knows that you’ve been scoring well on your homework, which was something she had been strangely insistent on knowing.

All in all, it had been a strange, stilted conversation, though charming in its own way. Just like Carol herself.

The drive out of Boston takes longer than the drive in, which had already taken a substantial length of time. That probably has something to do with the fact that you have to drive through the city’s traffic itself now, while you’d gone to an outlying city on your way in, though knowing that doesn’t actually help to make the drive go any faster.

Not that that’s a bad thing. You don’t want your date to be over.

Amy is sitting in the middle seat again, close enough that you’re able to feel her hair tickling your neck from where she’s sitting. You didn’t quite dare to start running your fingers up her leg again, not so close to the time you’d have to say goodbye, but she had been quite content to allow you to place your hand on her knee and draw small hearts over it with your finger. A good trade-off.

Nobody speaks during the drive home, just allowing the soft crooning of the local radio station’s jazz night to fill the silence around the three of you as you hold your girlfriend. After about fifteen minutes in the car, you do move your hands so you can wrap an arm around Amy’s shoulders and play with her hair, but that’s all the movement any of you make.

Unfortunately, nothing good can last forever. The drive back to your house is longer than the drive in, but eventually, you recognize the streets of Brockton Bay through the car’s windows, the housefronts illuminated by streetlights and the occasional window not covered by curtains. From there, it’s scarcely ten minutes before the car rolls to a stop in front of your house.

“I guess we’re here.” Amy looks morose as she speaks, her eyes cast down to her lap as she fiddles with the hand still drawing small shapes on her knee. “Thanks for coming along, Taylor. I had a really good time today.” She squeezes your hand as she says it, tilting her head up to give you a small smile.

“Oh course.” You hesitate, glancing towards Carol. You don’t want to call it a date in front of her, but that means you’re going to have to phrase this carefully. “It was really nice. We should do it again some time.” You bite your lip, studying her face. “I’ll find out about that ice skating rink,” you promise her. “I’ll let you know soon, okay?”

She squeezes your hand again, her smile growing wider now, somehow more genuine. “That would be great,” she murmurs. Then your eyes widen and your arm slips from her shoulders as she leans over and presses a kiss not quite on your lips, a little to the left. She studies your face for a moment,
taking in your wide eyes and the way your hand is now squeezing her knee, then she leans in again. This time, she doesn’t miss.

She’s wearing lip gloss, you realise dimly, in some small part of your brain that isn’t being overwhelmed by the fact that she’s actually kissing you in her mother’s car. Apricot flavoured lip gloss.

She pulls back after a moment, red flushing up her cheeks and her hand squeezing tightly against your own. You stare back at her with wide eyes as she gives you a self-satisfied smile, then uncurls her hand from the hand you’re still squeezing her knee with and pats your knee. “You should grab your books before you go inside,” she murmurs. “I’ll message you later, okay?”

You manage to nod your head, though you’re still stunned. You—you really hadn’t expected her to kiss you then. To kiss you. In front of her mother. “Okay,” you murmur vaguely. Still, you just sit there staring at her with a dopey expression for a few more moments before she giggles quietly and leans over to open your door.

The cool breeze from outside wakes you up enough to remind you to climb out, casting a wild glance at Carol. She’s staring out of her window, studiously avoiding looking at either of the two of you, although after you finish climbing to your feet outside, the car’s trunk opens with a soft click. Still, you don’t feel any seething resentment or hot disdain burst forth from her, so… she probably won’t murder you for kissing her daughter?

Your bag of books is just as heavy as it was before. You have to heft it up to your chest before you can manage to reach awkwardly up with one hand to close it, which at least frees up your hands enough that you can wave goodbye to Amy as Carol starts the car up again. She waves back, her cheeks still red as she slides into the seat you’d just been occupying and does up her seatbelt again, refusing to look directly at her mother.

Then, with a low purr, their car peels away, and you begin your trek inside.

Thankfully, Dad is tired from work today. He greets you well enough, and kindly carries your books up to your bedroom easily enough once he spots you struggling to walk through the house with them, but it’s obvious to both of you that he’s too tired to inquire much more about your day than to ask how it went.

Which is good, because now that your onrush of excitement has faded—now that the date itself is over, and your thoughts are no longer consumed by thoughts of Boston and Amy—you’re reminded quickly of the unpleasant things you have facing you ahead.

Or, more specifically, one unpleasant thing; your date with Sophia tomorrow. You’ve been putting it off, first because you were busy through the week, and now because of the revelation as to her possible identity as Shadow Stalker.

You can’t put it off forever, though. And despite the headache it’s causing you, you’re not willing to give up on a date with her. It wasn’t easy to secure a date with her, and putting it off without a legitimate excuse to offer her is just going to ruin any future chances you have with her.

You’re still consumed by thoughts of the upcoming date by the time you fall into bed, at the relatively early hour of nine. You didn’t get much sleep last night, and you’re going to have a
stressful couple of days coming up, you think. It’s probably going to be best to sleep while you can.
Waking up at six doesn’t feel quite as awful as it normally does. It’s still cold, but it doesn’t feel as cold as it did just a couple of weeks ago, and for once your head doesn’t feel foggy and clouded by sleep. It’s amazing what just a couple of hours of extra sleep does for you.

You luxuriate in the feeling for a while before getting out of bed, just enjoying how soft your mattress is and how warm it is beneath your blanket. It’s not so warm for your face, but you discovered when you were a kid that if you turn around and bury your face in your pillows it doesn’t get too cold. Your hair keeps the back of your head and your neck nice and warm, and the rest of you is covered by your deliciously warm beddings. It’s the perfect environment to send good morning texts from.

If it were up to you, you might have just stayed in bed for the rest of the day, basking in the warmth and softness of your bed. Unfortunately, you do have responsibilities today, and you can’t afford to stay in bed for too long. Still, fifteen minutes can’t hurt.

Finally, you climb out of bed with a morose sigh and move over to your dresser. You haven’t gone running in a while, and you know that it’s going to be easy for you to slip out of the habit of going for a run for a while yet. You should keep pushing yourself before you break that habit.

At least jogging warms you up after a while. The first ten minutes on a cold day like today are always the worst; your fingers and nose freeze almost immediately, to the point it’s almost painful to feel a chill breeze against them, and it’s almost painful to draw a breath. Still, it doesn’t take too long for your body to warm up, and by the time you’ve circled your block twice, you’re almost sweating already.

There’s something relaxing in the act of jogging. It’s not runner’s high, you know that much—you’re not pushing yourself hard enough to feel that, and you don’t really want to. There’s just something kind of… rhythmic about the act of jogging. Left, right, left, right, left right. Inhale, exhale. You’re not always the kind of person who enjoys having everything follow a rhythm, but there’s something that feels really nice about having at least one thing you do a day that does.

Your run goes on a little longer than usual. By the time you head inside, Dad is already up and moving around in the kitchen. You glance at the clock as you move past—it reads seven forty-five. You’d been jogging for nearly an hour and a half, and your legs don’t even ache more than usual.

You don’t move immediately for the shower, though. Instead, you sit down on the edge of your bed and pull your phone over to you, giving it a small frown. You’re not out of breath any more, since you’d walked the last couple of blocks home so you wouldn’t pull a muscle in your leg, but somehow you still, well. You’d just prefer to ask Sophia out by text, somehow.

It’s a short message, very to-the-point; Would you like to go out for lunch at 12 today? There’s a restaurant in town we could meet up at. Then you move to toss your phone aside, only to pause and frown some more. Okay, you might not feel quite up to asking Sophia out for lunch via an actual phone call, but—no, you should at least keep the phone out so you can see when she replies. You’re not a coward, you’re just… well.

Trying your best not to think too much more about the text, you get up again and walk over to your dresser for the second time today. It’s time to figure out what to wear today.
You end up pulling two outfits from your dresser this time; a more casual outfit, comprised of your most comfortable pants (a pair of soft, warm pants Victoria had bought for you) and a simple button-up t-shirt, and a nicer outfit with a shirt that stretches down to cover your wrists. Somehow, you doubt you’re going to want to be dressed up like that after you’re finished with your date today.

The shower spray cools your head a little. Well, it cools all of you—did Dad bother to leave you any hot water this morning?—but it does a more effective job of calming you down, as it normally does. Between the soothing rhythm of jogging and the calm relaxation of standing under warm water—well, tepid, but the point stands—your nerves settle a little, and you’re able to think things through more rationally.

There’s no reason to be as nervous as you are about this date with Sophia. Okay, yes, she did bully you for a very long time, and that’s a good reason to be nervous, but you’re fairly certain she’s not going to start that up again. And you can always make sure of that if she tries. And you’re half-convinced that she’s a part-time superhero in Shadow Stalker, but… you have no proof of that one.

And really; away from the immediacy of feeling Sophia’s emotions flowing from the superheroine, and without the hurt generated by the thought of one of your heroes getting away with bullying you… okay, without some of the hurt generated by that thought, it doesn’t seem quite so bad.

The cool spray of the shower is relaxing enough that you might have stayed in it until the water ran completely cold—easily half an hour of showering, by your reckoning—if your phone didn’t go off. As it is, you let out a small sound of surprise, thankfully swallowed by the sound of the shower, and hurriedly turn the shower off so you can reach it before the call rings through.

Unsurprisingly, your breathing is unsteady when you answer. “Yes, hello?”

You didn’t even have time to look at the caller ID, but somehow you’re not really all that surprised when you hear Charlotte’s voice on the other end. “Hi,” she says uncertainly. “D-Did I call at a bad time?”

“No,” you lie glibly. “I just got out of the shower.” Technically, it’s true, and it’d only make her feel bad if she knew how she’d made you scramble to get out of it in time. She might hold some views you disagree with… quite fundamentally, but that doesn’t mean you should deliberately make her feel bad. That won’t do a thing to change her views anyway. “How are you?”

“U-Um.” She sounds flustered for some reason as she replies. “I’m, I’m good. Just a little bored, and you, um. You said I could call you if I wanted to talk, or anything. S… So. How are you?”

Your hands are still covered in water, and you’re kind of worried that if you keep holding your phone like this you’re going to damage it. Luckily, you remember how to turn it on to speakerphone from the last time Charlotte called. “I’m good,” you reply after you spend a moment turning it on, speaking louder so she can still hear you as you place it on the edge of the bathroom sink. “What are you up to?”

“Not much. Um.” You can hear the sound of shifting sheets on her end of the phone, as though she’s shifting around in bed. You bite your lip at that mental image. “We’re coming back to Brockton Bay soon. I’m just up here in my bedroom again. Everyone is downstairs watching old movies, and they’re kind of boring—the movies, I mean, not my family—so I was hoping you wouldn’t mind, um, talking with me for a while.”
You pull a towel from the towel rack and begin drying yourself off before you answer. “That’s sweet,” you answer distractedly. “I can talk for a while if you want. Just give me a second, I need to get dressed.” You think you can hear her making a sound on the other end of the phone at that, but it’s too soft for you to decipher it, so you mentally shrug and move on.

You pick up your shirt, biting your lip. The thought of staying naked is still just as appealing as it was the last time Charlotte had called. There’s an illicit thrill in the thought of talking to Charlotte in the nude, knowing she has no idea. The only thing that stops you is that it’s cold, and it’ll hurt your wrists if you try to lay under your blankets and hold your phone to your ear at the same time.

… But then, you don’t need to stay out of bed. You’re not going anywhere until at least eleven, and Dad is preparing to go to work, so you should be safe. It might be uncomfortable to try and lay under your blankets like that, but really, you only need to wear a shirt to stay warm if you just sit on your bed and pull your blankets over your lap.

It’s a tempting idea. A very tempting idea. The only thing that stops you is that, well; if you’re going to do something like that, the thrill of the thought of Charlotte knowing that you’re lying there pantsless is hotter than the thrill of her not knowing, and you’d rather not spoil that for yourself.

Instead, you compromise. Dressing in just a shirt and panties is fine, right? And this way you can still feel how smooth your sheets are on your legs. It’s a win-win for everyone involved, or would be if Charlotte knew.

The phone is silent when you finally move back and pick it up. You give it an uncertain look. “Are you still there, Charlotte?” you ask.

“I-I’m here!” She all but shrieks the words into the phone. “S-Sorry! I was just, um, I was thinking about—some stuff! Um!” You raise your eyebrows at her tone, though there’s really no point to the action. “Um. Sorry. Yes, I’m here.”

“Are you okay?” you ask, feeling a little concerned. She’s acting very strangely.

She hesitates, hissing a breath so loudly you can hear it from here. “Yes, I’m fine,” she says after a moment, sounding unsure of herself. “Sorry. Um, so what have you been up to since we talked last?”

Now that you’re fully dressed, you peek your head out of the bathroom door, allowing the steam from the shower to spill out into the hall as you do. Dad isn’t there, so you quickly patter over to your room, talking as you go. “Not much,” you say casually. “I went to some bookstores in Boston yesterday and picked up some new books. That was fun.” You tactfully refrain from mentioning that you had gone with Amy; that would be awkward.

She coos softly, causing you to smirk in response. You’d thought talking about bookstores might interest her. “Ooh, where did you go?” she asks, sounding a lot more alert now. “What did you get?”

“I got a few different things,” you reply as you slip into your bedroom and climb onto your bed, lifting your blankets as you go. Okay, this was definitely a good idea. You might want to get silky sheets or something if you ever want to do something, but your blanket, at least, feels really nice against your nude skin. “I got some books to read around the house, and some books to help with my tutoring sessions.” Now that you’re firmly ensconced in your blankets, you hit the speakerphone button again, setting it back to normal.

You’re just about to explain further when your phone vibrates softly in your hand. Frowning, you
take a look at it as Charlotte responds—“Oh, did you find anything helpful? The library here hasn’t had anything useful.”

It’s a reply from Sophia. *Yes I’m free at 12. Where do you want to meet up?*

“Um, I found a few different things,” you reply to Charlotte, hoping the vagueness of your answer would buy you a few moments while you try to formulate a response to Sophia. Shit—you really should have decided on a restaurant to take her to before texting her. But then, if she’d turned down the offer of a date, it would have been wasted effort. Not that you think she would, unless she would, which she might, but she did agree? And now your thoughts are all scrambled together again. Great.

You start a little when Charlotte’s voice echoes from your phone again, almost quiet enough that you can’t hear it. “What else did you get?” she asks, sounding amused. Damn it. Your vagueness plan didn’t work. “Anything interesting?”

“Nothing too interesting,” you reply, not even having to fake the glumness in your voice. Your thoughts are whirling, and trying to figure out what to do about Sophia is starting to distract you too much from Charlotte. You think for a moment, then pick the first restaurant you’d seen that had looked half-decent and text her its name, then turn your attention back to the girl on the phone. Your phone buzzes again a few seconds later, with just a short acknowledgement. “I, uh. Oh, I got a book about the formation of unions. I think. It definitely has something to do with unions, anyway.”

Charlotte actually giggles about that. “You haven’t read it then, yet? Oh well. It sounds interesting, too.”

You do your best to put Sophia out of your mind now that she’s agreed to the date. It… isn’t too successful, but you’re determined to try your best anyway. “I think it might be!” you say, trying for a measure of enthusiasm.

Honestly, you’d picked the book up on a whim. You’re not a big non-fiction reader; you read your school textbooks, sure, and you’re more than willing to read through books on finances or business and administration when it’s directly relevant to your continually more vague plans to run a superhero team one day, but you’ve never been the kind of person to seek out books on the history of things or the making of… other things. You might be interested in a biography of Shakespeare or Hemingway, but outside of that, you prefer to keep your non-fiction reading relevant to your future work.

Charlotte, it turns out, does not feel the same. It’s not that she doesn’t *enjoy* fiction—“I do like some stories!” she says hastily when the conversation turns towards her taste in books; “I just don’t read all that much of it. I read some romance and crime fiction sometimes, but I mostly just read non-fiction stuff.”—she just, well. Enjoys reading non-fiction more.

Her tastes are actually quite fascinating, in your opinion. You might—well, you try never to build expectations of what your girls are interested in before you ask them yourself, but you certainly hadn’t expected her to be interested in reading medical textbooks and instructions on theatre etiquette and the proper construction of plays.

“Do you like theatre?” you have to inquire at that. You’ve been to plays before, but only ever with, well, with Mom, who had simply *loved* going to plays. You haven’t been to one since… well, in a long time.

She hums almost indecisively. “Kind of?” she hedges. “Most of the plays I’ve seen are really boring,
but I like reading about the technical side of them. You know, set design, costume design, that kind of thing.”

That’s interesting. “I don’t know much about that kind of thing,” you say, leaning back onto your pillows. “Tell me more about it?”

And she does—at length. You try your best to follow along, but after about five minutes of talk it’s all you can do just to focus enough to actually understand what she’s saying, and ten minutes after that it’s all you can do to focus enough to make approving sounds at appropriate intervals.

It’s nice, though. You haven’t actually heard her talk about anything she’s passionate about before, mostly because you haven’t talked to her very much at all, but still. You don’t understand half the words she’s using in the context of playwrights and stage construction, but you suspect that if you were to talk about the poetic construction of Hemingway’s prose and its supportive influence on the narrative structure of *The Old Man and The Sea*, she would not have a much better grasp of your words than you do of hers.

Finally, she winds down after a good forty minutes of talking. “I didn’t realise I’d been talking so much,” she admits. You can imagine the blush that spreads across her face at the words.

“It’s fine,” you say honestly. You tactfully refrain from admitting that you’d barely been listening to her words as opposed to the excitement in her voice. Progress. “You like talking about plays a lot, it’s easy to tell. I don’t mind listening to you if you want to talk about them. It’s cute.”

“O-Oh.” Her voice wobbles for a moment, as though she’s unsure of something. “U-Um. Thank you. That’s, um.” She lets out a sudden huff of air, then abruptly changes the topic. “We’re heading back soon, I think.”

You blink, taken aback by the shift in the conversation. “Back to… Brockton Bay?” you hazard. She makes an affirmative sound. “Oh, okay. Do you mean you’re coming back today, or in the next couple of days?”

“In the next couple of days.” You can almost hear Charlotte frowning, though her voice isn’t unhappy as she continues talking. “I think we were supposed to be coming back today, but Mom and Dad, uh… they had a fight, kind of, so we didn’t end up packing our bags last night.”

The only appropriate reaction to that is a wink and an instinctive reaction to try and hug her. You almost do try before you remember that she’s not even in the same city as you right now. “I’m sorry,” you murmur. “Are you okay?”

A tense silence fills the air between the two of you for a moment before she lets out another huff of air. “Yeah, I’m fine.” This time, you can hear the bitterness in her tone. “They’re just being stupid. We should be coming back tomorrow, hopefully, or on Sunday.”

You chew your lip for a moment, considering. Maybe you could invite her out, or something—get her out of the house for a few hours. You know there’s a community centre in town, and during the school holidays it would almost definitely be hosting some amateur productions. Or… “You could come over to my house if you want,” you say impulsively. “When you get back. If you want to spend the night away from them, I mean. Or not. Sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned it.” Damn it, *damn* it. No, you should not have said anything. It’s never a good idea to poke your head in when someone’s having familial problems.
Neither of you speak for a moment, until the silence is broken by an annoyed yet somehow cheerful sigh. “I might have to take you up on that,” she says quietly, almost murmuring the words to you. “I’ll check with my mother when we get back, and see if it’s okay with her.”

Well. You hadn’t expected your invitation to work. Not that you’re complaining. “That sounds like a good idea,” you breathe. “I’ll, I’ll make sure we have some movies or something to watch.” There’s a video rental store a few blocks over—it shouldn’t be too hard for you to borrow some DVD’s to watch.

She just says something vaguely acquiescent in turn. “Sure,” she says again, clearer this time. “That sounds like fun.” The annoyance that had been starting to build in her voice is mostly gone now, so you breathe a silent sigh of relief to yourself. Mission accomplished.

The rest of your conversation steers away from personal matters after that. You’re not quite sure if the conversation had strayed too far into the personal for her, though if it had, you imagine that she would not have simply accepted your invitation to sleep over with you. She doesn’t seem comfortable with discussing it any further, though, so you don’t press the topic.

She ends the call at half past ten, two and a bit hours after she had first called. You don’t encourage her to stay on the line—not because you don’t want to keep talking to her, but because you have something else you need to worry about; your date with Sophia.

That’s going to be frustrating.

You’re starting to build quite an eclectic collection of restaurants, you muse as the bus trundles to a stop. If there’s nothing else you can take from the piles of brochures that are left in your mailbox every week, it’s that Brockton Bay has no shortage of restaurants and take-away stores. You’re not sure why there are so many here, though if you had to guess, you’d assume it has something to do with the amount of tourism in the area and the hectic lifestyle led by many of the town’s workers.

Antonio’s is a smaller restaurant in town. According to the brochure, they mostly sell a variety of pizzas and pastas, especially woodfired pizzas. You’ve had your eye on it since you first saw it in the brochures, but either it’s only recently opened or it’s only recently started advertising the store down here, because Dad’s never taken you here before and you’ve only recently heard of it.

Luckily, it did provide you with the address of the restaurant itself… or, well, you thought it was lucky until you tried actually finding the store.

The buildings on main street- Columbus Street- aren’t all numbered evenly. A small number of them have their residential numbers affixed to their doors or painted on their windows, while others have small mailboxes with a number inscribed on it set subtly aside on the side of the business. Yet more only have their numbers written on the curbs. And most… don’t have their residential numbers written on them anywhere at all.

It’s a bit frustrating. It’s very hard to find number two hundred and forty-two when the closest number you can find is number two hundred and sixteen.

It takes you nearly five minutes before your eyes trail up and you roll your eyes at yourself. Well, duh. If you want to find a business that sells woodfired pizza, the easiest way is to look for the store currently trailing smoke. In fairness to yourself, it’s not producing very much smoke; if it did, it
probably wouldn’t be allowed to operate within town. There’s enough there that you can see where it is, though.

The store itself isn’t very large. You’ve thought about that before, but you can only see four tables in here, two of which have only two seats around them. There’s enough floorspace in here that you’re pretty sure they could fit in a fifth table without impeding the movement of the servers, but whatever; it’s not your store.

The man standing behind the counter—judging by the apron, he also stands in as the chef—gives you a friendly nod as you walk in, but doesn’t call you over. You move to one of the smaller tables, one of the ones with only two seats, and sit in one of them. There’s a menu—a sheet of white paper with the menu written in two columns, encased in a sheet of clear plastic and held up on a stand—so you pull it over to you and read through it while you wait.

Sophia doesn’t take long to arrive—she’s a good five minutes early herself, arriving almost exactly at twelve fifty-five. She’s dressed up quite nicely, almost enough to make you feel self-conscious about the way you’re dressed, despite your own attempts to dress up nicely for the date. You’ve never actually seen her in a proper dress before; she’s wearing one now, a nice blue dress that shimmers down to her ankles. Her hair is tied back, her usual rough ponytail brushed neatly and tucked away so no strands of hair can escape.

You only note all of that absently, though; the thing that draws your gaze is the look on her face. You’ve never seen Sophia look content before. You’ve seen her happy, angry, amused, vindictively satisfied, and even sexually frustrated; but the one expression you’ve never seen on her face is contentment. You can feel it from here, radiating from her in soft waves as she walks over to your table and sits across from you.

“Hey, Hebert,” she says, quirking her lips into a half-smirk at you. “Nice place you’ve found here.”


Her lip quirks up higher, but you can’t feel any darkness coiling up in her gut. You still tense, but not as much as you’d expected. Thankfully, she doesn’t comment on your stupid greeting. “So, they got anything good here?” she asks.

You had looked it over before, but you hadn’t thought much on your particular section. Still, they’d had a supreme listed there, and that’s what you normally get, so. “I’ll get a supreme,” you say with a shrug. “Would you like a drink with it?”

Before you can move to stand up, though, she’s already standing. “I’ll get one,” she says quickly.
“Do you want a drink while I’m up?” You move to stand, your hand falling to your pocket, but she shakes her head. “No, I’ll pay this time. Do you want a drink?”

You frown. “I can pay,” you insist, but a small part of you—the money-conscious part—prevents you from arguing the point too hard.

(If she wants to pay, a small part of you hisses, then let her. She deserves to be the one to spend a bit of money, considering everything.)

Sophia just shakes her head though, an impatient frown on her face. “I’ve got it,” she says firmly. “Do you want a drink? They’ve got soda, water, iced tea—”

“I’ll get an iced tea,” you say. Your words don’t come out very friendlily, so you attempt to alleviate the sting with your best attempt at a nice smile. “Thanks.” She just quirks an eyebrow at you.

Thankfully, you can’t sense anything bad coming from her, just a little bit of confusion, so it appears she didn’t take your words too seriously.

With Sophia here, but not here-here, you try and take a moment to sort through the thoughts swirling around in your head.

As far as you know, Sophia has no idea that you were at the Ward’s PR event—and even if she does know, she doesn’t know about your powers, so she doesn’t know what you felt. Hell, even you don’t know what you felt; you definitely felt Sophia’s emotions coming from Shadow Stalker, but that’s not a confirmation. Shadow Stalker is a cape, and the only cape you’ve tested your powers on so far is Glory Girl. For all you know, something in Shadow Stalker’s powers could be interfering with yours and making you feel like Sophia was there with you.

You’re still not sure how you feel about the idea that she could be Shadow Stalker. If she is, that’s—if she is, then that’s messed up. You can’t pin the blame for that on the PRT in its entirety—if your business textbooks have taught you nothing else, it’s taught you that employees often act on their own without the consent of the business as a whole; that’s why embezzlement laws exist—but it doesn’t speak well of their oversight either. And even if you can’t blame it on the PRT, you can definitely blame it on Sophia, if the two are one and the same.

She’s a superhero. Or she might be, at least. Superheroes should know better than to mess with other people’s lives and emotional health like that.

Ignoring the hypocrisy of your own thoughts, you subtly shake your head. Thinking like that isn’t helpful.

The point is irrelevant. Even if you were sure that Sophia was Shadow Stalker, this is your first date with Sophia. You’re not going to try and spoil this by subtly interrogating her to see if she is a cape. You’ll have plenty of other opportunities to do that—she’s already agreed to keep being tutored by you, and when school goes back the two of you will be together during the day as well. You’ll just have to try and figure it out then. Until that happens, you’ll… just have to try your best to treat her normally.

She returns just a couple of minutes later, bearing with her two tall glasses. She sets one of them, a glass of chilled tea coloured dark orange, in front of you, and keeps the other glass in front of herself. “There you go,” she drawls.

You nod, reaching up with clammy hands to hold your glass. “Thanks,” you say softly. You consider offering to pay her back for a moment—it’s very tempting—but you dismiss the idea almost
immediately. It rankles you to have Sophia paying for your drinks, but at the same time, you’re relieved to not have to spend much of your limited amount of money.

From there, the two of you mostly engage in idle chatter while you wait for your food to arrive. You flounder a little at first, searching for anything to talk about—while you can talk to girls like Charlotte and Amy all day about books and movies, and you’re comfortable enough around Madison that the two of you can talk about whatever is on your mind at the time—but eventually the topic circles back around to Sophia and her hobbies.

You’ve never been much one for sports. Jogging is about the limit for your tolerance for physical activity, and even that is more about the mental state it puts you in than it is about the physical activity itself. When your teachers try to encourage sports at school, it’s all you can do each time not to groan. Usually, you ended up just moping around on the edges of the field.

Sophia, on the other hand, is a very athletic person. That’s not to say that she isn’t smart, or intellectual—she is sharp, if nothing else—but both her interests and her passions lie in the direction of athletics. You already knew that she’s on the track team, that she’s their star runner, even. That’s a fairly impressive accomplishment, to your mind, considering that Winslow’s track team is notable as one of the best in the state—a substantial portion of the school’s funding comes from their accomplishments, even.

You hadn’t known that she plays baseball. It’s “just a side thing”, according to her, something that she does outside of school with some other friends from track.

(You’re a big fan of that image. Sophia would be adorable dressed in a baseball uniform.)

Eventually, you’re forced to admit that you don’t know all that much about sports. Dad watches the football when it’s on TV, but that’s as far as your knowledge of sports extends, and even that you don’t understand at all. You just sit down and watch men in ridiculous uniforms kick a ball across an overly large stadium sometimes.

Ordinarily, you might be embarrassed to admit that you don’t know much about sport. Not today, though. Not when it gives the two of you something to chat about when the servers bring out your lunches.

You’d half-expected the date with Sophia to go a lot worse than it actually had, you muse once you’re back on the bus. Aside from the ball of worry and stress churning away in your gut related to her potential secret identity, you—well. You just hadn’t been sure how she would act when you’re not in a position of power over her outside of school.

She’d behaved herself quite well, though. She hadn’t made a single cutting remark, and despite the arrogant pride you’d felt rising in her at several points during the conversation, she hadn’t even said anything you think had been intended to deflate your self-esteem. Probably a good thing. Still, as you sit on the bus chewing your lip, the fact that the date hadn’t gone badly doesn’t do very much to soothe the anxiety you’re feeling.

(Because she’s only part of it, a small part of you whispers venomously. She hurt you, and kisses won’t heal that. It won’t heal any of the rest of it, either.)

Before you can think on it too much further, though, your phone buzzes in your pocket. You flinch a
little, then hurriedly retrieve it, just in case it’s something important. It’s lucky you did, too, because it is something pretty important; a text from Madison. “Can I come over to your house this afternoon?”

You bite your lip to restrain a smile as you tap out a quick reply. Well, quick for you, anyway. “Of course. Is there something wrong?”

The bus comes to a shuddering halt just as you hit send. You look up, then quickly hurry to your feet, feeling a little shocked. Okay, you’d been preoccupied, but you didn’t think you’d been preoccupied enough with Sophia to nearly miss your bus stop. Your phone buzzes in your pocket as you climb out of the bus, giving the bus driver an apologetic grimace as you go. He just waves you off disinterestedly, only looking in your direction for long enough for you to climb completely out of the bus so he can close the door and begin to drive off again.

You frown after him, but it doesn’t last long. Your phone buzzes again; pulling it out, you see it’s a third text from Madison. Huh. You hadn’t even felt the second one, unless the first two had been sent at once.

“There’s nothing wrong! There’s a baking contest tomorrow that Dad wants to enter, and he dared me to enter it too. But then he took over the kitchen. So I was thinking I could practice at your house and make you some sweets!” Each sentence is punctuated with two empty squares. The second text is shorter; “And I haven’t seen you in a while. <3”

It has been nearly a week since the last time you’ve seen her. You’ve had plenty of things to keep you preoccupied in the meantime, but... no, you’re not afraid to admit it to yourself; a week is a long time to go without your Madison. With that thought in mind, you jog over to your front door so you can slide inside and type out a reply as you take your shoes off. “It has been a long time. You can come over and make me some sweets if you want.” You’re not sure why she waited until now to send the text, unless Rick had only just dared her to do it. Or she could have been looking for an excuse to see you, you acknowledge distantly. But you’d hope that if it was just that, she’d just ask.

Her reply is nearly instantaneous. “Thank you thank you! I’ll be there at four, if that’s okay!”

You glance up at the clock, then roll your eyes when you remember that your phone has a clock built into it too. Damn it, you’re still not used to that. It’s a little past three; your date with Sophia had only lasted an hour and a half before she’d had to go home. “Of course.” Your annoyance fades as you send the text, replaced with a faint sense of anticipation.

With the promise of Madison’s company in the near future, it’s easier to put everything related to Sophia at the back of your mind. You head upstairs to change into something a little bit more comfortable—Madison won’t mind if you’re not dressed up fancily for her, you’re fairly sure—and quickly bustle your way around the house, making sure everything is neat and tidy. Not that the house is messy, but better safe than sorry, and all.

There are a lot of little tasks that you’ve been neglecting anyway. You grab a feather duster and move quickly around the house, giving everything a light brush with it to remove any dust that has built up since the last time you did this. There’s some washing in the washing basket, as well, enough for a full load. The carpets were vacuumed just a couple of days ago, but the linoleum in the laundry hasn’t been mopped in at least a week.

And by the time you’re done with all that, it’s five to four. You quickly pour the dirty water from the
bucket into the laundry sink and put the mop and bucket away, then hurry into the bathroom so you can make sure you’re presentable. You are, thankfully—your pants are a little damp around the ankles, where you’d accidentally splashed some water, and your hands are covered in dust you have to quickly wash off, but otherwise, you look—well, as okay as you ever look.

The doorbell rings as you’re coming back out of the bathroom. You squeak a little, then pick up your pace, calling out, “I’m coming!”

Madison is standing on the front porch when you pull the door open. Her expression brightens immediately once she sees you, her curious smile morphing into something bright and free. You can’t help but match it with an equally bright smile as you step to the side, indicating for Madison to step through the doorway. “Come on,” you say quietly, pulling her over to your side so you can close the door, waving to Rick, who is waiting on the curb in his car. You think he waves back at you, but you’ve already stopped paying attention to him, focusing back on your girl, who is… carrying a paper bag in one hand. “What did you bring?” You quietly close the door behind you as you ask, tugging Madison deeper into your house.

She looks down at the bag in her hand, giggling a little as she obediently follows behind you. “Nothing too important,” she replies. “Just the ingredients for some cupcakes. I didn’t know if you like chocolate or strawberry better, so I brought ingredients for both.” You can’t see her, moving in front of her as you are, but you can imagine the smile that steals across her face at that.

You squeeze her hand, knowing that she can’t see the curl of your lips in turn. “I do like strawberry,” you admit. “At least, in my muffins. It’s a sweet flavour.” Unlike real strawberries, which are usually surprisingly sour whenever you or Dad tries to buy them from the store.

You can see her nod from the corner of her eye, and you can imagine her filing that away somewhere in her mind. “I’ll keep that in mind,” she says thoughtfully. “But I brought enough to make chocolate and strawberry muffins, so you could try both, if you wanted.”

“You see?” This time, you do turn back so you can smile at her, though you quickly have to turn to face forward once again so you don’t cause Madison to accidentally bump into anything. “I won’t turn down your baking, Madison.”

Her pleased tone at that is very evident when she replies. “That’s good,” she says dreamily. “I like baking, I think. It’s a relaxing hobby.”

The kitchen is almost sparklingly clean when the two of you enter it. The benches are still a little damp from where you’d wiped them down, and the kitchen cloth is still wet from where you’d used it to dry the dishes. None of that matters, though, because you don’t lead Madison directly over to the counter; instead, you bring her over to the table and sit on a chair, tugging at her shirt until she obediently climbs in your lap, allowing you to wrap your arms around her. “It’s good to have hobbies,” you say finally. “Do you like working at your dad’s bakery?”

She shrugs half-heartedly, settling in against you with a little tired noise. The bag drops beside both of you with a quiet thump, landing forgotten by your feet. “It’s okay,” is all she offers for a few moments as she buries her head against your neck as much as she can. “I have to get up really early most days, though. And I don’t like cooking the number of pastries we need for the store. I like making just enough for us.”

You poke her in the side, drawing a gentle whine and a pout from her. “So that’s why you bought two flavours?” you ask her teasingly, poking your tongue out at her. She flushes but doesn’t deny it,
so you poke her again, causing her to look up at you. “So we could have enough to share?” She surprises you by just smiling and leaning back against you. “I do need to practice as well,” she says. “I wouldn’t lie to you, there really is a competition tomorrow, and I do need the practice. But yeah, I did… kind of think that we could share some sweets, too.”

Leaning down, you tilt her head up a little so you can press a kiss to her nose. “You don’t need a competition to come over and cook me sweets,” you murmur. “I’m always happy to have you come over and cook for me.”

This time, she’s the one who leans up and kisses you, a slight brush of her lips against your own. “That’s good,” she murmurs. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

You lean forwards just enough that you can press another kiss to her lips, a deeper one this time, then tug at the back of her shirt. When she’s standing, you tug her down again so you can give her one more kiss before reaching down and handing her the bag. “You’d better start cooking them now,” you say quietly, “before we get too distracted.”

She pouts, but nods in acceptance. “That’s probably a good idea,” she says, giving you a shy smile.

There’s a surprising number of ingredients that go into making cupcakes from scratch, you’re quick to find out. When you and Dad have made them in the past, you’ve only ever used mix from a box. Some milk, eggs and butter and you were done. Madison has brought over quite a few more—self-raising flour, caster sugar, vanilla extract, baking chocolate, food colouring, and some other ingredients you’re not sure you could name if pressed.

It’s impressive to watch her work. You’re not a bad cook yourself, but you’re not the greatest at it, either. You’re always slow, somehow—inefficient. It takes you forever to cut up vegetables and prepare the meat for dinner, even though you’re much quicker at it than you used to be. Madison is much more efficient at it than you are, going so far as to pile the dishes she’s going to use on one side of the bench before laying out her ingredients.

You bite your lip.

There’s a warm feeling in your stomach, something you can’t quite place as you watch Madison scurrying around your kitchen, loosely wrapping an apron around her midsection before determinedly pulling open the packet of flour. Scurrying around your kitchen. Making cupcakes for the two of you to share.

You climb out of your chair and move quietly over to her. Well, as quietly as you can, anyway; you wince as you scuff your feet on the floor twice, but thankfully Madison is too involved with measuring out careful portions of flour into a large plastic bowl to hear you before you can wrap your arms around her, causing her to shriek a little and drop her plastic measuring cup into the bowl. “Taylor!” she shouts, half-surprised and half-amused. Her voice turns upwards at the end, until she’s almost giggling as you secure your arms around her stomach. “What are you doing?”

You hum, lowering your head slightly so you can brush your cheek against hers, feeling the burning warmth there. “Nothing,” you reply in a sing-song manner. “I just saw there was this cute girl in my kitchen, and I couldn’t resist coming over to give her a kiss.” True to your word, you turn your head just enough for you to place a warm kiss against her cheek, then rest your chin on her shoulder again.

Her grin grows even wider, and she ducks her head shyly. After a moment, she raises it again and
tilts her head until she’s resting it beside yours, your hair tangling slightly together. “It might be hard to cook like this,” she says, but makes no move to try and get away.

You drum your fingers against her stomach, causing her to wiggle a little. “I think you can manage it,” you murmur. “Besides, it’s been too long since I’ve been able to cuddle my Madison.”

“I was here on the weekend,” she protests, but despite her words, you can see the sparkle in her eyes as she tilts her head to look at you, and her hands drop away from the bowl so she can hold them loosely over yours. “I’m not that cuddly, am I?”

Before you answer, you kiss her cheek again, just to see if it will make them grow any redder. It doesn’t, but you can see her grin growing even further, the widest grin you’ve seen her give outside of the bedroom yet. “Yes, you are,” you reply fondly. “My cuddly little Madison.” Absently, you know that the words you’re speaking sound stupid even to yourself; but Madison ducks her head bashfully again, the food on the counter forgotten, and you can’t bring yourself to care.

She stands there like that, pressed against your body, for a long moment before she shifts. “Well,” she says lowly, “your Madison still needs to cook you some cupcakes. You can cuddle me all you want after I cook them, if… that’s okay with you?” Her voice rises at the end, an almost hesitant question.

It would be mean of you to deny her, but you don’t actually want to let her go. You pout to let her know that, even though you know she can’t see it. “How long will that take?” you ask, dipping your head petulantly until your forehead is resting on her shoulder.

“It shouldn’t take too long,” she says soothingly, patting your hands. “Probably only twenty minutes.” You grumble unenthusiastically, and she pats your hands again. “I’m sorry,” she says sympathetically, and she really does sound apologetic about it. “If I could cook with you touching me, I could, but you’re very… distracting.”

You pout again, then press a quick kiss against her neck. “Then take off your clothes,” you bargain petulantly. “At least let me look at you while you’re cooking.”

She shudders softly in your arms. “I need to wear an apron while I’m cooking,” she breathes softly, but she doesn’t protest. In fact, by the quick rising and falling of her chest, and the slight indent of her hard nipples against her bra you can see from up here, you don’t think she’s protesting the idea at all. “If that’s okay. Um. What time does your dad get home?”

The image of Madison wearing nothing but an apron is, admittedly, almost as appealing as the image of her wearing completely nothing. “He won’t get home for a few hours,” you assure her. “I’ll keep an ear out, and you can put your clothes back on after you’re done. Okay?” As much as you like the idea of keeping her nude, the idea of Dad walking in on the two of you like that is… no, not happening.

Lifting your head slightly, you can see her bite her lip. Then she nods, and a fierce grin spreads over your face. “Okay,” she acquiesces, and pokes at your arms gently until you let her go.

You’ve seen Madison strip before. Well, it’s not exactly stripping; you’ve seen—well, you’ve seen videos of people stripping, and there’s a lot more flash to it than there is to Madison taking off her clothes. She doesn’t accentuate her breasts as she does so, she doesn’t gyrate or wiggle or anything to draw your attention.
But you still prefer Madison’s stripping. You’d prefer to see her body over the body of a stripper in a porn video any day, no matter how nicely toned their bodies are.

It doesn’t take her long to strip completely. She piles her clothes—a shirt, her skirt, her bra, panties, and socks—on a different section of the bench than she’d piled her ingredients on earlier, peeking back at you each time she takes something off. You give her an encouraging smile as she does, which makes her smile in turn even as her cheeks flush red again.

Then, finally, she wraps an apron around herself, tying it loosely around her neck and waist. It’s a cute apron, with little pink flowers dotting the white surface; but more importantly, it’s perhaps a little too small for her. Where an ordinary apron usually wraps somewhere around your sides when you tie it, this one reaches back less than an inch over the curve of her hips. It’s enough to cover her against any spilled flour or similar, but it doesn’t leave much to the imagination when she’s nude like this.

Once she’s finished tying it, you step forward again, sliding your hands around her waist so you can press another kiss to her neck. “Thank you,” you whisper softly into her ear.

The tension in her body bleeds away a little at your actions, and she shuffles around in your arms until she’s turned a full half-circle. “Of course,” she replies equally as softly, before standing on her toes a little so her mouth is hovering uncertainly just in front of yours, as though waiting for permission. You grant it easily, moving your head forwards so you can kiss her, deeply this time.

It’s not a long kiss, as tempting as it is to deepen it and drag her up to your bedroom right now. After a moment, you pull back, smirking a little as Madison unconsciously sways in before catching herself. “Good girl,” you say, your voice almost a purr, and you can feel her shiver deliciously against you. Then you pat her on the back a little and move back. “Don’t forget about your cupcakes.”

This time, she’s the one who pouts at you. “It’s not nice to tease,” she says sulkily.

Her bad mood—well, really, it’s more of a short sulk than a proper bad mood—disappears after just a few moments as she turns back to her baking, shaking her hips at you in some kind of petty revenge for your kisses.

You can’t pay much attention to the baking itself with Madison dressed like that. It’s really far too distracting. Every time you try to pay attention to what her hands are doing, your eyes are drawn back to her backside, or she turns and gives you a side-view of her breasts. Not that you’re upset about that, but… well, you do think you might have enjoyed watching Madison actually cook for you.

Luckily, at least for you, it doesn’t take too long for Madison to finish making them. And, while you’re not the greatest judge of cupcake batter, you must admit that the raw batter itself looks surprisingly nice; you manage to tear your eyes away from her nude body just long enough to see her drizzling in vanilla and strawberry batters in equal amounts, creating small swirls in the batter that you imagine might look quite nice when they’re baked.

All in all, it takes a little under half an hour before she’s finally done, and you’re able to pull her back on your lap, where she belongs.

Dad gets home a little before six thirty. Thankfully, you’d already had Madison redress by then—you’d had her redress at five to six, just in case—but it still makes your heart pound a little when you
hear his car pull up in the driveway. It’s good timing, anyway, because Madison’s phone dings with a text barely a minute later; a text from her father, reading “I’ll be there to pick you up at half past seven.”

You hadn’t expected that Madison would be able to stay the night, but it’s still rather disappointing to have the news confirmed. As Madison informs you glumly, “The contest starts at eight o’clock tomorrow, and Dad and I need to do our baking in the morning for them, so we’re going to have to be at the store by four.”

Still, you make sure to get your fix of Madison before she has to leave. You can’t keep her around naked forever—Dad is going to get home eventually, and he is the absolute last person you ever want to see her nude—but even a fully clothed Madison is a very enthusiastic kisser, especially when you take her to your bedroom.

But even such, by seven thirty, you find yourself at the front door with her, watching sadly as Rick’s car pulls up again. He waves at you, and you wave back absently at him, but most of your attention is on the girl beside you.

“I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know how the contest goes,” she says quietly. “I’m sorry I can’t stay the night tonight. Maybe, um. I could ask Dad if I could stay over in a couple of days, when things have calmed down around the store.”

You pull her into a quick hug, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “That would be nice,” you reply, your tone only slightly mournful. “I’ll be waiting for your call, so don’t forget, okay?”

“Of course,” she says insistently, turning so she can hug you in turn as well. “I’ll call you as soon as it’s over.” She gives you a warm smile, then buries her head against your chest for a moment. When she speaks again, it’s quieter. “I’m sorry my message today was so rushed,” she says softly. “Things at home are just getting… a bit strained.”

Gently rubbing her back, you peck her forehead. For a moment, you’re tempted to give her a proper kiss, but the knowledge that Dad is home and somewhere inside the house stops you. That would be awkward. “Do you need to talk about it?” you ask.

She shakes her head. “It’s not… It’s just Mom and Dad,” she says, a wry twist to her mouth. “They’re just… disagreeing on some things. Thank you for the offer, though.”

“Of course.” You peck her forehead again, then reach up with your free hand so you can tilt her head up and kiss her nose. “You know you’re always welcome at my house.”

Her grin turns shy at that. “Thank you,” she whispers. For a moment, she looks like she’s going to say something more, but she seems to decide against it. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” she breathes.

You nod, then quickly kiss her nose again before she can escape. “I’ll be waiting,” you promise.

You watch her until she’s gone, a small frown stealing over your face. You don’t like the sound of Madison’s parents arguing, not if it’s bad enough to get Madison to get her father to drive you to her house to get away from it. Rick might have dared her to enter this contest with her tomorrow, but you’re fairly certain that if that was all it was, she would have just used the kitchen at night, or even just entered it without practice.

(You might not be the most aware person, but you know Madison fairly well, you think. If she
hadn’t wanted to get out of the house, she wouldn’t have given you such short notice. She’s not the kind of girl to let you know she’s coming over with only an hour’s warning.)

But you can only shake your head, letting out a small sigh. You’re going to have to keep an eye out for that, you can already tell. You’re not going to let her get hurt by her parents like that.

Still, there’s nothing you can do about it now.

You’re in bed fairly early again tonight, at half past ten. It feels a little strange to be in bed this early, but you have to admit that you do like being able to get up so early in the morning. It makes your routine a lot easier.

It’s lucky that you don’t have much to do tomorrow, you think dimly. You’re definitely going to have to speak to Victoria, you’re fairly sure, but aside from that you can spend the whole day just… relaxing. Something that you haven’t done too much of, recently. You can spend the day watching TV with Dad, or just reading. A day to yourself, mostly. A while for you to just… take your mind of things.

It’s a pleasant thought to fall asleep on.
The Wards' common room is almost nicer than the common room his team gets to use. Admittedly, he doesn't play video games or table tennis, so the amenities available in here are quite useless to Austin, but the point stands.

It's deliberate, of course. Kind of.

The state of the Wards varies from state to state, and even from district to district. The Boston Wards have a very comfortable common area, and the New York Wards, of course, have a common area more luxurious than the houses of some millionaires he's seen.

But he's been to Phoenix, and to Chicago. With public opinion of the Protectorate at a record low in the two states, and only six Wards having been recruited in the two cities over nearly fourteen years, their Wards facilities are particularly lacklustre.

Here in Brockton Bay, they try to make sure that the Wards are as comfortable as possible. The city is enough of a hellhole as it is—making the lives of the children as comfortable as possible whenever they get to visit is the least they can do.

The success of the Wards program here has shown that their efforts have borne fruit, but it's not about that. It's not about proving that their methods are successful, or even about drawing additional funding for the program.

It's just—a confluence of events, he supposes. They've seen what happens when children trigger and are left without guidance. He himself has worked with abused children. Hannah doesn't like to talk about her past very much, but from what he's been able to piece together, saying that she didn't have much of a childhood would be a gross understatement. Ethan grew up in a broken home, and Colin—well, Colin never talks about himself, but Austin has his suspicions. You don't develop that kind of asocial personality because you grew up in a stable home with a loving family.

Austin's watch chimes, a surprisingly loud sound in the empty room. He starts, broken out of his reverie, and lets out a self-deprecating laugh before moving deeper into the room.

Generally, the adult heroes stay away from this room. It's the Wards' space, not theirs—and though he only has an amateur understanding of psychology, he's been with Deborah for long enough to recognise the importance of having a space to call your own. All of them do. It's why the Protectorate heroes and the Wards don't have a shared common room.

The room is untidy, but he deliberately looks away from the messiest areas as he goes. The only concession he makes towards the state of the room is to make a mental note to bring up the importance of presentation with the Wards during their next meeting.

Then, he's standing in front of the study desk. It's a simple piece of furniture, even ugly, but he's not here to judge the quality of the room's furnishings; he's only here to collect their monthly reports.

In most cities, this kind of thing is handled by social workers, who are paid a premium by the Protectorate to monitor and support the Wards. It's a good system, when it works.

Here in Brockton Bay—well. A sardonic smile flits across his face.
He’s not leaving the well-being of his children up to the social workers here.

With the reports in hand, he beats a hasty retreat. It’s only eight in the morning, but it’s school break, and he’s never able to predict when the children are going to show up when their schedules aren’t dictated by school.

He offers a friendly smile to the PRT troopers he passes in the halls. They nod back at him, offering him a respectful-but-not-friendly smile and occasionally a quiet “Good morning, Dauntless” before hurrying out of his field of vision. They always do that. He’s not sure if it’s a rivalry thing or an intimidation thing, but either way, he wishes they would stop.

Shaking his head, he looks down at the ground and hurries to his office. Bah. There’s no use thinking about it. He’s never had much luck with people who ostensibly work beneath him anyway. That’s why Colin is their liaison with most of the city services.

His office is downstairs, only two levels above the ground floor. It takes him a few minutes to get there, travelling through the rickety elevators and giving the office workers and custodial officers the closest approximation he can offer to a smile today, but eventually he makes it there safe and secure, the reports still held tightly in his hands.

For a few moments, he busies himself sorting them into neat piles, first assigning them by order—patrol reports, routine assessments, scheduled power testing results—before scowling at himself and arranging them instead by who had written them, leaving the routine reports written by their schoolteachers in a pile of their own.

They aren’t fascinating reading by any stretch of the imagination. They’re dull, routine things; most of them weren’t even written by the Wards themselves, only collected in neat manila envelopes from their teachers and guardians. The rest had already been discussed in post-patrol meetings and their weekly check-ups, only written up as a formality.

He doesn’t read most of them, though. He’s not responsible for a majority of the Wards; that’s Hannah’s job, and Brooklyn’s while Hannah is off on leave. No, Austin is only responsible for one of the Wards.

Alone in his office, he doesn’t need to hide the grimace that crosses his face as he pulls Sophia’s folder towards himself.

“… several sources have reported that several members of criminal organisations in Brockton Bay may have left after a period of internal strife,” Colin finishes, his gaze falling seriously upon the group of Wards arrayed in front of him. “As per protocol, the criminals known as Purity, Night and Fog are not to be approached by any members of the Wards. If you witness them in the process of actively committing a crime, you should report the incident immediately to any member of the Protectorate in Brockton Bay, but otherwise there is to be no contact. Am I clear?”

His gaze sweeps across the room, the expression on his face stern and forbidding. Even Dennis, usually the most argumentative of the group, just swallows and nods.

Internally, Austin frowns. Intimidating the children doesn’t seem like a very good idea, but... well. There’s a reason that he’s not assigned to dealing with the children, he supposes.
With his job done, Colin steps back, allowing Brooklyn to move forward and take his place in front of them. A calming tactic, he supposes. She smiles at them, revealing a row of perfectly white teeth he’s somewhat jealous of, and lifts her arm to show the stack of reports held there.

“We’ve been going through your reports today,” she says calmly, eyeing each of them quickly to gauge their reactions. From his position leaning against a wall, Austin can’t see Chris and Sophia’s faces, but none of the other kids show any outwards reaction at all. “You’ve all made tremendous improvements over the past few months. I must say, I’m impressed with each of you.” If her gaze lingers a moment longer on Dennis and Sophia than the others, nobody comments on it. “Are the books we bought helping at all?”

There’s a chorus of faint assent, but Missy is, as always, the first one to speak up. “They’re helping a ton,” she says enthusiastically. “Miss Horton does her best to help me catch up on the work I miss when we get a call-out, but it’s really hard to understand without being able to ask her questions. Having those books to refer back to is really helping.”

He can see Sophia’s head loll back in irritation as Carlos pipes up as well. “They’re pretty useful,” he says sheepishly, “but there’s still not much on calculus or physics. Could we-“

“I’ll see what I can do,” Brooklyn interrupts, nodding. “I’m glad they’re helping, though. Is there anything else we can do to help you guys with your schoolwork or homework, or anything else?” Silence reigns for a brief moment, before she claps her hands and smiles brightly. “Excellent. As always, if you guys need to talk about anything, or there’s anything at all you need help with, I’m in until nine each day, and Armsmaster’s office is available until eleven. Until then, fantastic job with your schoolwork, everyone. Keep it up!”

Nobody says anything, but Austin can tell that everyone seems pleased that the meeting is over. The fortnightly meetings with the Wards are necessary, in his opinion, but they’re often tedious affairs, filled with busywork. There’s often a rush of activity during them within the first two or three months of a new Ward signing up, but after the excitement has worn off and the tedium of the meetings has made itself evident, that excitement has faded away without exception.

Still, that’s fine. He’s not here for exciting meetings. Hell, he isn’t even required to be here for meetings with the Wards. The only reason he’s here is still sitting in front of him, trying to catch his eye from a half-turned seat as the other Wards rush out of the room chattering amongst themselves.

He meets Sophia’s eyes calmly, then gestures towards the door to the Wards’ common room. She lets out an exaggerated sigh of relief, stifling it quickly when Brooklyn turns to give her a concerned look, then clambers off her chair and begins marching out of the room, slowing only enough for him to fall in step beside her.

Sophia waits for a few moments, long enough for the voices behind them to fade into intelligible murmurs, before she speaks. “So, what’d they say?” she asks, voice hushed.

“They were interested,” he replies mildly. “I spoke to a couple of the officers I used to work with about a week ago, and they seemed fairly happy with the progress of the investigation on their end.”

Her lips curl up into something resembling a snarl, though it could charitably be called a smirk if one were familiar with her expressions, as he is. “That’s good,” she says wickedly, a familiar hungry gleam shining in her eyes. “Can’t wait.”
He huffs in amusement. “You might have to wait still,” he chides her. “Investigations like these take time, even with us feeding the information to them. They can’t just take our word for it—they’ve got to conduct their own investigation and verify the information we’ve given them.”

She grimaces in disgust. “I know,” she says sourly. “You don’t need to remind me every time, you know. I get it, the police don’t move as fast as we do.” Austin waits for a moment, and she continues after visibly gathering her thoughts. “I just… don’t want this to have all been a waste of my time.” She scowls fiercely at the floor.

Austin pats her shoulder, smiling faintly at the way she instinctively pulls away from the movement and levels a glare at him. “It won’t have been a waste of your time regardless,” he points out. “It’ll be harder to convince the Director to let you stay if the chief doesn’t put in a good word for you, but my support at your hearing was never dependant on that. Your grades have been improving, and you haven’t missed an appointment with Rosalina yet. That’s all I’ve asked of you.”

Sophia scowls again at him, more heavily this time, but he can see the way her shoulders faintly fall, as though in relief. “That’s good,” she grumbles half-heartedly. “Be a fucking waste of my time otherwise.”

He has to turn away for a moment to fight off a snicker. Luckily, she doesn’t notice the movement, or he can only imagine how sharp her scowl would be then.

The two of them walk together in silence for a short time, until eventually they arrive in front of an elevator. Sophia gestures for him to take it, but it only takes him shaking his head for one short moment before she shrugs and steps in it before him. “See you on Wednesday,” she mutters as the doors begin to close.

“See you then,” he says easily, offering her a small wave before he shoves his hands back in his pockets, letting out a deep sigh.


He hadn’t quite realised how much work their partnership would be, when she had first approached him. It had been a simple request, at the time; her six-monthly hearing had been coming up in a few weeks, and apparently, none of her teachers had been willing to ask for the day off to attend and vouch for her character.

He’d been hesitant to agree, at the time. Admittedly, he spends most of his time on patrol or liaising with police and community groups, but he hadn’t been completely unaware of the Wards’ reports, and none of the teachers had had glowing reports for the girl. He’d been tempted to turn her down and tell her to speak to the Director if she wanted a character witness—very tempted, at the time. But—well.

He has a lot of experience with helping things to get better, one day at a time. And he might be a lot of things—reserved, standoffish, antisocial, even creepy according to Ethan—but he isn’t a hypocrite. If Emily could waste her time helping someone like him make something worthwhile out of himself, then the least he can do is offer the kid the same chance.

And besides, he thinks ruefully; at least when he’s working with Sophia, none of the others want to deal with him either. It’s a win-win for both of them.
The problem with being habitually early is that nobody else is.

Dean yawns, glancing down at his watch again. Twelve thirty, now. Forty minutes since he’d arrived, and fifteen minutes since the time Victoria had asked him to meet her here had passed. Not that that was unexpected, of course—she is a punctual girl when it comes to really important things, like meetings with New Wave or her book club, but she often forgets to check the time when it comes to less important things, like dates, or making it to school on time.

If he had to guess, he’d say that she’ll be another ten or fifteen minutes- it’s rare that she’s more than half an hour late. But his legs are starting to go stiff from standing here so long, and the sun is hidden behind a dreary coat of grey, so he can’t stay here much longer.

Casting his gaze around, he frowns. There’s a pagoda nearby, the wood splintered and the green paint bubbling and peeling off, but it’s sheltered from the worst of the cool wind. It’s smaller than he would prefer when meeting someone new, but he can make do. He will just make sure not to sit too close to them, so the atmosphere doesn’t feel intimate.

A tired sigh escapes him as he crosses the distance to the pagoda and sits across one of the wooden benches that sits in front of a small table. There’s a dull ache through his whole body, and particularly behind his eyes, a remnant of too many nights spent awake to the early hours of the morning.

There really isn’t much else for him to do beneath the dull skies, so he unhurriedly pulls his phone from his pocket and opens his email.

He doesn’t expect there to be much interesting in there, and sure enough, while there are a few emails, there really isn’t much in there that he cares to deal with today. Armsmaster has sent out another reminder to email all reports to him in Miss Militia’s absence, and—yes, there is the sixth reminder from the PRT to stay away from Purity, Night and Fog unless they engage first.

Scrolling down a little farther, he frowns. There are a few in there that his father has forwarded to him that he had somehow missed this morning. Mostly invoices and requisition lists for the various departments in his father’s company, nothing he needs to deal with urgently. He flags each of them so he can go over them later, and keeps scrolling down.

His guess earlier had been a little off. When he finally looks up to see Victoria approaching—in a cashmere sweater her aunt had bought her for her birthday, his inner fashionista notes, paired with flared cream trousers that almost make it seem like she’s floating even when she’s firmly anchored to the ground—nearly twenty minutes have passed.

It’s understandable, though. She’s always latest when other people are involved, and he’d known that she was bringing a friend along since she’d texted him about it two days ago.

They approach hand in hand, Victoria gently caressing the wrist of a girl with curly brown hair moving stiffly at her side. He subtly tilts his head, hoping she can’t see him as he appraises her. An uncomfortable feeling gnaws in his gut as he watches the two move together. It takes him a moment to fight it down—a moment that, thankfully, he doesn’t believe either of the two see.
Jealousy is not an attractive feature on anyone, least of all himself.

The two eventually step into the pagoda. He stands quickly, accepting the brief hug Victoria gives him, before settling back down.

Before he can open his mouth, Victoria beats him to the punch. “Good morning,” she says, smiling like the sun. “Dean, this is Taylor. Taylor, this is Dean.”

He smiles at the brunette. She doesn’t return the smile, only looking at him with a sickly expression. He keeps up the pleasant expression, though internally he sighs. “It’s nice to meet you,” he says anyway.

She gives him an attempt at a grin. “Hi.” Her voice is small.

Thankfully, Victoria interrupts before he can try and force himself to say anything to try and lift the atmosphere again. “So!” she says determinedly. “So. Um. Taylor and I actually met at my book club, where we…”

Dean tunes her out, studying the girl—Taylor, he corrects himself again—as covertly as he can.

When he looks at most people, he can see colours flashing around them. He’s had years of experience with it, now, and his powers bring with them a kind of understanding about what the colours mean anyway. Victoria, for instance, is almost always infused with a sunny yellow around her, the colour of determined cheerfulness; any other colours, or emotions, that touch her seem to hover outside that aura, only occasionally dipping a toe in to send ripples through her emotions.

But this girl—well.

Colours flicker indistinguishably around her, a chaotic mess of visual noise that shifts and fades too fast for him to understand them. It’s like static on the radio, except he’s seeing it rather than hearing it. It’s almost enough to give him a headache—almost.

Dean has seen this kind of effect before, a couple of times. Once when he’d been sent to a Wards conference over in Los Angeles, and once when he’d been attending a meeting in Boston and a Protectorate cape from Brisbane had been attending. The former had been a cape called Effervescence, a Ward whose power caused most Thinker powers to go on the fritz when he was nearby; the latter had been a cape called Tedium. He’d… he’d never learned quite what Tedium’s power was, but every time he’d looked at him, all he’d been able to see was this same cacophony of colours.

His eyes flicker to Victoria, his mouth automatically closing firmly. He’s never seen anything like this from a civilian, but just because he’s never seen it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. There are many ways it could be explained away—she could be neuroatypical in some way, or his power could simply be acting up. He could ask his girlfriend, but frankly, it’s not his business. It’s a curiosity, nothing more. If the girl is a cape, then either Victoria knows, or she doesn’t want to tell her, and he’s had enough experience with newly-triggered capes to understand that it’s not a topic he should bring up lightly.

Either way, he relaxes some. Now that he’s realised what it is that’s been weirding him out about Taylor, he doesn’t feel quite so odd about her.

Victoria is still talking, he realises dimly, sickly yellow anticipation and fear clinging to her skin like
a second coat. He tries to listen to her, to focus on her words, but—

—he just can’t seem to focus with her earlier text bouncing around in his skull.

Abruptly, he wishes he could just close his eyes. He hates this, sometimes. Hates being able to see the deep, dark indigo of guilt swirling within Victoria’s eyes, hates knowing that this conversation is not going to be an easy one.

So he doesn’t look at her. He turns his head instead to look at Taylor, allowing his girlfriend’s words to wash over him unheard.

The girl herself is nothing special. She’s cute enough, he supposes; not his type, but she’s not ugly or anything like that. She’s… plain. If it weren’t for her hair, curly and brown and tumbling far, far down her back, he suspects that he’d have a hard time picking out of a crowd.

Her skin is pale, paler than his. Her eyes are wide as she looks around, her gaze darting aimlessly around the pagoda, deliberately avoiding looking at any of the others at the table. Her hands are hidden beneath the table, but he can see faint tremors in her arms, as though her hands are trembling down beneath the table, a sight not meant for their eyes.

Internally, he frowns as she draws in a shaky breath.

He’s seen this before, a few times. He’s not sure exactly what is happening to her; it could be a panic attack, or stress, or the first steps towards disassociation—she doesn’t seem aware of her body, by the way she’s unconsciously almost twitching. If he had to guess, he’d say it’s the latter, but he’s not a professional. Just a guy with too much experience dealing with this kind of shit.

“Hey, Victoria,” he says roughly, his voice ragged and just a little hoarse. She quiets immediately, looking at him, then at Taylor as she sees him staring at the girl. “I’m feeling a little tired. Would you mind getting me a coffee?”

She starts to instinctively shake her head, but her gaze lingers on Taylor, and the move turns into a limpid nod instead. Her gaze flicks towards him, almost—orange and blue flash around her, protectiveness and affection and worry and pride leeching forth and wrapping around himself and Taylor like a warm blanket.

“Sure,” she says instead, then looks over at Taylor. “Do you want anything?” Her voice is tender, and soft pink flows between the two of them as Taylor looks at her hesitantly before nodding.

“Get me a cappuccino?” Taylor sounds somehow both unsure of herself and demanding. It’s an odd combination, but Victoria seems to take it in stride, just smiling at her and making a sound of agreement before she turns to him. She doesn’t need to ask him what he wants; he just nods his head at her, and she understands.

The benefits of a long-term relationship, he supposes.

Victoria waits for a few moments, seeing if either of them have anything more to say, before she waves at the two of them, the movement stilted somewhat as though she’s regretting agreeing to go. “I won’t be too long,” she calls out behind her.

And then, it’s just the two of them, himself and Taylor.
It’s tempting to let things fall quickly into silence. If he doesn’t speak, then it’s very unlikely that Taylor will speak, and they could simply sit there in silence until Victoria returned and acted as a buffer between them. He’s experienced what that leads to before, though, and he’s promised himself before that he’ll never just be silent and hope that things turn out for the best again.

“Do you want to get some ice cream?” he says quickly, before the quiet between them can grow stifling. “There’s a little shop nearby that sells it. We could pick Victoria up one while we’re there. They’re some of her favourite treats.” His thought process is simple—sitting here in silence will only let her dwell on whatever thoughts are causing her to panic like this.

Taylor looks stiffly at him for a moment before nodding, not speaking. He doesn’t let that trouble him, just climbs to his feet and waits for her to do the same before he looks around. Right—the store isn’t too far away from here. It’s closer than the nearest café, even—they should return before Victoria gets back with their coffees.

She falls in line with him, not walking behind him, but not walking in front of him either. He files that away in the back of his mind—so it’s not just Victoria she does that with, then—and dismisses it after a moment’s thought. Whatever; it won’t hurt anyone.

“The store isn’t too far away,” he says pleasantly once they’ve started walking, attempting to make his voice sound cheery and welcoming. “I know it’s a little cold for ice cream, but have you ever had an ice cream from the old-fashioned ice cream parlour around here?” She shakes her head, but doesn’t verbalise a response. He pushes on anyway. “Their ice cream is really nice. It’s not to everyone’s taste, but it’s a lot richer than the ice creams you buy in the store. I think it’s because it’s home-made, but I’m not sure. I’ve never made ice cream before, have you?”

Taylor nods half-heartedly. “I used to make some with my- with a friend of mine,” she replies, her words somehow loopy, dreamy. Dean tilts his head. He’s not sure how to interpret this kind of tone without colour. “Her mom had an ice cream maker, but, um. We’d usually make it in a bag instead.”

“That’s good,” he says encouragingly. Getting her talking in any way is good—he’s found, over time, that the best way he has to help people from spiralling into anxiety attacks or whatever is to just keep them talking. It’s hard for people’s obsessions to consume them if they’re talking about something they enjoy. “I didn’t know you could make it in a bag, that’s interesting. I wonder if that’s how they first made it, before they had machines? I can’t imagine they had it before we had functioning freezers, but…”

He keeps up the rambling talk as long as he can, pausing often in an attempt to encourage Taylor to talk. It doesn’t work every time, sometimes she just nods or shakes her heads and other times she seems not to hear his questions at all, but he persists, and by the time they reach the store, she’s answered more than two thirds of the total questions he’s asked.

She’s looking a little more lively as they step in, a little less likely to collapse into a huddled wreck. Absently, he wonders if it would be inappropriate for him to give her words of encouragement—although it almost certainly would be, so he silences himself instead, contenting himself with looking at the menu instead.

“Do you know what you want?” he asks curiously.

She hesitates, scanning the menu. “The… mint?” she says hesitantly. “Or, um, the lemon sounds like it could be nice.”
Dean raises his eyebrows, but nods. “Alright,” he says, and steps forward to the register, where a girl in a pink outfit is illuminated with the soft red of a teenaged crush as she looks at him. He makes sure to keep his distance as he places an order for a neapolitan, a caramel praline and a lemon ice cream respectively.

It makes him feel a little guilty to be so standoffish towards the girl, so when she rings up the total in the register, he gives her a smile and tells her to keep the change. The red tint around her grows slightly deeper, and he frowns internally. He hadn’t meant to encourage her crush.

The ice cream doesn’t take long—the flavours are laid out in a series of containers across a large bench, and it takes less then a minute for all three ice creams to be made and passed along to him. He passes Taylor’s to her first, then takes his own and Victoria’s and indicates towards the door, all too aware of the maudlin blue beginning to creep around the worker as he leaves.

“I’ve never tried their lemon ice cream,” he says casually once they’re on their way back towards the park. His hands are getting cold holding the ice cream, and he can see that Taylor is nursing hers in her palms with the edges of her sleeves pulled up to cover them, but she looks happier than he’d expected to be holding the dessert. “Is it actually sour, or is it artificial lemon flavouring?”

She brings it to her face and takes a quick lick, thinking about it for a second before answering. “It’s sour, but I think it’s artificial anyway,” she says after a moment. “Yeah, it’s definitely sour. It’s very sweet as well, though.”

Honestly, that doesn’t sound very appealing to him, but he’s not an ice-cream connoisseur. He’s not a big fan of sour things, he doesn’t think most people are—but if it’s sweet as well, then he guesses he can see how she could tolerate it. He shrugs, taking care not to upset his own ice creams. “I prefer sweet things,” he says after a moment’s thought. “That’s why I bought this—it’s a lot sweeter than it looks.” He holds up the caramel praline, following it up with a cheesy smile once she looks over at him.

She snorts, shaking her head. “There’s nothing wrong with sweet things,” she replies, looking down at the ground pensively for a moment. “My, um. My oth- my, my friend, Madison, she makes a lot of sweet things. Cupcakes and muffins, those kinds of things. She gives a lot of them to me to try, and they’re very nice. Sometimes I think it might make me sick with how much sugar is in them, though.”

He shakes his head, his smile broadening. “That’s ridiculous!” he protests. “There’s no such thing as too sweet, or too much sugar.”

“Tell that to my dentist,” she replies wryly. “If Madison keeps making so many sweets for me, my dad might have to declare bankruptcy just to cover my dentist’s bills.”

He huffs out a laugh. “That’s fair,” he concedes. “Dental health is very important. Okay, I concede, you’re right. I still like my ice cream sweet, though.”

She shakes her head, a smile that’s almost a grimace flashing across her face. Instead of replying, though, she just points forward, towards the pagoda. “I think I see Victoria coming back.”

Glancing forward, he cranes his neck. It takes him a moment to see her. She’s still across the street from the park, delicately balancing four cups held in a cardboard tray. He sighs fondly, shaking his head. Over the past few months, she’s developed the habit of floating when carrying too much in her arms, claiming that it helps keep her balance—despite that both Crystal and Carol have told her that
it’s harder to correct her momentum when her feet aren’t anchoring her to the ground.

“I think you’re right,” he replies eventually. “Let’s wait for her in the pagoda, then.”

The silence that stretches between them as they wander back to the pagoda is less awkward this time. He’s not sure whether it’s because his attempts at keeping Taylor’s mind occupied helped to take her mind off whatever caused her issues or whether it’s because they can both see Victoria approaching, but either way, it feels better.

The blonde raises her eyebrow at the ice creams as she approaches, but doesn’t say anything, opting instead to just hand each of them their coffees. A tall mug with the label Cappuccino is passed to Taylor, while she keeps a tall mug labeled Caramel Latte for herself. The two remaining mugs, labeled Cappuccino SA and simply SA respectively, are passed to him.

Victoria sits down, a fuzzy indigo anxiety settling over her as she looks between the other two at the table. Dean simply waits, though he can almost feel the nervous energy tugging at Taylor from the other end of their shared bench, and just takes a sip from his coffee, making a face at its bitterness despite the sweetened milk in it.

Finally, Victoria lets out a sigh. “I guess we should talk about this,” she says, sounding resigned. Neither Dean nor Taylor say a word in reply, causing her to slump a little further down in her seat. “I sent you both a text. Did you get it this morning?”

Taylor nods unhappily. Dean does the same, though he tries to keep his response tamer, not wanting to worsen the stress he can see beginning to fuzz from Victoria’s skin.

It hadn’t been a particularly pleasant text to wake up to. Declarations like “We need to talk” are rarely a good sign; when it’s followed by a statement like “I’ve been seeing someone else, and I want you to meet her”, it’s generally a sign that today is not going to be a good day.

Still, he’s found that if he begins a day by treating it as though it is going to be a bad day, it invariably turns into one. He’d resolved before coming that he’d put his best face forward, and he’s not going to be the one to make things turn south if they do.

“Okay then,” Victoria breathes when neither of them speak for more than a minute. “W-Well. I’ve already introduced the two of you, but—Taylor, this is Dean, my boyfriend. And Dean, this is Taylor.” She says the final sentence slowly, as though tasting the words. “We met at my book club, and we’ve been seeing each other for a while now. I didn’t want to hide her from you.”

Dean risks a glance from the corner of his eye at Taylor before he responds. Immediately, he knows that he doesn’t need his power to see the white glow of fear rising from her; the ashen colour of her skin does that perfectly fine.

He twists his mouth wryly.

Honestly, he’d expected that if anyone would seduce Victoria while she was still with him, it would have been Amy, not someone he’s never even met before. Still, in some ways, that does make this easier.

“I…” His voice trails off. “I see. I’m glad to meet you then, Taylor.”

Taylor squeaks, honestly squeaks. Even she seems embarrassed by the noise, because she clears her
throat and tries to respond more normally—though her voice is still soft, as though she’s afraid to speak too loudly, lest she break something. “It’s—it’s good to meet you too.”

Victoria stares between the two of them, an unreadable expression on her face, before he can see the indigo around her bleed into the mixed red relief and blue wariness that constitutes it. “I…” But before she can say anything, black guilt and wariness flares up around her, the colours mixing and dampening the red and darkening the blue, and she shuts her mouth, seeming to reconsider whatever she was about to say. Then she clears her throat. “I don’t actually know what to say,” she says, sounding faintly embarrassed.

The corner of Dean’s mouth tilts up. “I’m glad you told me,” he says evenly. “I’m not upset, if that’s what you’re worried about.” He can see Taylor’s head turn sharply towards him at that. “That was our agreement, wasn’t it?”

Victoria nods, sighing. “It was. But…” She hesitates, looking at Taylor. “I think we should… talk about our arrangement.”

And there’s that sinking feeling in his gut again.

He listens with half an ear as she begins talking earnestly. Most of what she’s saying are just repeated assurances to the two of them—assuring him that whatever she has with Taylor, it doesn’t change the way she feels about him, and that whatever her relationship with him, she still cares about Taylor, and how the two of them make her happy.

After a while, the noise starts to become little more than illegible murmurs to him. He can’t concentrate on this, he can’t think.

He closes his eyes and rests his face in his palms.

Victoria has always been a complicated girl.

Dean has known her for more than half their lives together, but even before they met, he knows it’s true. Growing up as the child of a successful lawyer ensured that there would always be people with their eyes on her; growing up as the child of a superhero just made certain that she would never be treated normally.

They’d first met in primary school, when his father had first moved here after his mother had died. It was an awkward meeting, he’d felt—still feels, when he thinks about it. He’d stood in front of a class of thirty, introducing himself in his pressed clothing and his slick hair, looking down at a group of people he’d never met and trying to open himself up to a group of people whose lives were so profoundly different to his own.

They hadn’t interacted much, at first. They’d floated around in different circles—or, well. She had floated around in different circles; he had spent his time sitting on the swingset, working on his homework or otherwise eating a sandwich and watching the other children play.

Really, he wouldn’t say that they had become friends until they were twelve. Long after the establishment of New Wave, long after he and his father had finished grieving for his mother, long after all the perils of their childhood. They’d each lived and learned before they’d met.
That was what had attracted him to her, initially. She’d exuded… personality, is the best way he can describe it. She was vivacious, cheerful, and exuberant. Not all the time, and not every day; but it was so different to he and his father that he had been unable to draw himself away from her, as though he were a moth drawn to her flame.

But being a friend to someone like Victoria is not an easy task. She is a bright girl, a sunny girl; but there are days when her sun fades, and gloomy clouds take over. On those days, most learn to leave her alone, to wait for her moods to pass and her sun to shine warm in the sky once again, as inevitably they do.

That was profoundly unfair, he’d thought back then. He still thinks that, even now. Drawing warmth from her when her exuberance shines through, and retreating from her when grey clouds swarm her thoughts and leave her cold—it just seemed wrong to him, in a manner so profound that, one day, he had found himself sitting across from her during one of her blacker moods, peering into her eyes as though seeking what little warmth remained.

“What do you want?” she’d asked rudely, glaring at him with her mouths puffed full from peanut butter and strawberry jam. He hadn’t responded verbally. Just shrugged, and offered her his macaroni and cheese, still speckled with chilli powder. She had stared at him for minutes—literally minutes; he’d counted on a clock behind her—before she snatched the macaroni and cheese from him, scowling at him as though he might try and steal it.

He’d never been one for talking much, or really interacting with other people any more than he had to. His doctors had thrown about many names for him; depressed, anxious, isolated, autistic, disabled—the names had gone for pages and years, but none of them ever came up with the right answer.

He wasn’t depressed, or anxious, or anything like that. Maybe autistic, he’s still not sure, but none of the doctors had ever been able to agree on that one so he doesn’t claim it. He just didn’t have anything in common with the other kids at school.

Victoria, though—Victoria, he had plenty in common with.

They’d found that out early on, on one of the nights they had snuck out together, young teenagers lying together in the park staring at the starry skies. They had both grown up different—Victoria the daughter of a lawyer and a superhero, himself the son of a multi-millionaire. They both had strained relationships with their parents, or parent in his case. They read, they sang, they played, they talked; their lives intertwined, and they’d grown closer until, one day, their cheeks flushed with laughter and their cheeks stained with cheap pizza sauce as they danced around her parents’ kitchen, they’d kissed; and as he stood there, surrounded by her sun and the clouds that threatened to overwhelm it some days, for the first time since he was a child, he hadn’t felt like a part of him was missing.

He stares into his hands, colours flickering behind his eyes as the palms of his hands dig into his eyeballs.

She’s still talking. That’s the one big difference between them, he muses. She’d never understood that she couldn’t change his mind by talking about things. He’s not the kind of person who reconsiders just because she begs and pleads for him to.

No. On this topic, he’d made up his mind a long time ago. Years ago, when he’d first sat across from
her and offered to share his lunch.

“Okay,” he says simply.

Victoria cuts herself off, looking at him in disbelief. Beside him, Taylor stirs, turning to look at him with confusion and fear written over her face. “… Okay?” Victoria asks uncertainly.

He flicks a small smile towards her. “Okay,” he repeats himself, as kindly as he can. Jealousy flickers in his gut, but it’s a small flame, easily ignored. More gently, he continues, “Our arrangement was only ever to keep us both happy. If you’re not happy with it, then I’m happy to rework it. So, okay.”

She doesn’t look like she knows how to react to that. Colours flicker over her, a veritable rainbow he struggles to track, before finally settling on a colour he’s all too familiar with; the pale lilac of teary relief. “Okay,” she says as well.

None of the lilac bleeds into her voice, but that’s another thing he’s used to.

It takes time for the three of them to reach a compromise. It’s made difficult by Taylor’s fearful contributions to the conversation, as though she were afraid to offer her own thoughts and opinions to the mix, but by the combined efforts of Victoria and Dean, they’re eventually able to drag her own desires out.

This is not a conversation that includes him alone, after all. It’s not about his happiness; it’s about Victoria’s happiness, but more than that—it’s about their happiness. Each of them, but the three of them together, too.

It’s not an easy talk. It’s not an easy discussion to have, at all. Things are left unspoken, and some things are ignored.

But it’s necessary, if something healthy is to be built for everyone to enjoy.

Still; though the talks may have been necessary, they are still draining; and for none more so than Taylor, who already is dealing with so much.

So if, once talking has concluded and agreements have been reached, she returns home and slips into her bedroom—well; if she cries, or if she screams, then it is a private affair. And for one night, at least, she will rest alone, her spirits low, so that when she wakes tomorrow, her cheeks shall glow, and the stresses of today will fade.

The talk with Victoria and Dean has concluded. Though it’s tremulous for now, a new arrangement has been formed, the details of which shall be made clear over time; for now, it should be enough to know that Dean has acknowledged Victoria’s desire for a polyamorous relationship with himself and Taylor, and has further acknowledged Taylor’s desire that she only date Victoria, not him.

The rest of Sunday has been locked out, allowing Taylor time to vent her anxiety without forcing
readers through some particularly unpleasant scenes. The ramifications of the stress will be made clear over time, but in the interest of not dragging the quest’s tone down through some emotions born of a temporary stress, we’re skipping the immediate scene here.

As such, the next update will pick up tomorrow morning, or Monday in the second week of the school holidays for Taylor.
It’s hard to sleep in when you’re used to waking up around the same time every day.

You give it a valiant effort despite that. Five minutes turns into ten minutes, which turns to fifteen; but by that stage your mind is already buzzing and your breaths are coming evenly, and you know there’s no point in staying in bed any later.

Staggering out of bed, you grimace at it before moving quickly over to your dresser to get changed. There’s a faint pressure at the back of your head, the kind of headache-that’s-not-a-headache you’re all too familiar with from stress, but it’s dull at the moment, a low, throbbing pressure you’re able to ignore if you focus on something else.

You’ve started keeping the right side of one of your drawers segregated from the rest of your clothing, affording you a space you can put a few sets of clothes you can wear while jogging aside. It makes things easier on days like today, where the energy has drained out of you and you can just feel how limp your limbs are as you quickly change.

Still, it’s important that you keep putting in the effort to go jogging anyway. You’ve let it slip a few times already, and feeling like this, you know it would be all too easy for you to slip out of the habit of jogging every day. Two days here feeling drained after an emotional conversation, another day here feeling tired after staying up too late the previous night, and you know that soon after you’ll be skipping it to have breakfast early or text Madison, or… any number of other little reasons.

You slip on a set of clothing you feel comfortable jogging in and head outside. You vary your route up as much as you can, but by this point you’ve mostly settled on a few routes around the neighbourhood. Switching between them as much as possible helps to alleviate some of the boredom of following the same routes, at least. You wish you could venture further out, but…

That thought makes you frown. You already know that your house isn’t in the safest part of town, of course; you’ve lived here for years, even if it didn’t used to be as bad as it is now. Things are mostly safe at your house, and for a few blocks around, but the farther you head out in most directions the worse your environment grows.

It’d be good if there was something you could do about it, but… it’s not a problem with gang violence, or anything like that. Okay, there has been problems with gang violence around here before, there’d been a drive-by shooting a few streets to the south two years ago, but that’s not why it’s a bad environment.

It’s more that most of the wealth in the neighbourhood is concentrated in the northern section of town, closer to Downtown where most of the surge in business from electronics and the like had happened. That’s where most of the business lies, and so that’s where most of the people who earn a lot of money live. Madison and Emma both live there, and you think that’s where Victoria and her family live when they’re not at the New Wave centre.

The house isn’t that far away from the Docks—that’s why Dad had bought it, originally. It’d made his commute to and from work a lot easier. Back then, there had still been a fair amount of work flowing in, and most of the people around here had had more money.

It’s unfair, you think glumly. Just because the people who live here don’t earn lots of money
shouldn’t mean that the health of the community drops. It does, though. You’re not that naïve. Lower incomes in general correlates strongly with higher incidents of crime and recreational use of drugs and such, and that feeds in on itself.

As you head back inside, you think about it for a few moments. You wish there was something you could do to help the community around here, but—there isn’t, not that you can think of. There are efforts set up around town to try and help people overcome drug issues, and both the Protectorate and New Wave are already trying to help people recover from the economic slump and find fruitful employment.

There’s just not much you can do about it, and that doesn’t make you feel happy.

You hurry into your room, pulling out another set of clothes for the day and thinking hard about the problems with your neighbourhood—hard enough that when your phone dings with a notification, you startle hard enough to drop your shirt on the floor. You open the message with one hand as you pick up your shirt and make your way to the bathroom.

It’s from Emma. You bite your lip, then hurriedly open it before you can think better. Thankfully, she’s abided by your restrictions so far regarding how many texts she can send you in a day, so you’re not too taken aback. You just hadn’t expected it right then.

The message itself is simple. "Hey, Nan is throwing away a lot of her old sewing stuff. Do you want some of it so we can make rugs or w/e?" Another message dings soon after; "For your new room and stuff."

You tilt your head. You’re not much one for sewing, but Emma is surprisingly good at it, and you were already thinking about getting decorations for your new room. After a moment’s deliberation, you reply with a quick. "Yes please." before you step into the shower.

You spend most of your time in the shower thinking vaguely about ways you could try and help make the streets around your neighbourhood safer—maybe you could volunteer at a community club? That could help get some of the younger people to leave you alone, at least—but by the time you’re out, those thoughts have dissipated from your head entirely at the delicious smell wafting through the house.

Scrambling to get dry and dressed, you run out before you’ve even put your socks on, coming to a sudden stop in the kitchen doorway. Having heard your footsteps, Dad turns around to you with an amused smile, but you’re not looking at him. You’re looking at what he’s cooking on the stove. "Pancakes?" you ask, your eyes wide and unblinking. He chuckles, turning back to them for a second to make sure they’re not burning before he replies.

"Yep," he says cheerfully. "Work starts an hour late today, so I thought I’d dig up an old recipe and make us a nice, sweet breakfast today." He scrapes idly at the pan with a spatula as he talks.

You step hesitantly into the kitchen. You’re not used to this—not used to Dad being so energetic in the kitchen, or putting in this much effort for breakfast. Sometimes for dinner, but never this early in the morning. But—pancakes. Who doesn’t love pancakes?

"Do we have any syrup?" you ask hesitantly.

He nods for a moment, then hesitates mid-movement. "I… think so," he says doubtfully. "Actually, do you want to check the cupboard for me?"
“Okay.” You trot over to the cupboard, pulling it open and looking carefully through it. It takes you a few moments to locate it, a small, dark brown bottle with a green cap. It’s still in date, thankfully, though you don’t know how long it’s been since either of you have eaten any of it. Months, at least. “We have some!”

He nods amiably. “I made you a coffee already.” He points to a mug on the table, steaming faintly still. There’s another mug sitting by it, what you’d guess to be his empty mug. “How many pancakes do you want?”

You almost tell him just one for a moment, but you pause, reconsidering. It’s been a while since you had proper pancakes. “Three?” you ask hesitantly.

“Okay.” He flips the pancake on the stove over, testing it out. “These are surprisingly simple to make.” His voice is genial, conversational. “Just egg, milk and flour.”

By that time, you’ve already sneaked over to the table and picked up your coffee. Rather than sit back down, you make your way out to the kitchen, peering over his shoulder. “… I don’t think they’re supposed to be that shape, though,” you point out. It’s not exactly a circular pancake. It reminds you more of the shape of North America than a circle.

Dad just shrugs. “I’m a bit out of practice,” he protests mildly. “But I’m trying. Give me a break.” He nudges your hip with his, grinning at you from the corner of his mouth. You can’t help but return it, and after a moment, nudge him with your hip in turn.

That’s how the conversation goes from that point. You poke at Dad, and he returns with something light-hearted and silly while the pancakes cook slowly on the stove. Eventually, you do return to the table and take a seat so you can sip at your coffee without risking spilling any.

It takes about ten minutes before all the batter is used up. He ended up making seven pancakes, and each of them is surprisingly thick. You have to swallow a little as you see them. If you’d known they were going to be this big, you wouldn’t have asked for three, but you did.

You take a wary bite of your first one, chewing on it speculatively. Then you nod to your father, gesturing down at them as you finish your mouthful. “They’re pretty good,” you compliment him. They could stand to be a little sweeter—you’d guess that he didn’t put any sugar in them while making them—but they’re not too dry or too chewy, and they’re not as filling as they’d first seemed.

“Well, of course,” he defends himself, cutting off a slice of a pancake bigger than your hand and raising his eyebrows at you. “I cooked them, so of course they’re good.” Before you can offer a rejoinder to that, he shoves the entire slice into his mouth, allowing syrup to drip down onto his plate. He grins at you through the mouthful of pancake.

It’s comical enough that you can’t help but snicker. “That’s gross, Dad,” you say, shaking your head. “Just eat your pancakes.”

The conversation flows freely after that, the two of you joking and teasing each other around mouthfuls of sweet syrup and bitter coffee. You’re not even consciously aware of some of the weight of yesterday lifting slightly, the pressure in your head receding until there’s so little remaining it can’t even draw your attention.

Finally, though, you’re finished with your pancakes, and thus with your breakfast. You offer Dad a
quick hug as he takes his plates, but you know he’s got to finish getting prepared for work—he might have an hour off today, but he still has to go. And so, you find yourself wandering aimlessly through the empty house for a moment—a moment just long enough to draw your attention to a blinking light on the answering machine.

The message is slightly distorted as it plays back, as though there was static on the other end. It’s just a message from your manager, asking if you could come in this afternoon, as another employee has called in sick for the day. You think about it for a moment, deliberating—how long does it take to make rugs?—but after a few second’s thought, you send him a message of affirmation. If nothing else, it’ll help keep your mind occupied through the afternoon.

With that settled, you hurry off down to your basement. If you’re going to be making rugs, then you should go down and decide what kind of rugs you’d like now, you think.

You’ve examined the basement previously, taking into account what you might need down here to make it a comfortable bedroom, but you’ve never really put much thought into the aesthetics you’d like for it. You know there’s not much you can do about the aesthetics of the furniture you’ll begetting—you can keep your wardrobe and your chest of drawers for down here, but you want a bigger bed, and with that and everything else you want, you’re not going to be able to afford to be picky about aesthetics—but you can at least put some thought into how you want the room decorated.

The basement itself is a fairly spartan room. It’s made of concrete, of course. There’s a single light in the room, hanging from a chain above, and a pillar in the centre of the basement serves to break up the dreariness a little. There’s also a window, one you think Dad had installed earlier—you can’t quite remember. It’s small, but it’s not tiny. In a pinch, you think you might be able to crawl through it.

It’s a little depressing to be down here, honestly. The concrete is a stark grey, and it’s hard on your feet. There’s almost nothing here. To make it a place you want to spend your time, you, well. You already know you’re going to need rugs, and something to cover your walls, but you think the rugs you get are going to have to be soft and fluffy ones. Your feet are going to ache after spending much time down here, without that.

The room is also dark. The window doesn’t provide much illumination, and the light from upstairs doesn’t trickle down well. If it weren’t for that, you might have opted for dark blues and purples, some of your favourite colours, but if you try to decorate it like that here, it’s just going to seem gloomy and oppressive. Brighter colours, then—some blues and lighter purples, maybe. Lighter colours, white or brown, if you can get them for your furniture. You can’t afford to be too picky there, but maybe if you can’t get that, you can at least get some sheets and covers that will make it all look a bit lighter.

Retreating back upstairs, you only dimly hear Dad calling out that he’s leaving for work before you hear his car starting. You do call out to him in turn, though you’re not sure if he heard it, but your attention is mostly focused on the thoughts swimming in your head.

Thus, when the doorbell rings over an hour and a half later, you have to tear your eyes away from the sheets of paper currently littering the kitchen floor, where you’ve been scrawling out vague ideas for how your bedroom might look soon.

You stand quickly, jolting your knee against the kitchen bench as you do so, drawing an involuntary hiss from you. “C-Coming!” you call out, your voice trembling a little from the pain. It’s awkward to
limp your way to the door while rubbing your knee, but you manage.

It’s a strange sight Alan and Emma are greeted with, you’re sure. Coloured ink marks dot your hands in all kinds of strange places, and you’re leaned half-down as you massage your sore knee, offering them a pained smile as you do so. Alan peers into the house curiously, but Emma kneels down to meet your eyes, giving you a concerned look. “Are you okay?” she asks.

You wave her off. The pain from hitting your knee like that generally fades quickly, so you’re not surprised when it doesn’t hurt all that much to straighten, though you can’t hide a wince as you accidentally put too much weight on the leg. “I’m fine,” you say, though you can feel your cheeks heating up. God, you did not want Emma to see you like that. “I just hit my knee as I was getting up.”

Alan chuckles lightly. “You should be more careful,” he chides. “Well, I’ll get the boxes out of the car, but then I have to be off. What time do you want me to pick you up, Emma?”

Emma glances at you. You think about it for a moment before you reply. “We should be done by four,” you say decisively. You don’t have to work until six, and that gives you plenty of time to get ready and still make it on time.

Thankfully, Alan just nods agreeably—it could have been awkward if Alan had said that she had to be back earlier, as then you would have had to invite Emma back tomorrow, and you’re not sure you want to have her in your house two days in a row. You stand aside, waving a hand for your friend to step inside, and watch as Alan moves to his car and withdraws two large plastic crates from within.

“I didn’t know what materials you would have, so I drew up a few different ideas on what we could do if you didn’t have certain kinds of materials,” you inform Emma as you lead her to the kitchen. She looks around, puzzled, at the dozen or so sheets of paper you’d left scattered around on the floor. Rolling your eyes, you lean down and pick all of them up, then hand them over to her so she can look them over as you lead her down to your basement.

Alan drops the plastic crates off in the basement before he heads off, dropping a kiss on the top of Emma’s head as he leaves. You scowl at him as he goes, before shaking your head to get rid of the silly jealousy and leaning against a wall.

The materials Emma had brought with her were surprisingly extensive. Upon opening the plastic crates, materials practically spilled forth, requiring the two of you to lunge forward and hold them still so they didn’t fall across your floors. How they’d packed them away in crates like these is beyond you, but there’s certainly a wealth of them here.

“Okay.” Emma’s voice is unsteady, shaking you out of your temporary fugue as she stands beside you, looking between the boxes at her feet and the plans in her hand. “I think there should be plenty of materials for some of these.” She flicks through the sheets, peering over each of them in turn and eventually placing four of them over in her other hand.

The two of you get settled in fairly quickly—though, only for a given definition of ‘settled in’, as the workload is not exactly being shared evenly. You’ve never been good at working with textiles, so Emma largely takes over that job beneath your direction. Your job is to tell her when and how to cut them, in order to best suit your room.

It leaves you with precious little to do, in all honesty—which, in turn, leaves you with plenty of time to think about things. And, for once, Emma is not the thing you want to think about the least right now.
You study her as she sits against a wall, carefully staring at a line you’d haphazardly drawn across a bolt of thick purple cloth as she lines up her scissors. She’s barely said a word since she arrived, contenting herself with just sitting across from you and glancing at you every minute or so.

Idly, you reach across to her with your power, gently laying it across her. Her emotions respond eagerly, seeming to almost reach up out of her to caress you. Patience rests thickest and heaviest, a forced and weary feeling hanging a dull cloud over her. Boredom rises next, but it’s strangled by something, a warm and almost happy feeling wrapped around it like a snake constricting it. The feeling fades, then, as oppressive sadness lays below, mingled through with spots and specks of happiness.

You frown, though you quickly turn the expression back to a neutral one before she can see it. That’s an odd mix of emotions, but you don’t feel any hint of anger or a desire to hurt you in there right now. It’s possible it could come in later, but… you can feel something else in there. Something empty, aching.

Rubbing your chest, you stare at her for a moment, noting the way her head tilts to glance at you, the small smile that flits across her face when she sees you looking at her before she returns her attention to the cloth in front of her. You can feel the happiness in her bubble a little as she moves to thread a needle, shifting and growing and pushing away the choking sadness that’s hanging beneath her a little further. You grip it lightly, take her happiness into her hands, but you don’t do anything with it just yet.

Normally, you think, you’d still feel angry with her, at least a little. She hurt you, and whatever her reasons, that doesn’t go away just because she feels sad.

But, lately… Lately, it’s been really hard for you to feel much in the way of anger. Anger is just so draining, and it’s so hard for you to dredge up the energy necessary for you to really feel it when there are so many other things demanding your focus.

Your steps are hesitant as you step across the room, trying your best not to alert Emma to your actions. It’s doomed to failure; once you get close enough, she can’t help but look up and see you, but by then, you’re already moving to sit down beside her. She looks at you with wide eyes, but doesn’t speak.

You stretch out like she is, leaning your back against the wall and sitting with your legs stretched out as far as they can. Then, after a moment’s consideration, you move your left leg a little, nudging hers with it. She doesn’t react for a moment, so with an impatient sigh, you move your hand down and lift her leg just high enough for you to slide yours under, causing her leg to rest atop yours.

Emma doesn’t move for long moments, not until you rest your hand atop her thigh and scoot a little closer, laying your head on her shoulder. You do try and make it seem as innocent as you can when you can clearly see down her shirt—and wow, that brings up a lot of mixed emotions—and although it does take her more than a minute, she eventually returns back to her stitching, though her movements are halting and awkward.

Time passes idly by as you continue to gently stroke her thigh. You can see her hands shaking slightly, causing her stitching to move awry, but she makes no efforts to pull away or to stop you. Confusion rolls in her, but you keep a tight grip on her happiness, not letting it recede beneath the mess. Occasionally, you tug at her happiness a little, feeling her body relax more each time you do it.
You’d intended to strike up a conversation about something inane to help you both take your minds off the history between you, talking about your job or her modelling or something innocent like that, but the longer you spend patting her and occasionally glancing down her shirt, the less desire you have to interrupt the moment with small talk.

And so, an afternoon passes by. Emma slowly cuts and stitches together near half a dozen rugs for you, her efforts stilted and the rugs plain, but still—still vibrant, and still something of her and of you. They're not professional quality, not even close; but you think that, given time, you’re probably growing to appreciate them more and more.

That’s how Alan finds the two of you when he returns at four; Emma slowly stitching away at a seventh amateur rug, a lost expression warring with a gentle smile across her face, and you half-asleep on her shoulder, relaxing in her warmth and the soft smell of grape-scented body wash.

Neither of you speak as you begin packing away the textiles, as though afraid that if either of you were to speak, the moment would be broken. Alan, thankfully, seems to read the atmosphere, and keeps his mouth silent until you have packed everything back up into the plastic crates and tucked them away into a corner of the basement. Even then, he mostly offers you a small smile and an aching sense of something warm and fierce and proud; the only words he offers you are a goodbye.

Before they leave entirely, however, Emma slowly drags her feet to a stop in front of you, pausing in the doorway while Alan climbs into the car. After a moment, she steps back inside the house, looking nervously up at you.

“Thanks, Taylor,” she whispers.

You flicker a smile at her, but you don’t reply verbally. You’re not sure you can, right now.

Emma steps forward, her arms twitching at her sides as though she’s planning to hug you, but she seems to think better of it after a second’s thought. Instead, she lowers her arms and turns to move out the door.

You don’t stop her, but you do offer another small smile to her back.

After your afternoon with Emma, it’s difficult for you to try and focus on work. A strange lethargy has fallen over you, as though your energy has been drained by something, leaving in its place a kind of empty fugue.

You could laze around the house, taking the opportunity before work to rest, but you’re half-afraid that if you try, you’re going to fall asleep and miss your shift entirely. Instead, you unhurriedly walk to your room and search through your closet again for something to wear to work, then move to the bathroom and turn the shower on.

You’re not quite sure what it is about a shower that wakes you up so much, but every time you step in one you feel revitalised. It might be the heat, or the humid air, or the comforting feeling of water cascading down your body, or all three, or something else entirely. You don’t really care, though. All you need to know is that it helps.

About twenty minutes later, when the walls of the bathroom are slick with condensed steam and your fingers have pruned, you climb out of the shower and wrap yourself in the fluffiest towel you own.
Feeling moderately refreshed, and energetic enough to not feel like you want to fall asleep from just wandering around the house, you get quickly dressed and hurry down to the kitchen. A bit of coffee before work has never hurt anyone, and you can leave Dad a note here letting him know where you’ll be.

You don’t really relax around the house so much as you just take things slowly. You sip at your coffee as you walk around, making sure you look presentable and that you have money for the bus, before finally heading out to wait for the bus, leaving a half-empty mug of coffee sitting in the sink.

The bus is near two minutes early today. It waits its full allotted time, affording you plenty of time to find a window seat as far from the other people on the bus as possible. Some of the passengers stir as you move past them, but only one of them, a man whose eyebrows twitch and breath reeks of cheap alcohol, turns to look at you as you sit past. Still, he settles back after a moment, and you claim your seat in time to zone out like the rest of them.

The trip doesn’t take as long as you’d expected, so you end up arriving to work near fifteen minutes early. The first thing you do is head out the back and talk to your manager, who quickly fills you in on what you’re expected to be doing today.

“We don’t need you cleaning just yet,” he says, his voice smooth and mild. “I’ll get you to give the floors a sweep and to wipe down the tables and benches around eight, but for now, I’d appreciate it if you could restock the shelves and make sure the workers behind the counters have everything they need.”

It’s not a job you’re used to doing, but he accompanies you back out to the counter for a few minutes, giving you a quick idea of what you need to do. It’s simple enough work, so it doesn’t take long; most of what he shows you are the principles of stock rotation (“Always sell the older products first,” he says roughly, “otherwise we’ll end up with a lot of wastage. Check the dates on everything as you go, just make sure they’re still good to be sold.”) and where everything is stored.

Then, once he’s assured that you know what you’re doing, he heads back into the office, leaving you free to work on your own.

For a solid half an hour, nobody bothers you, aside from the other staff members occasionally brushing past you as they scurry around the counter to get everyone their tickets and snacks. It’s a busy night, so everyone has enough work that they don’t bother with more than perfunctory greetings.

Things don’t slow down until around quarter past seven. The rush of people has largely died off, leaving just a few occasional stragglers walking in to buy a ticket for a movie that’s almost out of rotation. One of your coworkers—Tim, you think you remember his name is, but you might be wrong—has finished up for the night, leaving just four of you working now, one of them an usher.

You’ve finished restocking the candy bar, and are up to wiping down the benches when you’re approached by someone—a lady around the same age as your father, you think. She seems to be about in her mid-thirties, but you’re not a very good judge of how old people are. She looks vaguely Middle Eastern—Iranian, maybe, or Turkish, but those are just wild guesses; Brockton Bay isn’t quite multicultural enough for you to identify her as more than Middle Eastern. One of her arms is wrapped in a cast, but she’s moving easily around it, so you’d guess it’s a couple of weeks old.

“Hi,” the woman says. Her voice is rough, slightly raspy, similar to that of a smoker, though she doesn’t look like someone who smokes. “Would you be able to spare me a moment? You’re the only
worker that’s free, I think.”

You turn and look back at the counter, where—somehow, while you were wiping down the tables for the past couple of minutes—a small lineup has formed. It looks like someone’s birthday party. Resisting the urge to shake your head, you turn back to the woman. “Sure,” you say as brightly as you can. “What do you need?”

The woman smiles, holding up a folded piece of paper that holds the cinema’s movie schedule. “I have a few days off from work,” she says, waving her injured arm a little to draw your attention back to it, “and I’ve been looking for something fun to do. I thought I’d come down and see what movies are playing, but your papers don’t seem to have a summary of the movies or anything.”

You blink, biting your lip. Damn it—you haven’t actually paid any attention to what movies have been out recently, aside from the little bits you’d been able to catch while listening to your girls, but you don’t want to admit that. Ordinarily, you hate dealing with customers, but—this woman is pretty, and you kind of do want to help her.

Damn you and your libido.

“We usually keep summaries of the movies up on our website,” you hedge. You’re pretty sure that’s what your manager has said, anyway. “The brochures here are just for our times. If you’d like, though, I could go out the back and check to see if we have anything out there that might help you?”

The woman arches her brow, but her expression is still pleasant as she nods. “If you wouldn’t mind, that would be lovely,” she replies.

“Okay. I’ll be right back then!”

You’re actually fairly certain that you do keep summaries of the movies out the back, in the form of the movie’s blurb. They’re what your manager writes up for the website—and you’re fairly certain that there’s usually a stack of brochures designed to be folded into flyers that do have the summaries written on them as well, but a cursory glance around the room doesn’t reveal them to you, and you didn’t see any of them around. It’s possible that you’re out, so you just quickly grab the sheet of printed summaries and head back out to the table, where the woman is still standing around, peering at a screen above.

“Here they are!” you exclaim as you hurry over to her. She turns around, glancing down at the papers, and makes an appropriately thankful noise. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

She looks down at the papers for a few moments, seeming to consider something, then shakes her head before nodding quickly. “Yes, actually. Do you…” She hesitates for a moment, seeming to think of the correct way to phrase something. “Do you have any recommendations? I’m afraid that it has been some time since I last saw a movie, and I haven’t heard of any of these.”

You pass the papers over to her, frowning again. “What kind of movies do you like?” you ask after a moment.

“I like all kinds,” she says vaguely. “I like mysteries and romances, and I must profess a certain fondness for biographies. I don’t like tragedies very much.”

Quickly, you try to recall everything you remember about the movies people had told you they’d watch recently. Unfortunately, it isn’t very much. “Um… If you like mysteries, then you might like The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo. Or if you like romances, then I hear Hugo is meant to be a decent
movie, but, um, I haven’t watched it myself.”

“Hmm.” The woman hums for a moment, a throaty sound that makes certain parts of you respond in a rather inappropriate manner. “The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo—that’s in Swedish, isn’t it? That certainly sounds intriguing.”

“I think this one is in English,” you inform her. “There was a Swedish movie released two years ago, but they adapted it again for English audiences.”

Thinking over it for a moment, the woman lets out a sigh. “That’s unfortunate,” she says, her lips curling down. “I enjoy hearing movies in other languages. It is very refreshing, don’t you agree?”

You don’t visibly make any signs of relief, but internally, you let out a small victory cheer. Thank god—you can’t hold a conversation about a movie, you’ve never seen, but talking about movies spoken in another language and the benefits of subtitles over spoken audio, that you can do.

You can’t talk for too long, of course, and it seems the woman knows that. She keeps the conversation short and succinct, only affording the two of you enough time to talk about other subtitled movies you’ve seen—a series of Japanese films “provided by a dear co-worker” for the woman, she had declared with a wry twist to her mouth, and Amelie in French for you—before standing.

“Anyway,” the woman concludes, her voice cool and smooth, “it was nice talking to you…” She trails off expectantly.

It takes you a moment to realise what she’s waiting for. “Taylor!” you blurt out. “My name is Taylor. It’s nice to meet you.”

The woman looks bemused, but nods warmly enough still. “Taylor,” she repeats. “I’m Hannah. It was nice meeting you, but I’m afraid the next showing is in approximately five minutes, and I haven’t bought my ticket yet.” She visibly thinks for a moment, then smiles at you once again. “I’ll make sure to compare the movie to the original, if one of my colleagues will be willing to loan it to me. Perhaps it will prove to be an exception to the rule.”

She shifts as though to move away, and a brief flash of panic runs through you. Instinctively, you reach out with your power to brush over her emotions, but before you can do anything, with a sharp flash of panic at your own actions, you still yourself, only lightly touching her emotions.

“Well,” you say carefully, reaching down tenderly with your power to grasp her emotions as lightly as you can, “I work again this Friday morning. Maybe you could give me your opinion then.” And with a soft tug, you pull gently on what you think is her loyalty—a strong, unyielding current running through her and deep into the ground beneath, a solid, tangible presence that seems to almost define her.

Hannah shifts restlessly beneath the touch of your power, even though you’re barely doing anything—just enough that, hopefully, she might be more willing to actually return when you’re working next. “Maybe,” she says, uncertainty clear in her voice. “I mightn’t be busy then—we’ll see. It would be good to discuss it, though.”

You nod, smiling both inside and out. If nothing else, you think, at least touching her with your power like this should let you feel if she enters the cinema on Friday. Really, that’s all you’d wanted—at least this way, you can approach her then and try and talk a little more.
She departs with no more fanfare after that. You can feel her trailing off to the counter, then disappearing off towards one of the rightmost cinemas, but you can’t afford to pay much more attention than that—there are too many people over there for you to easily track her shifts in emotions, and you do have to pay attention to your cleaning so that everything is done appropriately.

Still, the memories of your conversation with her echo through your head as you finish your shift and head home, crawling into your pyjamas at eleven o’clock at night and collapsing into bed, your weariness returning in full force.

Next time, you think dimly, you should at least make sure to read a review of each of the movies playing at work. You’ve never really cared that much about it, it’s just a job, but—you can tell that, at least a little, Hannah had enjoyed having someone to talk about the movie with.

It’s not much, but talking to her had made you feel… warm. Excited, in that way that only someone paying singular attention to you can make you feel. And she had—the entire time the two of you had been talking, her attention had been focused on you and your conversation.

Yes, you think dimly as you begin to fall quietly into sleep; yes, you’d quite like to talk to Hannah again.

And then you’re asleep, your only thoughts of half-finished plans for tomorrow swirling through your head.

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