Vacancy

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Vacancy

by smolandfeisty

Summary

Taylor awakens, covered in blood and bereft of her memories, to a Brockton Bay rocked by Leviathan. Rendered little more than an extremely effective killing machine, she must navigate through this cesspit of a city in order to find herself - and anything she may have left behind in a previous life.
Trainwreck watched with a grim cast to his face as the group of battered and weary-looking women were marched into the bombed-out mall complex. At fixed intervals down the line, gun-toting Merchants prodded their captives onward. A woman cried out in pain – struck in the back of the legs by a young, overeager Merchant. Another Merchant smacked him over the head for this offense. *Territorial.*

The grizzled tinker pulled his gaze away from the ensuing brawl to survey the posse of prisoners and captors as a whole. Aside from the now-familiar infighting amongst the Merchants, there had been no major incidents on their excursion. The captive women were docile, any ideas of escape or rebellion beaten out of them.

Although he found the job distasteful at best, Trainwreck only allowed himself to feel muted sparks of concern which flared with each beating. He didn’t kid himself into thinking that he was a *good* guy by any definition of the word. After all, he had a job, and he was too professional to drop the ball because of something as inconsequential as his own skewed conscience.

That said, he was pretty pissed off that Skids kept saddling him with the shittiest duties. “Alright, break it up now!” Trainwreck hollered at the two men who were still intent on tearing each other apart. He lifted an unwieldy metal fist and pounded the ground for emphasis, cracking the tile floor. He heard a chorus of whimpers from the nearby women and grunted, shamefully proud at their response.

>*These are the only people in this godforsaken town I get any respect from, and it’s ‘cause I dragged them half-naked out of their homes.* The other Merchant capes often found him off-putting, not because of his hefty power armor or laundry list of crimes, but due to his ugly mug of a face. This was a nice change. *Well, rep is rep, even among the Merchants. Speaking of...*

“We’re almost back to the *Markets.* You don’t want to be gettin’ handsy with each other in front of everyone. You’re Merchants. Got a rep to hold up. Capiche?”


There was a burst of commotion as some of the armed men began to bring out their elastic armbands, marks of their “prowess” as far as Merchants were considered. Others began to goad the women forward more roughly than before, making use of their weapons and fists.
Trainwreck reached into a compartment on the side of his hulking chassis to withdraw a cheap cellphone. His fingers were clumsy when jabbing in the numbers, but he was used to it by now.

“Trainwreck here. We’re on our way with the girls.”

There was a slurred response on the other end of the line. Trainwreck interpreted it as, “Problems?”

“No capes and no cops,” he replied. That was a white lie. The small troupe had encountered a young, musclebound parahuman with heroic intentions, but the fight had been short. They’d left the boy in a grimy alley, bloody and bruised. The incident wasn’t even worth mentioning. “Things’re smooth sailing for us.”

Another mumble. Something to the effect of getting their asses back to the leadership’s headquarters along with a handful of threats to his life and manhood. Trainwreck nodded, before realizing he should vocally confirm his response. Another grunt signified the end of the call.

Trainwreck pocketed his cellphone and heaved a sigh that wheezed out from the chambers of his tinker-tech lungs. Skidmark was getting fed up with him, he knew that; he just wasn’t sure why. He’d done nothing to slight the man, he committed to each duty he was saddled with, and he’d been a pretty good employee all things considered. That might be the root of the issue – Skids didn’t seem like the type of guy to value excellence. He just wanted people who were desperate, mean, and willing to prove it.

None of those three factors were in short supply after Leviathan had left his mark on the town.

“Get the fuck back in line!” a hoarse voice barked, snapping the tinker out of his thoughts. He looked to see the same troublesome Merchant strike a young woman across the face with his baseball bat. Her head snapped to the side, spraying drops of blood onto the captives nearby. She swayed away from her assaulter, long, sweaty locks hanging in a dark curtain around her face.

Trainwreck roused from his position at the head of the company. With how over-zealous some of the gangsters could get with the women, it would probably be best for him to act before this boy took it too far.

The girl continued to spew out an almost unintelligible string of profanity. “Don’t get in my fuckin’ way, you dumb cunt! If I fuckin’ wanna hit a bitch, I hit her, and–”

Before Trainwreck could intervene, the Merchant swung his bat again, then suddenly froze in place, eyes bulging out and mouth hanging open. The girl withdrew her clenched fist from his torso, flashing two long, gleaming blades which extended from between her knuckles. Her victim fell to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut, entrails spilling from his exposed midsection.

The girl lashed out at the woman nearest to her. Two strikes of her fists – four blades hissing through the air – and the woman lay dead, bisected, on the floor of the mall.

Any hope in the captives that the sudden rebellion had sparked was brutally extinguished with her indiscriminate attack. Screams echoed through the empty hallways of the mall as the women tried to run, only to be cut down by the girl’s frenzied attacks or by the gangsters’ panicked gunfire. Chaos reigned outside the Merchant marketplace.

Trainwreck barreled towards the commotion on all fours. His posture was almost simian, given his broad, mechanical upper body and stocky metal legs. The loping strides quickly brought him in
arm’s reach of the parahuman girl.

In the brief time that it took the cyborg to close the distance, the girl had managed to cut down two more people. Flecks of gore drenched her scrawny frame. She was encircled by a myriad of severed limbs and the gouges that she had carved into the cement pillars. A stream of blood was dribbling into a gash that she’d scored along the floor. She slowed in her carnage to let out a scream of rage that sent chills up the tinker’s artificially-constructed spine.

“Hey!” Trainwreck bellowed at the girl to draw her attention before she could cleave apart another woman. The massive gauntlets that served as his hands clenched in front of him, triggering a mechanism in his gut to churn out a carapace of plate armor. With the additions, it was as though he’d gained over half a foot in height. Another motion caused the spout on his back to belch out a cloud of steam for effect. “Back the fuck off, girlie.”

To his surprise, the girl didn’t attack him. Her head cocked to the side, and what he could see of her expression seemed more…quizzical than hostile. Not that he’d stake his own safety on the curiosity of a parahuman who’d gutted a handful of people in seconds.

In closer quarters his view of the girl was unobstructed, but what he could see of the girl was not pretty. The blades that she wielded were claws, two jutting out of both her hands from between the knuckles. They were bone-white, but glinted as light reflected off of them. Each sporadic twitch of her hands sent blood wicking off their surfaces.

The girl’s face was just as menacing, with her teeth bared and eyes bloodshot. There was no sign of a bruise where the Merchant had struck her; perhaps it was just buried beneath the coat of grime and viscera that splattered her face.

“Now just calm your ass down and maybe we can see about other options for you besides the Market,” Trainwreck continued, his confidence increasing with each second that the girl didn’t lash out. The last thing he wanted was a fight between himself and some berserker with bystanders nearby. He tried to sound pacifying, hard as it was with those claws out. “You want to work for us? That’s fine. Just put those claws away and let’s talk—”

Letting out another bloodcurdling war cry, the girl slashed at Trainwreck with her left-handed claws. Instinctively, he threw up an arm to block the attack. Her wrist rebounded off of his gauntlet with a clank, but the blades still sliced into the metal plating. Trainwreck’s other arm swung into her gut – not hard enough to kill a human, but enough to give them second thoughts.

The girl folded over from the blow, spitting out a glob of blood, but remained on her feet. Trainwreck’s injured arm came down to swat her aside and send her reeling. The girl fell to her hands and knees, claws raking furrows in the floor as she skidded across it. Angry.

Her fighting style was wild, uncoordinated. There was no rhyme or reason, no intent behind the attacks besides causing harm. It pissed Trainwreck off.

Trainwreck’s other foot swung forward to punt her out of reach, but a flash of her blades almost took his whole leg off at the knee. He swiveled around and planted that foot behind him to stabilize himself and keep the girl at arm’s length. Her next strike only grazed his armor, but the scratch went long, opening a gash up the front of his torso.

_Shit. She’s gonna eviscerate me at this rate._
With another sweep of her arm, the girl shaved off three metal fingers from Trainwreck’s outstretched hand. Now he was on the defensive, backpedaling as well as he could with only one and a half functioning legs. The damaged hand folded inwards to reveal a circular saw – a monstrous thing designed less for its cutting power and more to crush and rend flesh.

He heaved the weapon forwards and pulverized the ground between them, yet still managed to miss the girl by a mile. She was pressing her attack on his unarmed side, now, turning his remaining hand into scrap metal. Trainwreck brought his saw around to gnaw into her torso; it flayed her clothes and flesh but groaned in protest once it reached her ribcage. The blade sputtered to a stop, mangled.

In the pause that Trainwreck took to gape at the damage, the girl lopped the circular saw off at the wrist. Her next step took her too close for the tinker to throw a punch, and then she was on top of him.

There weren’t many things around that could make Trainwreck really fear for his life. Nine out of ten times, he could make it out of a fight with only superficial damage to his framework, find a promising dumpster, and get to work on rebuilding. But now, with this feral girl dragging her claws through his guts, he felt his mortality with shocking clarity.

*God no, not like this,* he thought. A critical support gave way and caused half of his body to sag inwards. At this point, the girl was reducing the metal of his midsection to a pulp, any solid structure long since rent into scrap. He dimly heard her inarticulate war cries, but they sounded far-off. *I can’t die working with the Merchants...killed by some crazy bitch!* *Fuck, god, let me live.*

Trainwreck’s body, no longer under his control, staggered back and collapsed, and to his relief the girl did not pursue. She turned and leapt in the opposite direction. From his position on the ground, he could hear the thump of footsteps as she engaged another target. They wouldn’t be as tough to kill as him.

Gunshots began to fire off rapidly like a string of firecrackers before being cut short, and the footfalls grew more distant. She was gone.

“Fuck,” Trainwreck said aloud to the empty hallway after he had caught his breath. He tried to look down at his feet to survey the toll on his chassis, but the mechanisms in his neck were nonresponsive. “Double fuck. Motherfuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*”

A quick twist of his neck detached his head from the hunk of metal that had served as his body. He flopped around on the floor like a fish for several seconds before the crude robotic arm at the base of his neck activated, lifting him above the filthy ground. It took him a while to gather his thoughts, even with the threat of the girl long gone.

*Eyes on the prize. You’ve got a job to do.* Trainwreck’s spider-like appendage skittered across the ground with his head in tow. It cost him a few seconds to detour around the inert form of his body, but he didn’t want to chance the sparks of electricity and ragged metal. Byproducts of the damage that the girl had inflicted.

When he reached the hip of the fallen giant, one of his fingers opened the catch and released his cellphone. It was even harder than normal to dial. If he didn’t know better, he would’ve blamed it on nerves.

“Mall?” A disguised voice, making it impossible to discern the speaker’s age, sex, or ethnicity. It was the clipped and concise edge that revealed the nature of the speaker.
“Boardwalk,” Trainwreck replied without hesitation. Failure to procure the code word would have resulted in a string of more stringent security measures. If he failed those, the assumption was that someone else was in play: a Master/Stranger, a shapeshifter, even someone who had him at gunpoint. The phone would self-destruct or bring him to some other grisly but quick demise.

“This is an emergency, then,” the voice decided. Its tone brooked no disagreement. “Forwarding you to our employer.”

There was a brief silence, as the tinker’s unease grew. If he brought this to his boss’ attention and then was wrong about the threat that the girl posed, there would be repercussions. Minor ones at first. Less generosity when he asked for materials, more troublesome goons should he request any.

But the worst part would be the horrible dread of knowing that he was on his boss’ shit-list as a problematic element. His reputation was at risk.

He heard a click as if someone had taken a phone off the hook. Trainwreck interpreted that as his cue to speak. “Boss? I’m in a bit of a bind. Nothing to do with the Merchants…no, there’s another cape around. A loose cannon. I think she’ll be a problem.”

Fuck it. This is more important.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Mood Music:

Hurt - Johnny Cash

Taylor awoke in the gutter, half-submerged in trash and dirty water. Her long hair, mucked up and grimy from the filth, was plastered to her face and neck. She ran her hands over her body in a moment of panic. All her limbs were attached, her blood-soaked clothes still clung to her by threads, and her mind was still frustratingly bereft of memories. A sigh escaped her lips.

It was a surreal experience to wake up each morning a blank slate. In the first few breaths of consciousness, Taylor swore that she had something in her memory besides fuzz, like an evasive word or phrase on the tip of her tongue. But always, the sensations eluded her. After a few days, the pattern of waking up was established; she started remembering not remembering, and that got way too confusing to deal with on top of the constant fatigue.

She pushed aside the arduous task of regaining her memories and focused on the more important goals at hand. Like getting her next meal, or fighting off the next thug who jumped her in an alley, or keeping the host of other problems that plagued her at bay.

Brockton Bay was falling apart.

As of yet, Taylor still hadn’t gathered the full picture, and she couldn’t exactly walk into a library and find out. There had been some devastating event and Taylor had woken up some days or weeks ago in the aftermath: the flooded carcass of a city, populated by looters and murderers and monsters capable of far worse.

Monsters like me.

Sucking in another weary breath, Taylor pulled herself to her feet. Soreness wasn’t the right word for the feeling that had settled in her muscles - she didn’t get sore anymore - but it didn’t feel great. It was more a deep-seated exhaustion that enveloped her mind and seeped into her body too. Psychosomatic, she thought, but she wasn’t sure why that particular word leapt out to her; it wasn’t exactly a common one.

The soreness wasn’t unwelcome, though. It was sort of…therapeutic to feel the punishing strain all the way to her bones each time that she woke up, soaked in blood or not. That was probably masochistic of her, Taylor mused. She wasn’t too concerned. Better to stay grounded, connected to other people, than to go full-on animal.

She shook her head, clearing away the dark thoughts that were intruding on her bleary mental state. Physical needs first, Taylor decided, and then she could tackle the ongoing crisis that was her identity.

After a few staggering steps forward, she gained her bearings, straightening to her full height. First
order of business for the morning would be scrounging up some semblance of a meal. There was a sprawling shelter for the homeless and less-fortunate somewhere to the...northwest of her, Taylor was pretty sure. If it wasn’t serving full meals, it would at least have clean drinking water, maybe some snacks to tide her over.

The truth of the matter was, Taylor didn’t need food as much as most people did. She only ate because when she didn’t, bad things happened. That led to a different sort of hunger, one that she couldn’t ignore.

No, Taylor fed herself more for the people around her than her own well-being. That was important; Taylor didn’t remember much, but she knew that she couldn’t let herself hurt others.

Taylor’s footsteps fell into a rhythm as she made brisk progress down the empty streets. Her heart thumped in her chest; little memory as she had, this corpse of a city felt wrong to her. She could only surmise that this was the place she’d been born or raised in, likely both. It made sense that she might have had deep emotional ties to it.

But in its current state, there was a potential threat lurking behind every corner. It seemed impossible that someone might call this place home, Taylor reasoned, unless they were as twisted as the city itself. Why did people stay?

She could understand the mindset of the people a little bit, if she tried hard enough. The idea, the impulse that made no sense, couldn’t be reasoned out, but had to be obeyed? That was something she was intimately familiar with. Being without any memories, impulse and instinct were all she had to go on for the past few weeks.

The most important impulse for Taylor: don’t get caught. She didn’t get it, didn’t even fully understand it - don’t get caught by whom? For doing what? - but she didn’t need to. She just had to go along with it. That said, keeping a low profile was more difficult than ever with everyone on guard in this town.

The shelter fell into view, looking more like a mob of vagrants from afar and not much better up close. Hundreds of people had been displaced from their homes, and they were angry, scared, confused. Even weeks after the fact. Taylor didn’t find it hard to picture herself among them, shouting at the enforcers and staffers, desperate for something to carry them through to the next day. Food, a bed, information about a family member.

But Taylor didn’t have the luxury of worrying about those things; she had bigger concerns.

One of the enforcers, a well-built man armed to the teeth with an assortment of weapons, glanced her way suspiciously. It didn’t help matters when her eyes darted away from his, down to her tattered shoes, by instinct. His grip on his gun shifted. Her fists balled up at her sides. Please no...Don’t make me start something with this many people around.

The man’s gaze roved on past her, focusing on another person in the crowd. Taylor was hesitant to relax yet. Even in the throng of filthy, displaced civilians, she stuck out like a sore thumb - too tall, too gaunt, too wild-eyed. And she was splattered with other humans’ insides. She shouldered forward into one of the main tents. The sooner she was out of here, the better for everyone involved.

After nearly half an hour of waiting in line, she was able to grab an energy bar from a stack on one of the many tables. It took effort to restrain from shoving the food down her throat. Slow down. Chew and swallow. The dense snack fell into her gut in clumps, not doing anything to calm her
nerves. Still, it was one less thing to worry about.

The eyes of a crowd burned into her back, she could feel it, and the sensation was enough to arouse her paranoia. Taylor waited till a bedraggled family shouldered past her, then snatched up a baggy sweatshirt from a pile of dirty laundry. Looking around guiltily, she tucked it under her arm and moved on.

Right then. She had other business to attend to before she could make her exit. She ducked into one of the overcrowded restrooms at her first opportunity. It was another arduous wait to get access to the toilet, the sinks, even the rapidly diminishing stack of paper towels. But by the time she exited the bathroom, drowning in a hoodie several sizes too large and with her hands jammed in the pouch over her midsection, Taylor felt like an entirely new person.

She had a hunch that the feeling had something to do with how she could shake off injuries and illness; that whatever kept her alive also made her a little better. She was stronger, tougher, quicker on her feet. On the outside she still looked like hell, but her insides were working overtime. Unfortunately, she couldn’t recall any courses in human anatomy that she might have taken in the past to shed more light on the theory.

In the sweatshirt pocket, her hand closed around a smudged plastic ID card. It was a student pass belonging to a girl named Taylor, from a school which she couldn’t identify. She’d found it in her own jeans when she first woke up over a week ago. The picture on the card was identifiable as herself. But that was all she knew.

*Taylor.* That was all she had of her past.

The sun was beating down by the time she stepped outside, and Taylor hissed in annoyance. She felt uncomfortable walking around in broad daylight. She always felt like she was being watched. She caught the eyes of one of the newly-stationed guards on her as she pushed her way to the edge of the shelter grounds. Maybe that feeling wasn’t too far off from the truth.

Preferring to avoid the crowds, the girl resolved to make her way south, through the looming warehouses of the Docks. She felt more comfortable among the austere structures than the people.

Her brisk strides carried her quickly towards the buildings, putting distance between herself and the shelter. This wasn’t the first time that she’d been to the shelter, but it left her uneasy each time. There was something about the place, its atmosphere, that rubbed her the wrong way.

“*Whore!*” a voice barked from a nearby alleyway, punctuated by a meaty-sounding impact. Taylor jumped skittishly in time with the follow-up blow. “Think you can just steal from the Undersiders and walk away?!”

A soft whimper was the only response. Taylor tried to block it out. Muggings and attacks were an everyday occurrence in Brockton Bay. Taylor, more than anyone else, had to worry about herself. She couldn’t afford to lose control here, to wake up with another dead person smeared all over her. She walked onwards.

But the click of a switchblade and the muffled cry of a young woman were unmistakeable from where she stood. *Shit.* The first hints of a migraine tugged at Taylor’s brain. Her hands dropped to her sides, balled up into fists. Dammit, she’d just gotten this sweater.

She turned and stalked in the direction of the alleyway.
“I’m supposed to be teaching you a lesson,” the man growled to his victim. He held her by the throat in a tight grip; his wiry hand was attached to a gaunt body, laced in scars and wrinkles. He looked gray and aged, as so many people around this city did, but the cruel light in his eyes was very much alive. He continued in a low voice, “but I reckon the boss-lady won’t mind if I take my time with that.”

The girl that he held let out another fearful gasp. Her legs kicked out but were blocked by the man’s thick leather boots. She was a beautiful girl, Taylor acknowledged, with dark cocoa-brown skin and wide, doe-like eyes, but she was frail enough to be held aloft. A dirty dress hung limply past her bony hips.

The man’s voice dropped to a whisper that Taylor couldn’t hear from the mouth of the alleyway. Taylor took that chance to speak up. “Hey, there.”

“You’re don’t sound like my boss,” the man said. He released the girl who he was holding to face Taylor. From the thick vest he wore and the number of knives that were strapped to his body, it was clear he was one of the enforcers from the shelter. “Are you crazy, girl? Get outta here before you do somethin’ you regret.”

“I could say the same to you,” Taylor called out to him as she closed the distance. Each step she took only caused her headache to build. The man, having just turned back to his victim, glared back at the approaching girl. His expression was dark. Taylor blustered on. “Trust me, if you hurt that girl, what I do to you will be a lot worse. I’m not trying to threaten you, but this isn’t something I-”

Her rambling was interrupted with a series of sharp cracks that echoed through the alley. The back of Taylor’s head smacked against concrete before she could react. When the ringing in her ears faded, Taylor found herself stretched out on the ground. There was a sharp pain in the front of her head, not to mention the trickle of blood oozing out of her arm and gut.

Taylor heard rather than felt the plink as a bullet burrowed out of her forehead and fell to the ground. The pain in her head had reached a crescendo, roaring loud enough to drown out the harsh laughter of the enforcer, the screams of his victim.

A hazy, red film blanketed Taylor’s vision. No...fuck, no, can’t right now. Her claws, so often unnoticeable to her, inched their way past her knuckles with excruciating sluggishness. She could feel control slip away.

There was a screech that Taylor realized came from her own throat as her body rose to her feet against her will and surged forward. Her arms flailed in the direction of the thug, eliciting a scream of agony. Taylor ignored it, focusing her thoughts inward. If the seizure lasted more than a few seconds, she’d black out entirely and only the rage would remain. If her body got to the poor girl after that...

No! Taylor’s body stopped in its tracks as control returned to her. The red tint that the world had taken on faded. She took in deep gulps of air as her whole body shivered, repairing her. Each seizure wore on her, she knew, tore up her body as though she’d run a marathon without training.

She looked up into the terrified eyes of the girl. Dimly, Taylor realized that her claws, two long, sleek blades punching out from her knotted left fist, were only a hair’s breadth away from the girl’s throat. She relaxed her hand and the claws retracted with a wet snikt.
“I’m sorry,” Taylor wheezed. Her hands fell to her knees so she was bent double, straining to stay upright. Her body was healed by now, but she still felt like she’d been punched in the chest. She said again, in a whisper, “I’m sorry, I can’t control it.”

The girl regarded without a word for a few tense moments. “It’s...alright,” she said, breaking the silence. Her voice trembled. “If you hadn’t - if that man had - I mean...” She trailed off.

The alleyway fell silent again, punctuated by the rasping breaths of air that Taylor took and the faint gurgle of blood that bubbled out from the man’s wounds. Taylor finally spoke, her voice tight. “I didn’t mean to kill him.”

“Fuck him,” the girl snapped, her voice loud and harsh. Her fists were clenched, and the expression of fear that had gripped her was twisted into anger. “That piece of shit didn’t deserve to live. I took a bit of food and almost died because of it. You did this city a service by killing him.”

“You don’t mean that,” Taylor protested weakly. She pushed herself to her full height. The girl took a step back, bumping into the wall behind her. “All I wanted to do was help but I couldn’t control it-”

“You saved my life,” came the girl’s reply. She reached out to grab Taylor by the shoulders. Her gaze was piercing, but cold. “If you hadn’t lost control, he could’ve hurt someone else too. My family. Your family.”

“I didn’t-I mean…” Taylor stumbled back, pushing the girl away from her into the alley wall. “It wasn’t me who did it, I killed him - I was going to kill you!”

“No you weren’t! You were saving me!” the girl shouted back. She sounded like she was reassuring herself more than Taylor. “And you know what, fuck it! If you were gonna kill me, at least you’d take him out too! I’d let it happen in a heartbeat as long as you killed that sunnovabitch, as long as you kill everyone like him in this whole damned city. You’d be a damned hero in my books.”

“Shut up!” Taylor screamed. She hadn’t hit her head, didn’t even feel scared, but the red film was creeping up into the edges of her vision again. She tugged at whole fistfuls of her hair, trying to relieve the migraine as it blossomed inside her skull. “I’m not a fucking hero.”

She staggered out of the alley and ran as fast as she could away from the shelter, the girl, and the dying enforcer. Her legs pumped so fast that she could almost feel her bones rattling, but at least it helped keep the migraine at bay - just like fighting did, just like killing.

Taylor ran until her arms were hanging limp at her sides and her legs could barely keep her standing. Her impromptu sprint had carried her far beyond the Docks, into unfamiliar territory. Except…

The area that she was standing in did feel familiar, in an odd way. Taylor’s head whirled, but it wasn’t just the vestiges of her sudden panic attack. The houses on the street were modest, but well-loved, despite the buildup of trash and weeds in their yards. As her gaze spun around, taking it each house in one by one, it felt like a spike was being driven to her head through her eyes.

Like her body was on autopilot, she found herself moving towards the nearest home, a two-story house with fading blue paint and a defeated-looking porch. Taylor stumbled up the steps, tripping over her own sore feet to pound on the door. She shook her head, confused. *What the hell am I doing?*
She underestimated her strength, or maybe her jumbled mind got the better of her. The edges of the door splintered beneath her fist - not dramatically, but enough to be noticeable. A voice barked from inside.

“I don’t know who the fuck you are, and I don’t care. Beat it!”

Taylor’s hands trembled. She licked her dry, cracked lips and tasted blood. It wasn’t her own. “P-please, I’m lost. I need help.”

The door was nudged open and Taylor found herself staring down the barrel of a shotgun. The muzzle prodded her between the eyes and she backpedaled. The gun moved as she did.

“You don’t survive in this place by helping others, girl,” the man said softly. He took in her bloody, gaunt, and sickly appearance, but didn’t say anything for a while.

Taylor flinched under his scrutiny. He doesn’t know. He can’t know what I’ve done. What I just did.

“That’s what the shelters are for.”

He knows.

It was an accident. Maybe it was stupidity on the man’s part or just weakness on Taylor’s. He prodded her again with his gun, harder this time. In the next instant, her claws slid out, wet with her blood and sharp as ever. Snikt. The man’s eyes bulged.

Taylor gasped. “Wait-”

The man fired. Taylor swept at his gun with her claws at the same time. It was only due to luck, and her own intervention, that the man didn't hit her in the face. That wouldn't have killed her, of course, but it might have triggered another seizure. Still, getting shot in the throat with the shotgun wasn’t much better.

Pain.

The pain struck her like a dash of cold water as the blast tore through her body. Then, for another brief moment, she felt no pain; there was nothing but emptiness. She seemed to float through the air like a leaf before landing hard on her back. The dried and prickly grass of the yard crunched beneath her weight.

Her powers kicked in, then, struggling to repair the gaping hole that split her throat open. Taylor wasn’t sure how long she laid there in the grass. She did register the return of sensation as the nerve damage was healed. Then she felt as each pellet, speck of gunpowder, and grain of dirt burrowed out of her bloody carcass.

Her mind faded in and out of consciousness. The next thing that she was aware of was a creak of wood as two sets of boots landed on the porch in front of her. People spoke, but she couldn’t yet understand what they were saying. She just hurt.

“...thank you for alerting us, sir.”

“I wouldn’t have shot just any girl on the street. I saw her claws. And look at her! Almost no trace of it.”
“Right, right. No one is blaming you here; it was self-defense. However, I suggest you and your family lock up and stay indoors for a bit. We’ll take it from here.”

The door slammed shut. The boots clunked closer.

Taylor bolted upright, blinking blood and dirt out of her eyes. The two figures in front of her solidified into people: a knight in wicked-looking armor and a blue-haired youth in a white bodysuit. She recognized those people. Wards.

The Wards were teenaged superheroes, enforcers of the law. Did they know? That she’d killed a man? Surely the woman had spread the news, had alerted some authority about the incident in the alleyway. They’re here for me.

“No!” Taylor didn’t know what she was doing, but she knew one thing: they couldn’t take her in. She drew herself to her feet, swaying dangerously before she crouched into a more defensible stance. Her movements were sluggish, her body still recovering from the shotgun blast. She unsheathed her right-handed claws. The threat was clear. “Just stay back. Stay away. Leave me alone.”

The knight extended a hand towards her. His voice was calm, inviting. “We’re not going to hurt you. We just want to talk to you. Maybe you could come with us?”

“No!” Taylor’s eyes darted between the two junior heroes. The knight’s armor looked menacing, but his friend’s hands were glowing with power. Both were dangerous. She brandished her claws at the glowing boy. “I’m not going with you. I can’t.”

She couldn’t explain it if she wanted to. There was something she had to do, something important, that she couldn’t do if she was locked up. If she was restrained or restricted. If she was under their thumb. A familiar red hue pulsed behind her eyes. Shit.

“Damn,” the knight said at the same time, as if detecting the change. He raised a gauntleted hand in her direction. “We can talk about this later, I promise.”

The first blast struck her like a punch to the gut. The successive ones weren’t much gentler, sending her down a spiral of despair, despair, despair. The red haze began to fade but the shock of the emotion felt like a physical blow that hit twice as hard as the impact itself. Taylor staggered back with each lash of despondency. Her eyes squeezed shut. I can’t go with them. I can’t.

“Uh, Gallant…” the blue-haired boy said warningly. A field of blue expanded in front of Taylor, separating her from the Wards. “She’s not going down.”

The forcefield turned purple through the haze in the edges of Taylor’s vision. Her arms twitched. Two more claws slid out from her left hand. There was an overlapping snikt-snikt as claws ejected from her feet as well, digging into the dirt beneath her.

“No sudden moves, Shielder.” Gallant’s response sounded like it came from underwater. “Keep calm. I’ve got this.”

The migraine was back in full force. Stronger than before, than after being shot in the head, if that was possible. But he didn’t hit me in the head, Taylor thought, her mind drifting. This only ever happens when I get hit in the head.
She tried to rein it back - the bloodlust, the rage, the surge of movement in her gangly limbs. But she was so, so exhausted. She was already losing control of her body, fading into unconsciousness as the migraine took over her body.

They had powers too. They could protect themselves. Would it hurt, just this one time, to lose control?

“I’m sorry,” she managed to murmur as the red fog overtook her completely. The last thing she saw before she passed out was Shielder’s terrified face as her claws sliced through his forcefield like paper.
“Heads up, Panacea,” Vic-Vista said, slipping her visor back on. She rose from her seat on the air-con unit, back to business. “Console says there’s something going down a couple blocks away. We’re the closest heroes around.”

Even after spending weeks living together in the cramped PRT HQ, Amy still found it hard to differentiate between her friendly dorm-mate, Missy, and the stolid Ward, Vista. Ever since Amy could remember, the line between “cape persona” and “civilian ID” was blurred. The members of New Wave were heroes, celebrities, and a family; they always took on more than one role at once.

But among the Wards, everything was different. They found it so easy to put on or take off a mask and leave all the stresses of the other life behind - the pain, the grief, the responsibility. To become someone else.

For Missy, that someone else was nothing short of a grizzled veteran, at least in Amy’s eyes. While Amy was still floundering, struggling to adapt to the patrols and the comms duties and the rigid, self-imposed sleep schedules, Vista was always ready to dive into the fray.

Amy was ashamed to admit it, but she had at first doubted the girl’s experience as a hero. When Gallant had assigned Vista as Amy’s patrol “buddy,” she’d had several reservations. Amy had never been on a patrol, or helped in a fight, or reported to a leader, and she wanted someone who could show her the ropes, not just the runt of the team.

But Vista had proven Amy wrong. She hadn’t been nice or forgiving of Amy’s inexperience, but she’d helped the process along. Set a good example. Kept her busy, as hard as that was at times.

It was these short breaks — the breathers in-between the action — that made coping hard. When Amy was…before Leviathan, she used to blow off steam by heading to a hospital and helping out. Now, it was fighting criminals and cleaning up the streets. Amy didn’t like the fighting. But she hated the silence even more.

“Alright,” Amy said quietly. She drew up her hood over her head and joined Vista at the edge of the rooftop. “Ready when you are.”

She didn’t miss her old outfit, not really. The robes were voluminous, too heavy to run in. The stark white colors were also not suited for hitting the streets. She’d only worn a costume because Carol made her, because Victoria had… And well, anyway, it was easier to stay out of the public eye if people didn’t find Panacea’s face immediately recognizable.

The new costume was built for practicality, though. It was a bit bare-bones at the moment, to be sure, with the bodysuit and armor mostly pulled from PRT storage. But the material still covered her up, kept a bit of the Brockton filth away from her skin. The armor did a good job of padding her body.
The hood was the only piece from her old outfit that she’d retained at the Director’s insistence. Apparently it marked the costume as hers. As Panacea’s, if only in spirit. Amy hated it. It was a reminder of her days as Panacea, but not a nice one. It branded her: as the youngest member of New Wave, as the pariah.

Vista looked over her shoulder, up at Amy, her expression all business. She held out a hand. "Ready?" It wasn't a question.

Amy took a deep breath and placed her hand in Vista's, and then the world moved around them. Sometimes, when Amy had to fix some major damage - like when, just days ago, she’d pushed Aegis’ intestines from his throat back into his body where they belonged - it was hard to recognize what she was looking at as human. It was just so easy to distance herself, to see the thing instead of a person who loved and hurt and felt.

That’s what Vista’s power made her feel like, sometimes. For a few brief moments, Brockton Bay twisted into a caricature of itself, an unrecognizable mass that held none of the hate or pain Leviathan had left in his wake. For just a split second, as Amy stepped out into thin air, she felt escape.

It was with a pang of disappointment that Amy touched her foot down on another rooftop, half a block away.

Focus, Amy, she chided herself. This isn’t about you.

They were on a mission; this was about helping other people, about heroism. It was sometimes hard to repress that disdain that she’d built up for crime-fighting over the years (she still felt she should be bettering society in other ways), but more and more, she found herself doing so. Even enjoying it, a bit. Helping people in any way was still a service, and that was important now more than ever.

The world bent again and they arrived, looking down at the ruckus. A gang of criminals was throwing what looked like firebombs into an apartment building window, hooting and hollering all the while.

“Merchants,” Vista said, with the same disgust that Amy felt. Her tone softened, becoming more professional. “That apartment building is empty. I think they’re just marking their territory.”

The young heroine fell silent, casting her gaze over the street below.

“Aren’t we going to stop them?” Amy asked, trying to keep the indignation out of her voice. It didn’t really matter what the Merchants were doing, did it? They were…they were the worst of the worst! They sold drugs, kidnapped people, ruined lives. The fact that they were scummy stains on society was undeniable. She almost wanted to clamber down the fire escape and try to stop them herself.

Vista seemed to shake herself from a reverie, squaring her shoulders. Her voice was tight. “Of course. I was just…assessing the situation.”

Well. At least they were on the same page. If Vista wanted to take things slow, Amy would defer to her judgment. After all, Amy was technically a rookie to this business.

“You ready to use your power?” Vista said. Amy raised her hands, showing off the fingerless gloves that she’d been issued. “Then let’s do this.” She couldn’t keep the childlike glee out of her voice, but
Amy couldn’t fault her for that. *That* was the Vista that Amy knew.

The burning building across the street was already twisting out of shape, extinguishing the fires inside while also sealing it from more of the firebombs. One or two of the Merchant goons below shouted in alarm, but the majority of them seemed too inebriated to notice. None of them even drew weapons.

Vista exerted her power again, and the distance between the two Wards and the street closed rapidly. Amy shut her eyes as the ground approached like a freefall, both her hands extended towards the raggedly-clad Merchants. She didn’t need to see for this part. It came all too easy to her.

Amy didn’t feel too tired, but she still collapsed onto the rooftop, leaning back against a short wall. Vista seemed less affected as she came down from the thrill of the fight - or maybe she was still keyed up, with how she was pacing back and forth through Amy’s shaky field of vision.

“How can you do it?” Amy asked, so abruptly that she surprised even herself. Vista turned to her, looking confused.

“Do what?” the girl asked. She paused in her pacing although she didn’t make any move to approach Amy. Amy supposed that, with a space-warping power like Vista’s, distance didn’t mean much.

Amy waved a hand, not really sure how to explain herself. She’d never been good with words, with talking about the important things. It made things hard in the Dallon family, at least sometimes, when it was so easy to fade into the background. Amy cleared her throat. “Do this thing! Just…get in these fights and then act so normal about it after, like it’s no big deal? It’s like…it’s crazy!”

“Didn’t you and Glory Girl ever get in fights?” Vista asked.

Amy flinched back at the reminder. The words that were bubbling up in her throat died.

“Sorry,” Vista said. She didn’t *sound* sorry.

“No, I just…” Amy took in a shuddering breath. There was no use harping over it, or something, right? She should just…heroes had a job to do. She shook her head. “We got into trouble sometimes but…we had each other. We could help each other out. It sounds dumb when I say it like that. I don’t just mean with powers, but like…moral support and shit. It helped.”

“Well, I guess that’s my answer?” Vista replied. Amy tensed, but the girl didn’t seem like she was being condescending. She still just sounded a bit confused.

“What do you mean?” The words sounded more accusing than Amy meant them to. She didn’t care.

Vista shrugged, uncaring. “I’ve got moral support. Family, friends, people to talk to…like you said, it helps.”

“Well that doesn’t help me, does it?” Amy bit out. She glared at Vista. “At least you have a family! My family is *dead*, remember? I can’t exactly ask *them* for…for fucking *field therapy* or whatever!”

“I…I didn’t mean it like that,” Vista said, a frown creasing her face. She pulled off her visor, blonde hair tumbling loose. Amy jerked her head away, looking out over the city. Vista continued after a moment. “I was talking about the team. The *Wards* are my family, as far as I’m concerned.” She glared back at Amy defiantly.

Amy didn’t have a ready response to that. What was she supposed to say? That Missy’s team didn’t count as family, not really? Amy wasn’t in a position to talk. That family members couldn’t come
and go as easily as teammates did? Amy’s had, at least for the most part. That Missy was only twelve; what did she know about how family really works? But Amy wasn’t so sure that she could count herself as an expert on the matter either.

She said nothing instead. They sat in silence. Vista donned her mask and resumed her pacing.

A voice crackled in both of their ears. “Vista, Panacea? This is Gallant. We’re at Lord Street and King’s, and ran into a bit of trouble. We could use a hand from you guys.”

Amy scowled, letting the hood mask her expression. It was always Gallant. He was the rock of the team; it seemed like everyone was in love with him ever since Leviathan attacked. Even on patrol, she couldn’t get away from him. The only thing that made it worse was how Vista’s whole countenance lit up at the sound of his voice.

Amy hated him. Hated the crushing silence every time they were alone together, the waves of judgment and pity that she could feel coming off him even without the benefit of his powers, the delicacy that he treated her with as though she wasn’t a hero. It wasn’t like Amy needed the reminder on that front.

Vista raised a hand to her earpiece, her voice brisk. She sounded as professional as ever. “Acknowledged, Gallant. We’re on our way over - what should we expect?”

There was a brief pause. “It looks like a bloodbath, but it was just a brute run-in. We need Panacea’s assistance, if she’s not indisposed.”

Amy knew Vista was looking at her expectantly. It was Amy who spoke first. “I can help. Over.”

“Thanks.”

Amy clambered to her feet, finding the action easier without her robe. That was only a reminder of how much had changed since she’d been apart of New Wave. She wasn’t used to healing people in the field; now it felt like she was doing it every day.

This time, Amy was the one who reached out to take Vista’s hand. Their eyes met.

“I know you don’t really like him,” Vista began, “but he’s family too.”

“Well…yeah,” Amy asked. She didn’t ask how Vista knew about her feelings towards Gallant. She just couldn’t muster the energy.

“Too?” Vista said, as though it was obvious. “Of course. You, me, Shielder, Gallant, Aegis…we’re all family now.”

Amy swallowed. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t fair. Family was supposed to be something special, not just your…your roommates or something. She couldn’t bring herself to say anything to Vista. She just clenched her hand tighter.

“Let’s go.”

It was a good thing that Gallant had given them forewarning before they arrived; the scene was a bloodbath.
when she saw all the blood. It stained the front lawn and sidewalk of the rickety suburban home, pooling out in the gutter of the street as well. It was an obscene, inhuman amount of blood, and the source of it all was…one girl.

She wasn’t much to look at, and not just in the sense of her wellbeing. Her face was plain, and her body was awkward and gangly. If not for the gleaming white blades that protruded from both of her hands, she’d look exceptionally average. Not even plain, just…unremarkable.

The girl was sprawled out over the grass, lying at the feet of Gallant and Shielder. The latter Ward’s blue forcefields pinned the girl to the ground although she wasn’t moving anyway. Amy turned away to avoid Shielder’s gaze, met Gallant’s, and turned back. Family? She wanted to scoff. Even Eric felt like a stranger these days, having taken to the Wards like a fish to water.

Amy broke away from Vista’s side to close the distance on her own. The two heroes stepped aside to allow Amy better access to the unknown cape.

“Is she unconscious?” she asked before even touching her.

“We think so,” Gallant replied. Typical. “She’s tough. My blasts didn’t even phase her, Shielder’s barely scratched her, and she healed up from anything we threw at her.”

Amy tried to suppress the frustration in her voice as she spoke. “Then why did you call me here?”

“Something’s wrong with her,” Eric replied bluntly.

“It’s more than just her aura,” Gallant elaborated. He was referring to his own Thinker power, the ability to see what was going on in other people’s heads. Amy didn’t make another move to approach the girl. “She was feral. I got the sense that she wasn’t even trying to hurt us, but…”

“But she did,” Eric butted in. He raised his arm to show a shallow gash in his sleeve. He gratefully accepted Amy’s healing before continuing. “It was insane. She was flinging her arms around and slicing through my forcefields easily. I thought she was gonna slice through me, too.”

“The homeowner came outside again and nailed her with his shotgun,” said Gallant. He jerked a thumb at the home behind him. “I sent him back inside, and Shielder pinned her down as she healed.”

“She woke up again, too. Gallant had to hit her, like, fifteen times with his power before she finally passed out.”

“What did you hit her with?” Amy asked, ignoring the boyish exultations of her cousin.

“Despair and sadness, for the most part,” Gallant replied. He placed his hands on his hips, challenging her to say something.

Amy bristled. “You hit a crazed parahuman with depression? Why?”

“I’ve studied my powers too, Panacea. I read the Textbook of Parahuman Neurology cover to cover. Ever heard of the Sweet Valentine case study?”

Her fists clenched by her sides. Amy hated him, hated how he could act so nonchalant when half their city was wiped away, when the people they loved were gone forever. She wanted to wipe the look off his face - she couldn’t see it, but she could imagine that self-assuredness that had confronted her so many times in the past.
“…and despair was almost half again as potent in the field.” Gallant’s tone turned firm, like he was done entertaining her questions. “Now, look, can you help her? I think there’s something gravely wrong with her.”

“Oh, you can bet your ass there’s something wrong,” Eric agreed. “I’ve seen Aegis fight before, but I’ve never seen it get that bad. I mean, seriously, when she got up again…”

Amy wasn’t interested in the gory details. Her questions answered, she reached down to get a sense of the girl for herself. Her stomach was exposed, and far enough away from the blades to give Amy room to work.

The girl’s biology didn’t enter Amy’s consciousness so much as explode, with so many disfigurations and defects that it was almost overwhelming. She’d healed people with fucked up physiologies before, repaired Aegis for god’s sakes, but this was something else entirely.

Her bones were a blind spot to Amy’s power, as cold and unresponsive as a tooth filling or pacemaker was to her. The blades - they were claws, really - had sheathes of their own that further skewed the girl’s muscle structure. And as Amy’s awareness reached the girl’s head…something shifted inside. She jerked back in surprise, breaking contact.

“What the hell did you do to her?” Amy demanded. Gallant and Eric exchanged a glance.

“What do you mean?” Vista piped up, sounding concerned.

“Exactly what I said. I thought you guys just said someone shot her. There’s some…some foreign object lodged in her brain!” Amy turned her accusing glare to Eric, who threw his hands up innocently.

“Hey, my power doesn’t work like that! We didn’t even go for her head. Much. It’s like trying to punch a brick wall.”

“Then how do you explain it?” Amy shot back. “I don’t suppose it magically materialized in there?”

“If there’s something in her brain, that might explain her behavior,” Gallant interjected, like it was some great insight. Ever the voice of reason. Amy assumed that he was thinking of Blister, one of the case studies covered in their Parahuman Psychology class. As if she hadn’t thought of that too. “Can you fix it?”

“No. I can’t fix brains, and it’s really deep in there. If I tried, I could really fuck her up. Maybe kill her.” Amy didn’t mention that she was pretty sure she couldn’t force the object out of the girl’s skull anyway; her skull might as well have been a solid object. “The good news is, it seems like she’s operating mostly fine with it there. At least she’s still alive.”

“That’s crazy,” Eric marveled. He seemed excited, of all things. “She’s got something stuck in her brain and she’s still almost indestructible? She must be, like, a Brute 8 or something!”

“The designations aren’t power rankings,” Vista told him, sounding as annoyed as Amy felt. She looked up to Gallant. “Can we call a PRT van, maybe bring her back to base?”

Gallant nodded slowly. “Yeah. Yeah, that sounds like a good plan. At the very least, the PRT has a better way to contain her.”

A better way to contain her? That’s not reassuring. Amy thought. She said nothing aloud. It wasn’t like she was of any use here either; any change that she made to the girl would likely get stalled by her bones or erased by the regenerative factor.
It wasn’t fair, how powers worked. Why did this girl get the power to survive so much harm when all she used it for was to wreak havoc? Why did she get a power that was always keeping her in tip-top shape and Victoria got a power that… didn’t?

Deep down, Amy knew that it wasn’t the fault of Victoria’s powers. Victoria was strong and there wasn’t a lot that could hurt her. When Leviathan had… when his tail had snapped around through the air faster than even Glory Girl could react to… when the streak of white and gold had been sent hurtling into a building so hard that three whole floors caved inwards…

They’d never found her body beneath the rubble of the ruined building. It had been days until Amy had given up hope.

Amy brushed away a tear from beneath her hood before anyone could notice. She knew Gallant would be looking at her without even glancing in his direction - that was what he did, never letting up the pressure - but Vista and Eric were busy oohing and ahhing over the girl. It wasn’t every day that they got into conflict with another cape, even after Amy’s world fell apart.

“Amy,” Gallant spoke up, interrupting her thoughts. Her head snapped over, glaring at him. Maybe he couldn’t see her face, but he would feel the simmering hatred that bubbled up beneath her skin. He didn’t so much as flinch. “Can you restrain her in some way until the PRT squad gets here?”

“How?” she said, her voice challenging. “I can’t wipe her brain, I can’t break her legs, I can’t-”

“Can’t you just… sedate her or keep her down somehow?” Gallant asked. His tone was as level as ever. As calm as he’d been when Amy had approached him after one of his many breakups with her sister and berated him for his foolishness. As calm as when he’d addressed Amy about her… problem with him just a few weeks before. As calm as when he’d walked into the Dallon home and announced that Victoria was dead.

He wasn’t biting.

Amy sighed. She hated giving in to him, but… what was she going to do? Let the girl run free? “I can try.”

She knelt down next to the girl and placed her hand on her torso again. She couldn’t touch the brain - even if she could navigate her way around the extensive damage, she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t break her rule for this girl when her own mother - well, adoptive mother - was a drooling mess lying on a couch back home.

No, nothing in the world was fair. Not even before Leviathan attacked. But… Amy couldn’t help but feel like she deserved more. It was a stupid, silly thought; she knew that nobody owed her anything. Her only comfort was that she didn’t owe anyone else anything either.

Vista shifted in the corner of Amy’s eye, and she looked up from her work. The girl was staring off into the distance, a pensive look on her face - probably anticipating the PRT vans, or maybe even shortening their travel time right now.

Amy looked down at the face of the girl that she was touching. She looked so peaceful. Part of that was due to the severe nerve and muscle damage that Amy had inflicted on her, smoothing out the tense lines of her body. But, Amy had to consider for just a moment, maybe she was just glad for the rest. Maybe she needed to escape the pain of the city just as much as Amy did.

The sirens drew nearer. Gallant approached the PRT officers, laying out the situation in low-tones. He talked about Brutes. He mentioned Changer-slash-Striker. He lectured on containment measures.
Amy tuned him out after a while.

Vista came over to join Amy and the unconscious girl, kicking aside a clump of grass and sitting cross-legged on the ground beside her. The three girls stayed there, waiting for the PRT to finally come and take them away. None of them said a word.

That was okay.

The cityscape passed them as a bluish-black blur through the window.

Before, Brockton Bay had been a city of lights - whether that was the glittering Boardwalk in the dead of night or the brilliantly illuminated Protectorate HQ that stood proudly in the bay. But in the wake of Leviathan, everything was so dark all the time. Even before nightfall, the scant few lights in the city would go dark and the city would become something else.

Their van splashed through a deep puddle and sent a curtain of muddy water over the window. Amy watched the dirty brown streaks as they sagged down the glass like wilting flowers. The rumble of the car and the breeze served to clear off the window soon enough.

A small gaggle of children waved at them as they clattered down the road. One of them had a baseball bat slung across his shoulders. A few weeks ago, Amy might have mistaken them for some homeless kids who were playing in the street. She knew now that they were just kids - maybe they’d been rich before, or even just well-off, but not since Leviathan.

The boy with the bat shifted his head, letting Amy see the rusty nail driven through it. A weapon. Then the movement of the van pushed them out of her sight.

Amy averted her eyes as they passed the craterous lake of what used to be a hospital. She’d helped out there more than once. And Leviathan hadn’t even intended to destroy it; he’d just juked out of the way of Alexandria’s flight path, sent the heroine and tens of thousands of gallons of water flying into the building at breakneck speeds.

Amy could still hear the crunch Alexandria had made as the hospital was obliterated. But then their containment van swerved to a stop, and Amy realized the crunch had been real. So that wasn’t just my imagination? was all Amy could think before the back of her head smacked against the metal wall of the van. She saw stars for half a second.

“-you okay?” Amy heard Vista ask. It took a moment before she could respond.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

She looked around the interior of the van, trying to get her bearings. Their prisoner was still plastered to her seat with containment foam, most of it concentrated around her legs and arms. Her hair hung like a limp curtain, straight out in front of her. Beneath her, Amy corrected herself. The van had been flipped onto its side.

Gingerly, Amy pulled herself up from the tangle of her seatbelt. When standing up in the cramped confines of the van, she was a bit too close to the girl’s claw hands for comfort. Vista solved that problem as soon as she could stand too.

Amy reached out for Vista’s hand. The girl accepted it, seeming confused until Amy began to work her power on her. The Wards were still unused to having a healer on their team.
The two of them jumped as a heavy impact rattled the back door of the van. The girls tensed, wary of an attacker. The thing struck the door again, knocking the door inwards and revealing Gallant’s gleaming armor. He ducked his head in to look in at them.

“It’s Faultline’s Crew,” Gallant intoned. He didn’t even flinch as a spray of sparks flew over his head. “Someone must have hired them to jump us. Maybe. The timing doesn’t make sense, but I’m not sure what else it could be.” He shook his head. “Vista, I need you to handle Newter at the very least. Maybe Labyrinth, if she shows up.”

Vista nodded. She skipped past Amy and Gallant, through the yawning door of the van. Amy moved to follow her, but Gallant raised one of his gauntlets to cut her off. She looked up at him quizzically.

“I think we can handle these guys, Amy. Keep an eye on our prisoner, in case the ‘Crew is here to break her out, okay?” Gallant didn’t give her a chance to respond; he was already moving into the fray.

“Wait!” Amy called after him. “I can help too!”

She flinched backwards as a large chunk of masonry landed outside, cracking the unstable road. There was no answer.

Amy retreated deeper into the van, shaking her head angrily. She had tried so hard to fit into the Wards, to prove herself to… whoever. Anyone. And still, Gallant was in her way, cutting her off at every opportunity. It was always him.

There was a shout from outside. Gregor had revealed himself from the doorway of a dilapidated apartment building and sent a gout of slime at Shielder, only for it to fall short by several meters thanks to Vista. Shielder quickly shied away from the monstrous cape. A series of forcefields ensured that Gregor couldn’t press the attack.

Vista waved to Shielder before she turned back to breaking Labyrinth’s control over the area. As Amy watched, she saw a new figure enter the battlefield. She couldn’t call out a warning in time. Newter leapt out at Vista from a second-story window. He hurled a gob of something at the girl and she dropped like a sack of bricks.

“Fuck,” Amy cursed.

Amy shot a glance back at the unconscious girl. Leviathan had fucked over a lot of the people in the Bay. He had fucked over Carol, fucked over Victoria, fucked over all those poor kids in the street, even fucked over Gallant in some ways

But maybe, at least for Amy, there was a chance to make things better. She donned her hood and stepped out of the van, breaking into a sprint as she approached Missy.

This is what family does, Amy told herself. You fight a lot, you disagree and disobey, but… but you’ve always got each others’ backs in the end.

As she ran, she could swear to herself that she felt Victoria’s power urging her on.

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