Summary

On her first night out as a superhero, Taylor Hebert breaks up a dog-fighting ring, punches Nazis and makes a new... friend?

She doesn't know what she's in for.
Ruff 1.1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The worst part of having a friend had to be that, once you stopped being friends and they turned against you and spent all their time bullying you, they knew all of your secrets.

At least, I have to say that it was the worst, most aggravating part of my day. It was weird, because she mixed truth and lies, or at least things that could be true, might be true, with made up nonsense. Just a constant stream from Emma Barnes, my best friend, and all of her cronies and friends and people who just liked gossiping.

“I heard that Taylor blows guys for money,” one of them whispered almost under their breath as I looked down at the math book and worked on copying out problems. This was a lie, of course, but they tried to make it real, or rather, make it seem real. Madison or one of them had written my name and phone number in several different guy’s bathroom stalls. And one of those ‘for a good time’ things.

I’d had to change my number.

“Well I heard that the only reason she’s not failing math is because she’s kissing the teacher. You know what Emma said, after all--”

The teacher was Mrs. Yvette, a forty year old woman who, no, I was not in fact kissing or anything like that. I had confessed to Emma once that I’d had a crush on another girl once. I had no idea if that made me bisexual or not, but the Emma that I’d thought was my friend had been sympathetic and understanding and nice.

And then, this Emma, the one that had replaced her, had used it. Had used the confessed crushes on guys I’d had (far more numerous) to set me up, had done everything in her power to make the past few years miserable.

I wrote as hard as I could, gritting my teeth and telling myself I had ways out, that I had ways to get out of here.

Two of them, in fact, I thought miserably.

The first was obvious, because I got decent grades despite the bullying and harassment campaign that Emma, Sophia, and Madison were leading. If I went off to college, I could make my own way, figure out things on my own. I hoped I could, at least. My mom and Dad had both gone to college, and it was the Hebert way by now, even if it didn’t always pay off.

Second, I had superpowers. I was a parahuman, in common parlance. Someone who had gone through an experience so traumatic I’d gotten superpowers. It sucked in some ways, that the only people who got powers were those who were victims, but I could be a hero. I could stop people like Emma, I could--

I dunno. I could do something. I hadn’t ever gone out, I’d spent way too long planning and thinking and dreaming of it. I was doing that even now, when I wasn’t thinking through quadratic equations. Math wasn’t hard, it was something I could mostly just do off to the side. It didn’t capture me like literature did--my Mom was an English Professor, after all--but I can’t say I had any problems with it.
The problems I had were that it really didn’t help, thinking long term. Thinking that someday, in the distant future, I would be happy didn’t help when my hand hurt and I felt awkward and gawky and the girls behind me were making up worse and worse rumors. When my Dad was barely making ends meet paying for the house and the car and all sorts of other problems, when my school life was a living hell, I had no friends, and nothing to really distract me.

Sure, I could browse PHO or play one of the handheld games I’d gotten on the cheap as something, anything, to pass the time. I sometimes talked to this kid named Greg about it. He was alright, and considering that everyone else acted like I had the plague, I appreciated one person who occasionally talked to me. But that’s all it was, really.

It felt like, even with the future stretched out, that I was treading in place. Waiting and waiting some more to get everything ready. I’d even finished my costume a little bit ago. I’d made it myself, and not in the way most independent heroes did.

You see, there were five or six flies in that room, and a few ants that I’d had follow me in. I had the power to control bugs, or at least, that’s mostly what I could control. I’d been working on my range and all sorts of other details about fine control, trying to imagine ways I could use my power, but I’d never gotten into a fight.

One of the things I’d done was make a costume. It involved using spiders. I’d gathered them up, looking up which spiders were best for it (black widows) online, and then controlling them through the process of making the silk and then turning it all into a costume, which I’d finished not all that long ago. I’d even tried it on, realized that it needed some more color, and tried to put together a little bit of cloth or something. The idea I had was, like, the symbol of a spider, but somehow make it heroic? Apparently in Earth Aleph (another earth, with far fewer Parahumans) they had someone called Spider Man, so clearly I could do it.

So now I looked like a proper hero.

If I went out. I felt like I was circling the drain, holding off on acting when I should have. It was already right in the middle of April, and I wasn’t sure if I’d make it to the end of the school year without tearing my hair out.

A spitball hit the back of my head. I growled, turning around, but I knew who it came from. That was just acting. It was always Madison who did these petty, stupid things like that.

I could have used my bugs to go Carrie, I knew that. But I wasn’t going to do something like that. I was above it. Though I could sometimes feel my resolve slipping. The idea of giving Emma bedbugs was the sort of childish fantasy that sometimes helped me get through a really, really bad day.

But that’s all it was. A fantasy.

Reality was much harder and more stressful than that.

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My home wasn’t bad. Just run down.

It wasn’t even a bad neighborhood. Just run down.

My Dad wasn’t a bad Dad either. Danny Hebert worked hard, he loved me, he watched his temper and if he knew how hard things were for me, he would have sprung into action, as he had when I’d wound up getting powers, though he didn’t know that I’d triggered yet. Just run down.
Ever since Mom died, I’d taken on my fair share of the cooking, which was to say I’d learned a lot and also probably not as much as you’d think. Dad was an uncomplicated eater, and I wasn’t much better. We saw food, we ate it. So I made chicken and potatoes and some vegetables, and then waited for Dad to get home.

He stepped in, looking tired and rubbing at his eyes behind his glasses. Dad looked more than a little like me. He was tall, and skinny, his hair darker, and just like me he had to wear glasses. He always looked a little uncertain behind the glasses, they made his green eyes look just a little too large.

“Hey Dad, how was work?” I asked, trying to sound a little happier than I was.

“Fine.” Dad shuffled over to the fridge and opened it up. Dad didn’t drink that much, but I swear he drank more than he had before Mom died. He grabbed a beer and then headed for the kitchen table.

“School?”

“Got the lit test back. Did alright at it,” I said, even though someone had dunked my book in the toilet so I’d had to read an online version of the last two chapters.


Not awkward at all.

“Oh, Right.” Dad wasn’t so old he didn’t have some experience with old video games, but he never really was the type. He was smart, but I got most of my geekery from my Mom. That and just my own personality, as far as it went. “So, what are you going to do this weekend?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I’ll see what comes up,” I said, “unless there’s anything you want to do?”

“I’m going to go down to the docks to see if there’s anything we can do. There’s rumors that this summer will be better--”

There were always rumors. There were rumors every season that the next seasons of working on the docks unloading ships that bothered to come to Brockton Bay would be better, except in the fall, because not even the desperate would believe that winter was going to be a great season for unloading ships. My Dad had devoted his life to the Dockworker’s Union, and it wasn’t really--

Well, it hadn’t given him back nearly as much as he’d given it.

I hated that about the city. But even with my superpowers, even if I became a real hero, which is what I wanted more than anything. Even with all of that, there were some things I couldn’t possibly fix.

I just had to endure them. And hope that I came out the other side alright.

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As soon as my Dad was on the couch watching television and drinking and looking over some papers and files, I went up to my room to put on my costume. People online said it would stop bullets, but even if it didn’t, I knew it’d make pretty decent armor, all things considering. I’d then hung or stitched this blue circle on the back of my costume and drawn, sort of roughly, a spider on the back. I had no idea how else to note down ‘I am a hero’, so I went with the crudest possible way to do that.
Blue made it look better, right?

My costume otherwise was pretty simple. A black and grey silken bodysuit, with some armor panels that I know didn’t help my attempt to look non-villainous, and a mask that similarly made me look just a little too sinister. They at least meant I wouldn’t have to fiddle with glasses, at least, because the lenses dealt with that. I’d left the back free, after thinking about it for a bit, because having my long, curly hair coming out the back at least made me look slightly less threatening.

It was an uphill battle, but I’d done as best as I could. Now all I had to do was actually go out on patrol.

I didn’t have a fast way to move around, so I’d be hoofing it, which meant that where I could go was pretty limited.

So, I thought about it. And I thought about the E88. They were a neo-nazi gang that recruited a lot from the kids of dockworkers and other poor people (the white ones, at least), and so I knew they were right around this area, more or less.

They had a lot of territory, and a lot of capes, but I thought there were at least some of their capes I could deal with, and parahumans were too rare for them to be everywhere. With enough bugs, I was pretty sure I could overwhelm a few thugs. Hide out of the way and have flies crawl down their throat, or a swarm of bugs just swallow them up.

And I’d had this idea for creating clumps of bugs in the shapes of people to distract them from the real target, me. I just hadn’t tried it. I’d had a lot of ideas in the last week, but without a chance to practice, they all remained ideas.

So I set off, to see what I could see.

All the while, as I walked the streets, having found the nearest alley to change into the costume, I’d gather bugs. You wouldn’t believe how many bugs there are, once you actually start paying attention. They’re just everywhere, and I could control them.

It’d felt a little creepy and weird at first, but the more I got used to them, the more normal it was. Bugs weren’t always cute, many of them were gross, but--

Well, you either learn to tolerate and even like them or you just never use your power, and of the options, I’d chosen the only one I could.

And spiders? Spiders were cute as heck.

Then again, I was the girl who used Black Widow spiders to make my costume. So maybe I was just weird.

Or maybe it was the world that was weird!

I continued along, until I saw it. A trio of tattooed punks were going somewhere. Normally that’d not be a big deal, except one of the tattoos was of a swastika, and so I assumed that wherever they were going, it wasn’t good news. So I backed up a little and used my bugs to follow them. My range was several blocks, give or take, and seemed to change based on factors I couldn’t even quite understand.

But it meant I could follow them well, as long as they didn’t look back. And they seemed to be heading towards an area filled with old warehouses.

This was the kind of area where the streets were bumpy because nobody lived there to complain, and
few enough people worked there either. Where the lamps flickered and the buildings themselves seemed cast in shadows, even during the days.

They were headed towards a somewhat small, squat warehouse, with a fading logo on the sign outside.

One of them scratched at where I’d put the fly, but it just moved off and then went back to its task, and as I got closer, I could see that there were sounds coming from the warehouse, and out front was a large, bald man. He had tattoos covering almost his entire face. White, of course, with hands like ham hocks and a glare that even from a distance felt accusatory.

Nervously, I checked what bugs were in the area. And felt it.

A lot of fleas. Just so many fleas it wasn’t even funny. And there were other squirming, strange things beyond. The fleas were moving a lot, or rather, whatever they were--

I frowned for a moment, concentrating on trying to figure out just what was going on here. It was all fuzzy, but I felt this vibration every so often from the fleas, as if…

I started trying to add up the pieces. A lot of fleas in a warehouse, and then maybe worms? And a bunch of Empire Eighty-Eight Neo-nazis were heading for a door and it was guarded.

I inched around. There were a number of run-down businesses nearby, which had once catered to, say, hungry working men, and standing in the shadows of one alley as I made my way as close as I could while I tried to think about what I’d do, I saw someone.

I couldn’t actually make out a lot about him. He was not quite as tall as me, but at least not below average, with the sort of blocky frame I associated with pretty impressive athletes. At least, I think that’s what he looked like, because he was wearing a dark brown jacket with a hood, and a fur collar around the hood that looked a little odd. As did their features behind the hood. Or lack thereof.

It looked like the side of an animal. No, a dog, I thought, as I had a few flies head his way. He was wearing a dog mask?

And near him was a german shepherd and a rottweiler, or something like that--oh! The mask, it had to be shaped like a rottweiler. So, some sort of hero or--

I tried to remember, I’d looked up a number of capes. There was one called Hellhound. I can’t remember looking at the profile, or at least, I hadn’t lingered over it, just had read the name.

Could this be him?

I also realized a few other things. First, that had to be a dog-fighting ring, or something like that. Either that or an Aryan Dog-and-pony show. And if a member of the Undersiders, this minor heist sort of group or something like that, was here, it probably wasn’t for a good purpose. Or at least, not good for the E88.

Which wasn’t the same thing as bad at all. I made my way a little closer to him. He was resting a hand on both of the dogs. A gloved hand. When I got closer, I began to have a better impression of his solidity, and yet I knew that one wrong glance and he’d see me.

My bugs began to crawl over him, and he shook a little, as if trying to dislodge them. A fly flew into his mask, and then down his collar, and he stopped to work with it as the fly sent vague impressions back. And then it was squished.
The dogs, though, when I got slightly closer, I could see that they were growing larger and, frankly, a little less dog like. They weren’t growing fast, though. This wasn’t attack of the fifty-foot dog, at least.

Okay, so, attack dogs? Some sort of attack dog power? Either way, if I attacked the E88, perhaps he’d join in and help out.

I began gathering bugs. The people were talking to the bouncer. I couldn’t make out words, but I could get a vague impression of sound from the bugs, and it sounded frustrated and angry. He finally gestured and then looked right in my direction.

A fly through straight into his throat, and he let out a cough as the three punks turned around. Two of them were shaved bald, and the third had shaggy, thick hair on his head that went down almost to his neck, and all of them looked very, very mean.

But I’d been gathering insects. I wasn’t very subtle with it, all things considered, but people don’t really look beneath their feet, and this place was crawling with bugs. A tidal wave of chittering insects leapt from the corner of the warehouse, and one of the men screamed, reaching for his pocket as the bugs hit him.

They scratched and bite and gnawed, and I had a black widow somewhere there, crawling up his leg, trying to find flesh to bite. Black Widow bites weren’t fatal all that often, but they weren’t nice, either, and I half-charged forward, hoping that as they fought against the biting, kicking and scratching insects they wouldn’t pay too much attention to me. I’d drawn out a secret weapon, pepper spray, and I was going to hit them even worse. They were already being bitten and stung (I had brought along bees) and that meant they were already in pain and confused, but I needed to take them down. So, I sprayed away, and the screams would draw people. By then, hopefully, more of my bugs would take out more of their men, and then--

Okay, maybe I hadn’t planned ahead, but the first step was really impressive. Four men, including one that could have crushed me like a grape, were screaming. Two of them were down on the ground covering their eyes, as a bee stung them all over. I wouldn’t have ordered it to go for the eyes, but they didn’t know that, did they?

Then there was a sound. It was loud, like someone slamming down a hardback copy of Lord of the Rings as hard as they can. I blinked, stepping back, and realizing after a moment that there was a ragged, short-haired woman standing in front of me with a gun, having started by shooting at random before she even saw me.

My ears were ringing as I sent the bugs after her, but she fired again and almost hit me. If she had any training, I’d have been hit, but as it was, she went down.

Then I heard a loud bark, and a large dog hurtled past me to catch one of the goons coming up, tackling him down. It was larger than any dog I’d ever seen, though not as large as I’d feared, and I smiled. Good, he was--

“Get out of the way,” a voice growled, and I turned to see him…

No, not him. This close, and hearing the voice. It was a gruff, somewhat masculine voice, but it was also a woman’s voice. I think.

“This is a dog fighting ring,” I said, “I’m going to break it up.”

“I can do that myself,” she grunted, shaking her head. “Out of the way.”
“A little help never hurt. There are a bunch of dogs in there, and they all have fleas. Pretty badly
cared for, I’d bet,” I said.

I wasn’t even thinking about the fight for a moment. I just directed my bugs to keep on attacking
everything that wasn’t the dogs, me, or Hellhound.

She shook her head, angrily. It was the way she walked. There was confidence and an odd sort of
brutality to it. Tensed up and ready for an attack. I didn’t know whether that was a yes or not, but I
decided to wait until she was through the door to actually follow her in.

What I saw inside probably didn’t do much for my faith in humanity. There was a pit of sorts, and
cages everywhere, and the place stank of dog and blood and sweat and all sorts of other things, just a
pungent scent that almost knocked me out as I stepped in, behind her. She seemed to be willing to
tolerate me if I kept out of her way. Or maybe it was the way I kept behind her. I didn’t know.

I couldn’t make out much of her even this close up, which probably made it a decent costume, but
she looked strong, and the way she kept on whistling and giving orders to her dogs as they mauled
people was impressive.

If violent.

In the pit, a pair of dogs were circling, and from the way that people were spilled over, screaming as
my bugs bit at them or as Hellhound’s dogs did rather worse than what a few bugs could do. Or even
all the bugs I could gather. There were probably a dozen dogs, if not more, most of them in crates or
cages.

I didn’t have to be a dog lover to stare at the ribs and the generally poor condition of the dogs, the
torn off ears and the angry snarls, to guess that what had been done to them wasn’t right.

“It isn’t right,” I muttered to myself.

The E88 tried to fight back, and if they’d had a cape, well, who knows. But as it was, few of them
had guns on them, a polite society not being an armed one despite what everyone said, and those that
did were very terrible shots.

Especially when flies kept on landing on their eyes before they could make a shot. Soon, they were
fleeing in terror, and Hellhound’s shoulders lost a little tension as she began called out, “Brutus” and
one of the dogs came to her side, as she marched towards the two dogs that had been fighting, who
were now eyeing each other warily, scared of what was going on.

I watched her as she moved, effortlessly separating the dogs and dodging when they bit at her with
their sharp, honed teeth.

Then she took out a cell-phone, dialing a number rapidly.

“You… that was impressive, Hellhound.”

“Bitch,” she said.

“Excuse me?” I asked, trying not to sound as offended as I did.

“I’m called Bitch,” she repeated, sounding annoyed and frustrated as she waited for someone to pick
up the phone. “Got them. Get them. It’s the deal. What? How did you--”

She tensed and shut off the phone. “How the fuck,” she muttered.
“Alright, then, Bitch…” I said, stepping closer to her carefully. She was moving around, cleaning up the place and making sure all the dogs were in the cages. “What are you going to do here?”

I stepped past a groaning, bleeding member of the E88.

“Take these dogs. They deserve better than this shit,” she said, her voice hard. Hard and firm. Now that she wasn’t in the middle of a fight, she moved a little differently. Still closed up, but a little less ready to attack. The dogs close to her, her dogs that was, they looked like they could be very vicious, and I knew if I crossed her she’d attack me.

She was a villain, after all.

“You gonna care for them?” I asked, frowning. Saving dogs wasn’t what I imagined doing tonight, but at least I was helping something.

“Yes.”

“That’s a lot of dogs to care for yourself. Do you need help?”

“I’m fine,” she said, clearly distracted.

A part of me wanted to give up. After all, she was a villain anyways, while I was an aspiring hero, but I dunno. The first thing I’d seen her do is break up a dog-fighting ring, and I looked at the dogs and, I dunno. Something about me had sympathy for beaten, ill-treated dogs. I wondered what.

“I’m… a new cape. Bug? I’m not sure what to call myself. This is my first night out,” I said, hoping that talking to her would help to lower her guard. I wasn’t sure whether there was any chance. “I just saw, well. I saw the Nazis and—”

Bitch nodded, “Fucking Nazis.” She hesitated, and I saw her looking me up and down, probably wondering whether I’d be any help, on top of whether or not she trusted me. She was big for a girl, and just from what I could see, I bet she was pretty strong. She was able to lift the dog crates, with the dogs in them, one-handed without straining, and I had to imagine that looking at me, the skinny girl whose only real exercise was running, she didn’t think great things.

We’d worked together, and I kind of liked that, even if it had been quiet. I’d helped her a few times, without even thinking about it, and I admit that wasn’t much of a basis for trying to get to know her more, but considering that ‘we both play video games’ was enough to wind up talking a ton to Greg, there were worse reasons to want to help.

“So, I mean. I could give you a phone number, if you wanted help. I mean, if you don’t, you could drive me off. I don’t know what my bugs would do against your dogs, really,” I admitted. “I’m not going to sell you out or anything, I just want to help.”

Bitch hesitated for a moment. “Number.”

I blinked and rattled off the number for a cell phone I’d just gotten for calling in crimes and the like. Except I’d forgotten to bring it along with me.

She nodded, and I asked, “Do you need any help now? Lifting all of these?”

“Sure. Got people coming, though.”
“For what?”

“Help me load them,” Bitch said. “Van.”

“Oh… okay,” I said, hesitantly, and tried to follow her lead, lifting up crates and putting them closer to the entrances. They were heavy, and I had to use both hands to carry some of the dogs, which snapped and bit at me, even when they couldn’t reach me. I had no idea how she was going to train them.

The ones she was carrying seemed to be the ones who were cowering, at least, and when she set each crate down she’d lean in to talk to them. I couldn’t hear what she was saying. I could have tried with my bugs, but it didn’t feel right.

It was hard work, but soon all of the crates were by the door, and I moved towards it. “Bitch, I’m out of here.”

She shrugged, and I left, arms aching, and smelling a little of dog.

Outside, a van had parked, and I passed them by, noting the wary way the men looked at me.

I headed off, not sure of whether I’d done good, or done bad, or just done something. But I’d faced people, and I hadn’t panicked or freaked out. It wasn’t the same as facing down capes, I knew, but it was something, right? I kept on warring with myself whether I’d made the right move or whether I was doing any good, and I’d gotten myself worked up by the time I slipped into the house, glad that Dad was already asleep.

Honestly, I expected she’d just decide not to call me and I’d never seen her again. She was weird, and her dogs were violent, and yet she’d just… saved dogs. Not the same as saving people, but it made me think.

What was her plan, her goal? I could obviously look up Bitch online if I got a chance, and now wasn’t there a name that it felt horrible to say. Maybe I’d learn more about her. I knew that the Undersiders were pretty small-time, but that didn’t mean anything. I was small time. Maybe I could, I dunno, figure out more about them?

I didn’t have a specific plan, but maybe if I could…

No, I didn’t have a plan. But I needed to make a mark as a hero somehow, and taking down a bunch of nazis was a start, right? And without Bitch, it would have been a lot harder for me. A lot harder, really, because there were a lot of people in there, but the combination of bugs and her dogs had been surprisingly powerful.

I was still thinking about that strange girl when I finally drifted off to sleep. I dreamt of mad dogs and cheap dog-masks.

Chapter End Notes

This is a complete work and I’ll be posting an update hopefully every day or two to transfer it over to A03. Feedback of course is appreciated, as well as speculation and thoughts. Any typos or the like I’d be happy to correct, and I do know that the work itself is, of course, not perfect.
Chapter Notes

I woke up remembering that I hadn’t had a shower at all before going to bed. I knew this because I had a working nose. You didn’t need to be a dog to notice. I’d been walking this way and that, and then I’d been stressed during the fight, and I’d had a decent day at school (Emma hadn’t come after me, or Sophia, and that was enough to make it decent) but even the best day was stressful… and then there were all the dog crates I lifted and helped move out of the way.

So in conclusion, I stank.

Emma made up rumors that I was some sort of cave troll, because I dressed in concealing clothes after all sorts of things including her comments, but I wasn’t. So even though my plans included going for a run, I hurried into the bathroom for a quick shower. I turned it on, let out a surprised shout at the cold water, and then bathed as quickly as I could.

By the time the shower was steaming, I was deep in thought. Things had gone well with… Bitch, and in the light of the morning, I felt even better about it, even though I hadn’t even seen her face. Then again, she hadn’t seen mine. Neither of us had seen much of each other, and I couldn’t actually have described her well enough for someone else to pick her up out of a lineup.

I was assuming the jacket was not so thick that it was throwing things off, which was probably a silly assumption. She’d certainly seen more of my appearance, of course. The hair, the general frame, thin and too tall, enough I supposed.

Okay, so, I thought, toweling myself off and hurrying into my room, I’d go to the library after I went for a run and look them all up. If she turned out to be sketchy, some kind of evil psycho-killer who just happened to like dogs, I’d just not respond to her calls. I didn’t know why I was even thinking about it anyways. Was I that desperate? Yes. Yes I was. It frustrated me, sometimes, how needy I felt. Grateful for any talk, even if it was just Greg talking about video game levels when we occasionally chatted.

Even that sometimes made him the target for Emma’s wrath, and that he hadn’t shunned me like everyone else was enough to win a little bit of grace in my book, even if he was often sort of awkward. After all, so was I.

I’d gotten up earlier than usual, though I wasn’t sure why, so I still had time to get dressed and quickly and clumsily brush my hair just enough for it to look a lot worse, and still have time to go out for a jog.

Ever since I’d gotten my powers, I’d taken up exercise because the time would come when it’d pay off. If I was out of shape it’d make getting around the city hard, and getting away from trouble harder.

So I’d pulled on a sweatshirt and jeans, and then went over to the calendar I’d set up on the wall of my room as an encouragement to keep with the program. It was a calendar of female athletes, meant to inspire people to perspire, or the like, I assumed. This month wasn’t all that appropriate for my own task, this female mixed martial artist who had won a ton of fights, but the one before had been a marathonist, which certainly felt more fitting. Either way, I checked the box for today’s date, Saturday, April 16th, and then flipped through it for a moment.
Still most of the year to go. I glanced around my room one last time and then put on my sneakers and headed downstairs, apologizing to Dad for skipping out on breakfast first. I’d eat when I got back.

So I started out for a jog, just a little bit past six, the air still cool and the world still empty. Sometimes that felt like a bad thing, of course. I was lonely enough sometimes, but today I liked it. The crisp air, the routine. I didn’t have an amount I ran, I just kept on ramping up, going faster and faster until I started to get tired, and then I’d slow down, allowing my body and my feet to take me where I wanted to go.

I wound up going along the Boardwalk part of the way, and then looping around. If I wanted to go get breakfast, I could have stopped at one of the fast food places on the way, I thought. I had my phone on me, and I stopped near a bus stop to call my Dad. I decided I could just call him, use the money I’d brought in my sweatshirt (I had a twenty and a five that I’d shoved there a few weeks ago, and then forgotten to use), and eat some sort of sausage and muffin sandwich or something. Of course, that’d cancel out some of the good I’d done with all this running, but I was really starting to get hungry.

Which was when the phone rang. I looked at the number, which I didn’t recognize.

“Hey,” a voice said. A very familiar one. “Come down. Need your help.”

“Where?” I asked, frowning, annoyed. I wasn’t in the mood to come, even if I had said I would, but-

I sighed. “Don’t know where you are.”

“Go on Thompson street, I’ll meet you there.”

“Fine, fine.”

“You asked,” Bitch said, her voice hard, as if she expected that of me.

“Sorry, just hadn’t had breakfast yet. Was out for a run,” I explained, as if she cared. “I’ll just jog over there. See you then.”

“Okay,” Bitch said, not sounding interested.

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I’d like to think I made decent time, actually. I jogged most of the way, walking only when I got tired, and then finally I reached the street. I looked around, and that’s when I spotted Bitch for the first time.

She was looking at me, her eyes dark and a little bit big for her face, which was square and blunt, with a strong jaw. Her lips were shut, not smiling or anything, and she had a nose that looked like it had seen its share of fights. The brows above her eyes were thick and dark, and red-brown hair cut very short, though with at least a little care.

My impression of her was right. She was big and thick, though not at all fat. Strong arms ended in short, blunt looking fingers, and she was dressed in a shapeless sort of T-shirt and a torn pair of jeans, as well as some well-used looking boots. She looked like someone who could get into a fight with one of the punks from the other day and win, her form blocky and solid.

She started forward, holding something in her hands. I’d been using my bugs the whole time, to make sure that this wasn’t a trap with a dozen people around ready to leap on me, and as far as my
bugs could tell, everything was normal. Then she thrust out her hand.

It was a protein bar.

“Eat. It’ll be hard work.”

“Oh,” I said, startled as I looked at her closer, surprised at her kindness. “Thanks.”

She grunted, annoyed as I smiled at her. Oddly, she seemed to tense up for whatever reason until my smile dimmed. “Whatever,” she said. “Dogs need to eat. Gonna work with the ones I rescued, they need baths, and we need to clean out the cages.”

She turned and began to walk, and I followed her, close behind. It seemed like it made sense. Those dogs were in no good condition, so of course she’d pay the most attention to them. I didn’t know how many other dogs she had, though. That was certainly something to consider. Speaking of considering, “I have control of bugs, B… can I call you something else? I’m Taylor.”

She walked for a little while, as if she hadn’t heard me.

“Anyways,” I said, pressing on, “I can control bugs. That means I could get rid of fleas on the dogs without any powder or anything, and… you know, I wonder, if they had worms, would that count as a type of bug?”

Bitch slowed down a little bit. She didn’t really have a runner’s build, but she was pretty steady all the same. “Rachel. Call me Rachel.” And then she sped up a lot, as if she were trying to leave me in the dust.

I hurried to catch up when my phone started ringing again just as she started to round a corner. “One sec,” I called out, checking the number. Another one I didn’t know. I frowned, and decided not to take it at the moment. If Rachel had as much to do as I thought, she wouldn’t like to wait, and so I sped up, and left it to go to voice message.

Which it did. I’d listen to it later, I supposed. I opened the protein bar and took a bite. Horrible, absolutely horrible. But I kept on eating, and while I walked, I thought. It was odd, the way she’d gotten more tense when I smiled. Did she not like friendliness, or not trust it? Or did she not like smiles. But why would she--

I frowned to myself, not sure what kind of read to get on her.

Or the building she was coming towards. At the moment it was quiet, but as she got closer dogs started to bark. Some poor sap had started to build in this area, and had apparently realized just how horrible an idea it was. There was a small crane, and the building had literally been left half-finished.

Rachel walked up to the door, opening it and gesturing for me to get inside before quickly locking it and striding forward through a run-down looking hallway towards a second door. And when she opened it up, a handful of dogs almost knocked me over when they overshot Bitch. Licking, barking, most of them obviously happy.

And then, angry and far less certain, were the Fighting Dogs, still kept in their cages, which were pushed in a corner of the strangest room I’d ever seen. It was half build, cement up to one point, and then grass and dirt in the other half, mixed with a bunch of stone, as if someone had been preparing for cement. Three of the walls were finished, leaving a fourth completely open, bizarrely. Someone, or a dog in general, could just walk outside at any time.

There might have been a second floor, except it'd never been built, but what had been built was
enough of it to create a decent overhang, so that despite the lack of roof, it probably kept off the rain decently enough.

Man it was odd, though. There were pallets lying everywhere, toys here and there, and most of the dogs seemed to only have eyes for her, though one ugly looking mutt rolled over and demanded attention from me. I rubbed his belly for a moment, looking over at Rachel as she walked over towards a pallet with several different kinds of dog food. She frowned and then picked up one of the larger bags.

Some of the dogs, especially the new ones, had fleas, I noted, as I read the bag. It was a very general issue sort of dog food, since these dogs came in all shapes and sizes. I didn’t know exactly how her power worked. She’d been giving commands to them, and they’d been obeying, but was that because she trained them or because she was the dog whisperer?

Or both, I supposed.

She gestured over to me and tossed me a pocket knife that she’d apparently just carried around. In a firm voice, she said, “Pour half of it out. The fighter dogs will eat after the others.”

I clumsily cut a hole in the bag and began to pour it out while she watched for a moment and then, once she’d decided I wouldn’t somehow kill the dogs by incompetence, she walked off. As soon as the food hit the trough, the dogs swarmed on it, eating as fast as they could.

Wolfing it down wasn’t even the start of it, and I watched it, a little amused.

The dogs in the cages were whining, and I looked at them. Most were larger, and rather rough looking in one way or another. Scrappy. Survivors, which was another way to say that they were hurt and yet had gotten very good at hurting. One of them seemed a little less imposing, a white dog with brown patches here and there, and a shoulder that even from here looked off.

He or she had been used hard. All of them had. Rachel returned a little bit later with a large carton of water that she poured into several very large bowls. And even then, it wasn’t enough, because once they’d drank all the water, she had to put out more.

She whistled, and the german shepherd she’d trained before came up, walking with her as she began opening the cages for the other dogs. They leapt out of them, and one of them looked like it was going to run before the shepherd growled at it. “There, Judas. Keep the other dogs off of them.” She whistled, and then walked over to me. “Pour the food,” she said, impatiently, and I did.

A few of the dogs that had already eaten moved forward to get more of their fill, only for Judas to get in their way and growl. I’d have gotten out of the way. And the Rottweiler was there as well, doing his job as well, without even being told. Whenever a dog snapped at the other, Rachel would growl and Judas or the Rottweiler would come forward to deal with it. After a while, the dogs had eaten and drank their fill, and Rachel nodded at me and said, “Any of them got worms?”

“That dog,” I said, pointing to a black lab that hadn’t been part of the fighting dogs, “has… heartworms?”

It felt really, really weird. But yeah. “And, that one,” I said, pointing to a pit bull, “has a worm in its stomach.”

“His. his stomach,” Rachel corrected.

“Didn’t know,” I said, shrugging. “The others are fine, thankfully. I bet that they didn’t want any of their dogs to be too sick, or else they couldn’t fight and suffer for their amusement.”
Rachel looked at me. “That so?”

“People are like that.” I once thought that Emma liked me, and even now, I think she’d be grieved if I died. Grieved that I’d robbed her of her fun and her chance to prove whatever sick, horrible point she was trying to make by bullying me relentlessly.

“Yeah,” Rachel said, and she nodded, in a way I couldn’t quite place. “I can bulk Sirius up, it might hurt the worm. It’s worked before.”

“Maybe, but when they die, I think they release toxins?”

“ Heard that too,” Rachel said, “somewhere. Could you stop the worm from doing it?”

“Not sure,” I admitted, “um, how does bulking up the dogs work?”

“Why?” Rachel asked, suspiciously.

“I’m just trying to think,” I admitted.

“They bulk up when I touch them and concentrate. Once they get large enough, they’re actually in a… meat shell.”

“A meat shell?” I asked, baffled. “Like a dog piloting a Gundam?”

“What’s a Gundam?” Rachel said. Her suspicion seemed to redouble, and I realized, or thought I realized, that she thought I was mocking her.

“Giant robot that people get into, shaped like a person.”

“Oh,” Rachel said, sounding a little incredulous. “Yes, I guess.”

“Cool. So if the shell is different, I could have the worm sort of crawl into it? If it doesn’t work,” I added. It might, after all.

“Sure.”

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It wasn’t that easy, though. As Rachel explained it, tersely, when they first got empowered, the dogs were startled and angry. So she couldn’t control them. So she had to bulk up the three dogs she knew how to ‘use’ and have them at the ready before she even touched the dog, who she called Sirius. The stomach worm I’d dealt with on my own, it was actually pretty easy, all things considered. It committed what, for a stomach worm, was suicide. And now it should just pass through, ultimately.

Sirius, though, that involved gripping him tight, and I was there as well and the dogs were there if he did anything.

I was watching to see if it worked. I had no idea how her power worked, and I wasn’t sure if she knew all of the specifics either.

As she touched him, he began to change. The power flushed through him, and it felt like the worm was dissolving. And that should have meant that the simple thing released highly dangerous toxins that seriously hurt the dog. As bad as the heartworms had felt, that was the result that should have happened.

Instead, other than struggling and trying to bite at Bitch in surprised anger, he was fine.
“Oh,” I said, faintly impressed. “It seems like it’s dead. But... no poison.”

“Huh,” Rachel said, with a shrug. “Next, we need to look over the animals. You’ll need to help hold them,” she said, and I could just picture the checklist in her head.

I nodded, trying not to smile just to see how that went.

******

Rachel was strong, and she knew what she was doing. She’d hold the dog and quickly check over him or her. Teeth, muzzle, ribs, moving them all over, and whispering them the whole time. I held their head, or their body when she was looking at the mouth, and when one of them tried to bolt, one of the fighting dogs who had taken into a panic, she easily kept it from moving. Her arms were a little tanned at places, and it was clear she spent a lot of time outside.

From the way this place was set up, there was probably a lot of outside time.

“What are you going to do with the cages?” I asked, in the middle of the sixth examination.


“The dogs don’t sleep in them?”

“No. I have plenty of floor,” she said, as if it were a stupid question, “and blankets.”

I blinked, looking around, “Where do you sleep?”

She tensed a little at the question. Her whole body seemed built for tensing up before an attack, the way it was made of strong lines. This close she smelled strongly of dog, and this only added to the faint sense of discomfort I felt. It was hard to place, just this feeling like I was on thin ice, that every word I was saying mattered and that I didn’t want to say anything wrong.

I was afraid of her and couldn’t even quite feel it right, I decided.

“I have a room. Don’t wanna talk about that.”

Oh, the Undersiders. Some sort of hidden villain lair.

“Sometimes just sleep here,” Rachel said, “nicer here.”

“So do you have blankets?”

“Blankets and pillows. I just find a spot on the floor,” Rachel said. Just like the dogs.

I imagined that some of them would have cuddled up to her, or tried to bother her, but I don’t think that would have troubled her. It was such an oddly peaceful thing to imagine, her sprawled out on the ground in a mound of pillows and blankets, the dogs next to her or even on top of her. I had to keep from smiling, my face almost demanding to turn upward.

“What,” she asked, her voice harsh.

“Nothing. Just thinking,” I said. “I can get all of their fleas and all of the ticks and the like out of here, if you want.”

“Sure. They don’t like them none,” Rachel said, as she kept up the work, not slowing down just because I was gabbing at them. “They’d appreciate it.”
The cynic in me wondered if that was a difference between dogs and people. Appreciating when someone did something nice for you. But I knew that was just another dark, angry thought, the kind of thing that didn’t help, but felt good to think.

******

It took a long time to look through all the dogs and make sure we knew what was wrong with them, and even longer for me to do a Pied Piper and escort all of the fleas to the nearest storm drain.

By the time all of that was done, and looking over the other dogs, and cleaning up when one of the new dogs had peed on the concrete floor, it was well past eight o’clock, and felt like it’d been way longer.

It was a lot of work, really, but it did feel oddly purposeful. I didn’t have a maternal bone in my body, not that I could tell, but there was a certain feeling like when the efforts were directed towards another living being, it made them feel better? Maybe that was the other side of the coin from the cynicism. Either way, I could see why she enjoyed doing this, and the thing was, when I watched her move from dog to dog, rubbing them, throwing sticks for them, going outside barefoot to watch as they went around the large, fenced in yard, she was good at it.

If I had to hire a dog sitter and she was charging anything short of “Dog Sitter for the Stars” rates, she’d be the one I chose, I thought to myself as I mostly just hung around and got curious sniffs from dog after dog. I patted them, rubbed a few bellies, and once the main work was done mostly I did things that weren’t work so much as relaxation.

And when she wasn’t playing with them, she was watching them. She eventually made her way over to the pallet I’d been sitting on, and sat down next to me. She smelled of sweat and dog, but she felt more friendly than she had earlier. As if I’d passed some kind of test.

“They’re circling. They think they should fight because that’s what they were told to do,” Rachel said, pointing to two dogs.

I frowned, thinking back, “Are those the two dogs that were fighting?” They looked in pretty rough shape, really, and yet evenly matched in an odd way. Both big dogs with tears and rips in them. A missing ear on one of them, a somewhat wobbly shoulder with another. They moved slowly, this way and that.

“Yeah. Trained to hate,” Rachel said, and she said it in this way like she’d said it before, like she’d memorized it.

“Hurt,” I muttered, “like anyone who triggers.”

She started, as if she hadn’t quite thought about it like that. “Dogs can’t trigger. If they could, maybe people would think twice—”

I began to nod, and then thought about it. No. No they wouldn’t. “I wish they would, but I’m not sure. The possibility that I might trigger if pushed too far didn’t help me any.”

“You could sting them with your bugs or whatever,” Rachel said, as if that was the logical thing to do. Just hurt people.

“I could. But I want to be a hero. I… fuck,” I said, shaking my head, “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Sure,” Rachel said, as if she had had no investment at all in the answer. “The yard needs work.”
“Huh?” I asked.

“Shit everywhere. Could you shovel it.”

“If you join in,” I said, sharply, then added, “two sets of hands are better than one.”

She was looking at me, now, standing there stocky and sure, and then finally she gave a shrug and gestured over towards a corner where there were a few shovels.

So we shoveled shit for a while. It wasn’t enjoyable, not in the last, and yet at least it was a decent day. I had to step carefully, and I wished I’d brought boots or something like she had, but there were worse jobs. I could be working retail, after all. Of course, I wasn’t getting paid for this.

Rachel had rolled up her sleeves as far as they could go and then immediately set to work, her dark hair eventually glistening with sweat from the heat, doing twice as much work as I was doing.

“Well,” I muttered to myself, “there is worse exercise.”

“What?” Rachel asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Oh, I said that there was worse exercise. I’ve been working out some ever since I got my powers. Running, I mean,” I added.

“Sure.”

“Do you do any exercise, or is it all looking after these dogs?” I asked.

“There’s weights somewhere,” she said, a little vaguely, “but I don’t need them.”

Her arms had real definition, on top of being rather tanned. “I can see that,” I said, flushing a little at how silly my question was.

Rachel looked at me for a moment and said, “Good job.” She said it grudgingly.

I couldn’t help but react, “At shoveling the shit? Yeah. I have to say that I was born for this work.”

Rachel almost growled, “That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh,” I said, a little weakly. “But it’s no problem. I mean, I’m sure that you sometimes get help, your teammates.”

“No,” she said, and that was a very final sort of word. “Not more than once.”

“Well, I liked the work. Sort of,” I said, “dogs are nice.” Which was a nice noncommittal statement that she couldn’t disagree with. “And if I had brought a book or a game, I could do that if there was any spare time, and still watch the dogs.”

“A game?”

“Yeah, I play video games a little. My mom was a literature professor, so I kinda picked up a love of books,” I said, wondering if I was sharing too much. There was something about the seeming apathy and yet attention that just made me keep on wanting to talk, though.

I don’t know how well I’d have reacted to pity, and even sympathy seemed like it might be too much, if it came on too fast. But she was just listening. Maybe she was judging, but who knew? “So, if you wanted me to come around, say, tomorrow or after school later in the week, I could. If I
I don’t know why I was talking so fast, but it felt like I had to get it out, the same way you tried to slam your foot into a door before it closed.

“Sure. Why not,” Rachel said, as she walked towards the inside.

I followed her close behind and saw she was moving around a little, aiming for a closed door. “So, are we done?”

“We’ve done enough,” Rachel said, which went to show that she could get sick of shoveling like anyone else.

She opened the door, and beyond was a room. Blankets, chew toys, an actual cabinet just screwed onto the thin wooden wall. It was an entire room, and I guessed at once that she used it as a back room. I looked around, but there was nothing especially personal to it all. Or rather, nothing hidden. She didn’t secretly have a romance novel lying around, she didn’t hide the bodies of the last four people who had helped out her dogs here, it was just a place to store stuff like blankets and extra food and the pillows.

I stepped towards the cabinet, as she moved towards a door in the far wall. I quickly opened the cabinet. Protein bars, granola bars, pop tarts, a box of cereal, it seemed I’d found the food cabinet. There was also a lot of jerky just piled up here and there, some of it in packages, and some of it clearly bought and just tossed in, which couldn’t be hygienic. I assumed she ate out a lot, because there was no room for anything cold, and there weren’t any fruits or vegetables, either.

She opened the door and gestured for me to get in. I stepped in to see tiles, a toilet, and a sink. It was a bathroom, which meant that this was probably meant to be some sort of small business. The bathroom had the look of one of those ‘all genders’ ones, for places too small to have two separate facilities.

She went over to the water and turned the faucets, splashing her face and even drinking some of it. This must be where she got the water for the dogs, I thought, waiting my turn. As I drank a little of the water and looked at myself in the mirror, wondering just what I was doing, Rachel stood behind me, still watching, obviously still thinking.

“Hey, go pick up lunch,” Rachel said.

“Pardon?” I asked, distractedly, having taken a moment to just look at myself in the mirror, and seeing as many things wrong as I usually did.

“There’s a greek cart around here, I can give directions. You’ll smell it before you see it. Pick something up with a lot of meat. I have money--”

“N-no,” I said, “I can pay for it. I mean, you have let me in on a lot, and it doesn’t hurt anything.”

Rachel just stared for a moment, as if she was trying to get me to back down. Which was weird. “Fine. Hurry, I’m hungry.”

“And I’m starving,” I added.

“No. You aren’t,” Rachel said, her voice hard, in a tone that felt almost foreign. It was how she’d talked to me last night, and I’d apparently already gotten used to how she was talking now, even at her most disinterested or even mildly hostile.
“No, no I’m not,” I said, reminded for a brief moment of The Giver. “Anyways, I’ll go and grab it, then we can eat lunch and I guess I’ll… go from there?”

“Works,” she said.

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Once I was out of her lair, I took stock of things. Things were going well. I’d keep on interacting with her and… I dunno. Maybe I’d learn about the Undersiders? Maybe I could bring her around to the light side? I didn’t have a plan, I was just doing it because, because.

I didn’t know why I was doing this. I checked the phone message on the way to the cart.

“Hey, I know you don’t know me, but this is Tattletale. Bitch’s teammate,” a girl said, in a voice that sounded vaguely posh. Slightly upper-class. “I was just going to give you some advice about talking to her, because there are a few things that might trip you up. She can be very hostile, and she’ll probably force you to shovel dog poop, and if you’re not ready for it, she might attack you just to see how you reacted.”

There was a pause, “She’s very prickly, and don’t talk to her as if she’s stupid or she’ll react badly, and she sometimes thinks people are making fun of her if they talk about education. I have other advice, but I’m not sure how much would really fit on the message, and so please call me back, ASAP.”

Well, that was weird advice. She hadn’t attacked me, and she hadn’t made me shovel poop until after we’d done everything else together. I didn’t know what sort of Rachel she was talking about, but it wasn’t quite the same girl I’d met. I could imagine her doing all of that but wasn’t Tattletale a teammate?

If anything, I should have gotten the worse treatment. It was sort of weird, and I put it out of my mind for a moment, and then decided to just text her.

‘Weird advice. I’m doing fine. Whoever you are.’

There, sent.

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I had a gyro and a little bowl of lentil soup, and ate slowly and carefully. It was delicious, so much so I had to keep from pigging out.

Rachel, on the other hand, ate like a dog. Or, I corrected myself, like someone who was afraid that her food was going to be taken away from her. Combined with her earlier statement, it created a certain impression. I watched her eat for a moment, and then got back to eating myself.

The dogs crowded around, begging for food, and with Rachel’s permission I’d gotten another Gyro, just about running out of money to do so, and I occasionally threw bits of greenery or the lamb itself to the dogs, who of course kept on coming back for more. Rachel even shared a little of hers occasionally, sitting there on a pallet, just being there.

I didn’t know what to talk about, and if Tattletale’s advice was right, if I talked too much about science fiction, she might think I was laughing at her if she didn’t know about it. So I just let the silence work for me. It sort of did. By the time we were finished, it was somewhat past noon.

“I should get going, Rachel,” I said. “But I’ll be back tomorrow. How about seven?”
Rachel frowned, and then shrugged. “Okay. Or earlier. Just knock on the door. The dogs will bark.”

“I could try for six, though I normally don’t wake up that early,” I admitted.

Rachel nodded, and there was that focus in her eyes, as if she was noting something down. Her eyes were dark, and very intense looking when she was frowning like she was. “Got it.”

I left to the barking of dogs who seemed sad to see me go. I didn’t know all of their names, but maybe if I had enough time, I’d learn them.

******

Rachel Lindt’s name was known to the world, oddly enough. Her trigger or perhaps her attitude, I thought as I read what there was online, had let to her unmasking pretty early on. The Protectorate called her Hellhound, she called herself Bitch. She’d done a lot of petty crime. Smashing and grabbing, living on the streets, and then suddenly she’d shown up in Brockton Bay, part of a team that did a lot of the same sorts of things. Heists, attacks on gang-bangers to steal their money, all of it pretty simple. They were a minor team, consisting of a Thinker with unknown powers (Tattletale), someone who could summon darkness, Grue, and Regent, who had… the ability to make people trip? Something with the nervous system, people on PHO speculated. That and Bitch, who was the muscle of the group.

It was not a description made to inspire confidence. They seemed small time, which was better than them being a big street gang beating up minorities in the street, but did make me wonder. They’d mixed things up, stealing things from Lung’s Casino, and then immediately turning on the E88.

That was the latest news, that they’d been hitting the E88 hard at several places, and the Dog fighting ring was actually in the online news, sort of. The insect bites were causing speculation, but I thought about the attack.

It seemed too personal. It seemed like something Bitch was doing for herself. But if it happened to hit the E88, maybe that was the point? Either way, I wasn’t sure if I could trust the Undersiders, and if I’d learned all of this before my morning with Rachel, then I might have stayed away.

As it was, nothing was new enough or threatening enough to make it seem like a bad idea.

Speaking of bad ideas, I should go out on patrol again, so that everyone knew I was a hero, rather than some sort of new Undersider, as a few people speculated considering how many people had eventually been found with insect bites when the police had rolled in… huh.

That was impressive timing, I thought, distractedly. Someone must have tipped off the police.

It wasn’t my problem now. So I tried to put Rachel out of my mind as I began to plan for my second excursion out into the night of Brockton Bay.

Hopefully it’d go just as well as last night had.

Chapter End Notes

Decided to post two chapters instead of one the first day. Give people more to read and react to.
Dad was waiting for me when I got home. He’d probably been busy, but he had to have noticed when I hadn’t shown up. He wasn’t crossing his arms or looking like I was about to be in big trouble, but he was sitting on the couch, going through some papers, and as soon as I opened the door, he stood up. “Taylor, where were you?”

“Well, things happened,” I began, carefully. “I decided I’d just go to a fast food place, and I met someone there. Another girl, my age.” I didn’t actually know how old she was, but she did look roughly my age. “We started talking, and then we wound up hanging out.”

“Oh?” Dad said, and I heard the interest. Obviously, I’d managed to hide what was happening at school from him partially, until the… incident, and even then he’d raged but not known that it was Emma that had done it. He was distracted, but that didn’t mean he didn’t care. It just meant it was hard to pull everything together. He still worried.

“Well, yeah. Her name is Rachel. She was actually dog-sitting for someone,” I lied, trying to throw together something fast. “So I wound up hanging around dogs. Which is why I smell like I do.”

I stank, even worse than I did when I woke up. If I was going to spend a lot of time around Rachel, I’d need to take a lot of showers.

“Oh,” Dad said, “she nice?”

“Well… yeah,” I said, after a moment of thinking. “She’s really strong. Sort of blunt, straightforward. Doesn’t go to my school.” I added, to cut off the question. I didn’t know if she went to any school at all, actually. Maybe I’d ask her sometime. I thought about her a little more, trying to figure out what else I could say, “Striking. Likes dogs a lot.”

“Striking?”

“I meant,” I said, “you’d known her when you saw her. It’s like Lacey.”

Lacey was one of my Dad’s coworkers, married to Kurt. She was built pretty strongly, sorta similar to Rachel, actually. She and Kurt were close to Dad, and I knew that when he’d lost Mom he’d needed people like them to help him. I hadn’t been much help, that was for sure.

“Ah,” Dad said, nodding. “Did you have lunch?”

“Yes,” I said, “if you wanted to hang out for a little while, I could.” I couldn’t go out on patrol now, not with him at home, and not if he was going to be watching, and so I thought I’d just wait and wait some more. After I got cleaned up. Actually, now that I was thinking about it, maybe I should get some boots or clothes I was willing to get a little dirty? So that I didn’t ruin anything good.

“Sure, Taylor. Anything you wanna do?”

“Well, it’s been a little while since I’ve been shopping, and I thought, if I was going to hang out around her and the dogs she’s sitting, I might need to get some clothes that are a little more…”
“Disposable?” Dad asked, smiling. Of course he believed that Rachel was just some girl. Who’d believe otherwise, all things considered? It was what made most sense, and really, I’d mostly interacted with her as if we were just two teens. Me the tall, skinny one, her the blunt one with impressive biceps.

...okay, not as seen on TV, but whatever. “Yeah, that’s what I meant.”

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Shirts. Jeans. A pair of boots. It wasn’t really thrilling, but then again, I hadn’t really done thrilling in fashion since Emma had been my friend, and of course those days were over, never to return again, so I almost felt more comfortable shying away from that, even if I didn’t also know that my body was something to hide or not talk about or else Emma would gossip about me even more than she already did.

It was fast and easy, and I hoped that Rachel would appreciate the effort I was going through. I almost wished I had her number, so I could call her. Or text her. Not that I approved of texting, but anything would be better than nothing. I didn’t know if she had a phone. I wondered if I could just buy her a cheapo one if she didn’t. Though everyone had a phone, didn’t they?

I found myself wondering what she was doing right about now. Probably not anything nefarious. I could almost picture her, lifting another thing of dog food effortlessly, barely straining herself, and cutting it open to pour it out for dinner. Dogs were hungry things. They needed care and attention and love.

I guess they weren’t all that different from people, then.

Either way, I made dinner again, meatloaf this time, and wondered if I could look up some books on dogs. Or go to the library and get some. I could always just give her some. Oddly, I hadn’t seen a single book in her whole room, so maybe she wasn’t much of a reader?

Still, in the optimistic mood I was in, I thought it was maybe worth a try. Or at least, I could see if she liked anything I brought and go from there?

Then there was the patrolling. I didn’t really want to run into anything too rough, so maybe I’d go a little north? I knew that there were some areas where the drug dealers mostly worked. Scare a few drug dealers, make them regret annoying someone who could control bees, and then go home.

Yeah, it sounded kinda pathetic, but it was a start, and once people started knowing who I was, then maybe I could figure out what else to do. I knew that plenty of independent heroes spent most of their time going up against goons. Shadow Stalker, at least from what I’d read online, had mostly kept away from cape fights since she was on her own. That changed once she joined the Protectorate, but it did make a model of sorts.

Stay out of the way of trouble unless I was strong enough to be trouble myself.

Dad always drank a little more on a Saturday night, and so I was able to slip away before too long, and change in an alley. It was a skill I didn’t have yet, to be able to do it comfortably. It always felt exposed and vulnerable and weird, like I was just about to get attacked by someone in the middle of it.

But that didn’t happen, not this time at least. Plus, I knew it was paranoia, because I already had my bugs spread out here, there, and everywhere in order to check for that sort of thing. So I walked along, thinking that I really did need a way to carry them, or at least, worrying about whether people
would notice all of the bugs I was controlling, moving as I walked along.

People moved out of my way when they saw me, and I allowed flies to go on ahead as far as I could. Strangely, my range seemed down tonight, and I didn’t know why. I continued on my way, until I saw it. A cluster of people in an alley. I couldn’t make out specifics, my bugs were still as they ever were, hard to read sensory information from.

But I guessed it was nothing good, because this part of town wasn’t really a place where people gathered together at night for any good purpose.

I moved cautiously, and as slowly as I could, drawing insects to me, and allowing them to crawl up all around me. I needed as many of them on me as I could.

“What’s the take?” someone asked.

“Not enough,” a guy said. “Damn, Kaiser’s going to be pissed, sweetie.”

“He’ll have to learn to deal, or not,” a woman’s voice said. “Now all of you. We should get out of here. We’ve done what we came here for, and--”

I inched around the corner, allowing myself to get a peek at what it was.

So, six Nazis, and two capes.

This was known as the exact sort of odds that I ran away against because I wasn’t a moron. I actually recognized the capes, because I’d done a lot more research ahead of time on the E88 than I did on a far more minor team that hadn’t done that much that was notable.

So that was Victor and Othala. Victor was a blond man wearing a black breastplate and a blood red shirt, and a black domino mask that hid surprisingly little of his face. A handsome face, relatively speaking, though the red and black didn’t work all that well.

Still, everyone knew what it meant: red, black and white. Germany, or some versions of Germany. His power was only partially known, but seemed to involve stealing abilities from other people.

Othala was similarly dressed in red and black. She had on a skintight red bodysuit that hugged every impressive curve the nazi jerk had. In the center of her chest was what looked like a diamond with two small v-shaped legs. It probably had a name, and probably meant something important. A rune, maybe? But either way, her power was more interesting. She gave powers to other people. She could heal them, could make them stronger, could make them invincible. And that meant that she was the first target I should go after.

If I did this. I shouldn’t, because it was stupid.

If I got hurt my Dad would notice, and then--

A dozen bees went straight for her before I could even think, right towards her head.

She screamed in shock, as one of the men pointed at me. Victor drew and fired, and I barely managed to get around the edge of the alley in time. He was a quick draw, and if he’d hit, well then that was it.

As it was, I gathered bugs, aiming mostly for her. I had a spider of mine leap off of my body, as others swarmed on and around my costume, and then begin to crawl towards the men.
One of them who had been about to run around the corner to go after me gave a surprisingly high pitched scream and backed up. Victor, though, ran right to Othala, batting at the bugs.

Ah, that was something I could use, I thought, as the bees stung her again and again. She couldn’t heal herself, so in theory anything I did to her that messed her up would stick, and that’d be a good thing.

In reality, though, I really needed to get out of here. The tide of insects would only hold them so long, and I didn’t really have a finishing move. Bugs, and then more bugs, and then when I ran out of those, bugs. If Rachel was here, then I could have cleared both of them out, I thought, but then again, I might as well ask for a Protectorate team to show up right now.

Instead, I backed up again, going for a corner, as I let the bugs swarm out. They bit at and flew in the mouth and eyes of as many people as they could, and then they started dying. Fire. Victor was using fire.

That’s when I knew it was definitely time to retreat. I could feel him stalking around the corner, ready to go after me. He was angry, I could tell from the swearing, and I thought for a moment. I had a lot of flying, buzzing insects around, on top of the spiders and the few bees I had. Nothing that could stop him, but perhaps I could distract him.

I continued to flee, while focusing on the cloud of insects, trying to get them to vaguely resemble my head, and as he got closer I had it pop out at head height. He threw himself back, ready for an attack, and then I felt my insects dying as he threw fireball after fireball into them.

They died like bugs. But in the meantime, I was running as fast as I could, ducking around an alley and then continued onward through the other alley, glad that I’d been exercising as much as I had. I’d done nothing more than inconvenience them, and I could have died.

I ran like a dog with her tail between her legs.

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I tried to think about what I wanted to do to fix it. Now the E88 probably knew someone was out there attacking them, though I bet they’d hear it from some of their guys that sprung bail. I didn’t know what they’d think I was, but the retreat definitely wouldn’t scream ‘dangerous threat’ to them. If I had a bunch of beehives, maybe I could have done more. A swarm of hundreds of bees could have changed things. As it was, I’d just…

Bugged them.

I could join the Wards, but I didn’t want to have to deal with teen drama. Rachel was the farthest thing from teen drama I could imagine, so she didn’t count. Maybe once I built up more of a reputation, I could join the Wards on my own terms, or something? I know that Shadow Stalker had wound up joining them eventually, so who knew.

I drifted off to sleep, and woke up early. Five o’clock early. I groaned, and got a quick shower in, before going downstairs and writing a note for Dad.

‘Out running. Might visit that friend of mine after that. Will be back for dinner. Love, Taylor.’

Well, that wouldn’t stop him from worrying, but I didn’t care that much about that. I rifled around upstairs for a moment, being as quiet as I could.

So, what to bring along? I grabbed the Microsoft Game Machine, four different books, and made
sure to put the boots and heavier clothes in the backpack. I was going to run with sneakers, but I was going to work in boots.

There was an alternate reality, where there were few Parahumans that we called Earth Aleph, and apparently they found the idea that the foremost maker of handheld games was Microsoft to be bizarre. Also, they thought our graphics were dated. But the Game Machine was an old workhorse, nine years old now, and still getting games released on it. It was part of some weird strategy, and I knew that they were phasing in a new system, but in the meantime, I enjoyed my used, cruddy, blue and secondhand Game Machine.

I also enjoyed my jog, as I passed by with some money I’d saved up and bought a few things.

A lot of meat, huh?

********

I jogged up with several bags in my hand. The dogs were barking even before I’d reached the door and knocked, and Rachel opened it, looking at me for a moment.

She clearly hadn’t been expecting me as early as I’d gotten there, because she was in a pair of jeans that were in fact unzipped. Which made me imagine her springing out from wherever she was and throwing them on. Her shirt looked rumpled too, and I wondered if I’d almost caught her in bed.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Food. For you and me. I figured you might like some more breakfast,” I said, “my treat.” I didn’t think I could keep on buying that much every day, though the fact that it was from the dollar menu certainly helped. Bacon, sausage patties, chicken nuggets, just simple, pretty unhealthy stuff honestly.

“Got anything good?” Rachel asked.

“I’d think so. I’ll go change in the bathroom,” I said, “I brought some boots and some sturdier clothes.”

“Sure. What can I eat?” she asked.

“As much as you want, just save some for me,” I said, casually. She definitely ate a lot more than me, though looking at her she used all of those calories up. She nodded, and I couldn’t tell what the look in her eyes meant.

When we opened the door, the dogs all but sprang on me, and this time I did have a little to give them. Just a bit of meat, pulling it out of the bag and tossing it here and there. In the corner, I could see a pile of pillows and blankets, and I realized that Rachel must have decided to sleep here this time. Did she sleep in her clothes, or had she thrown them off and then thrown them on later?

I made my way to the bathroom, this time noting a new addition. She had a toothbrush here, which she hadn’t before. Again, another minor mystery about her. She had good teeth, so it was clear she brushed them, or maybe she just didn’t eat anything that’d give her bad teeth? Not that I’d seen them that often, since even when she was happy she didn’t smile.

I both did and didn’t want to see her teeth. It was easy to change, and I hurried out to see that she had already fed the dogs, all of them in fact. The new arrivals already seemed to be getting used to the new status quo, or at least coping well enough to be able to eat without fighting, though one or two snapped at each other.
Rachel was eating a sausage burrito when I came in, wearing new boots that were just a little uncomfortable.

“Hey, I hope I didn’t wake you up or anything,” I said, making sure not to show my teeth as I made my way over to her. “I just woke up earlier than expected.” I was sweating a little, because I had gone on a full jog and run before getting the food. I’d walked the rest of the way, but my legs definitely were tired.

So, I probably smelled pretty bad. Then again, there were all of those dogs, and Rachel had just woken up. Though I was already starting to get used to the smells, really.

“It’s fine,” she said, which was more tactful than I expected. “We should work after this.”

“Sure,” I said. “I have the whole day free. I told Dad I was going to be out, but that I’d be back for dinner.”

“Makes sense,” she said with a shrug, taking a bite into that cheesy, egg and sausage goodness. The bane of every diet was that the good foods had a lot of calories, though I’d managed decently, all things considered.

“Are things going well with you? If you don’t mind asking.”

A pause. Rachel shrugged. I waited, carefully, watching her for a moment, her dark eyes meeting mine. “Sure.”

“Do you get along with your teammates?” I asked.

“No,” she said, without even hesitating.

I pulled out an egg sandwich and took a bite of it, pausing to let it all soak in. “So, what are they like? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“Tattletale. She’s blonde. Pretty,” Rachel said, as if this were the greatest insult imaginable, “annoying. Bares her teeth all the time, thinks she’s so smart, the bitch.”

“I got a message from her, actually,” I said.

“You did?” Rachel asked, suspiciously.

“She was going to try to give me advice on how to talk to you. Though, I suppose it’s good that she didn’t?” I didn’t smile, though now I thought about it. Bares her teeth all the time? Also known as grinning.

“Yeah,” Rachel said.

“Then there’s Regent and Grue?”

Rachel finished her wrap, and stood up, stretching a little as she did.

“Ah,” I said. “So why are you with them?”

Rachel just gestured around, a little brusquely, and I realized. The money and the support for the men with the van. It came from the heists and other actions she did. She definitely wasn’t living the high life with whatever she got. It was going straight back into dog food and other such things. And they were cheap.
“Got it. I get that, I really do,” I said. “So, thanks for letting me back here.”

“It’s nothing. You helped,” Rachel admitted, again as if she didn’t care. But there was something about the way she said it.

Once we were done eating, I threw myself into the tasks she set. She wanted to give each of the dogs at least a bit of a washing today, because she hadn’t done that yesterday. In this case it meant mostly pouring water and scrubbing, which meant I had to deal with the joys of a lot of wet, frustrated, angry dogs. I hadn’t really prepared for that, and my T-shirt was soaked to the bone.

It reminded me of this one time the trio had dumped water on my head, when I was in the bathroom. And then when I came out to confront them, they’d made fun of how they could see the outline of my bra.

Rachel, though, didn’t say anything, just kept on working, and once they were washed, it was socialization time. I knew that she had to train the dogs, and I almost wanted to see that. It’d be impressive to watch, at least.

But mostly, I just played with the dogs, and watched Rachel. Trying to get to understand her, without being able to really ask her questions. I couldn’t trust that she’d answer more than a minimum.

Though I could talk to her about dogs. Or something.

Once the work died down, I moved over towards a pallet and sat down, patting at a dog and pulling out my game system.

To my surprise, Rachel went right for me. “What’s that?”

“A Game Machine,” I said, “have you ever played?”

She shook her head, her face hard. “It fun?”

“Yeah. I mean, it requires quick reflexes, some of the games, so I guess I like the RPG sort of things more, y’know? But I’m good at a lot of games.” I saw that she was looking at me blankly. “I also like how it feels like I have control?”

I blinked, those words having slipped out. She stopped staring and sat down next to me, leaning in. My shirt was still damp, but she didn’t seem to care, and I could feel the warmth of her body as she looked down at the tiny screen. Practically hugging me to see it.

“I mean, it’s, like. In my life, there’s a lot of things I can’t control and they go to hell, but then there’s a game, and even if there’s RNG, it’s easier, you know?”

Rachel paused, and I could see her thinking, see the way she’d somehow actually cared about what I said, and I was startled. “Sort of. What game is this?”

“Ah, well, Stolen Hearts, it’s an RPG, but if you wanted to try out one of the games, you could? I mean--”

“Not an RPG,” Rachel said, after a moment. She was squinting a little as she looked at the text. One of the characters was telling another off, and it was one of those interactive cutscenes they did. It was a weird game, a sort of Japanese-American RPG hybrid. Really, really hard to describe.

“Well, I have a Bullet hell, but that’d just make you hate me,” I joked, “since it’s hard even for
people who have tons of experience. I also have books--"

“Don’t read,” Rachel said, and then she glared at me as if waiting for me to laugh at her. I knew that feeling.

“That’s fine,” I said, with a shrug. “I could also read to you if you wanted, sometime.” The glare didn’t go away, and I held up a hand, “Okay, it was just a suggestion.”

“Maybe,” Rachel said, in the way people say ‘no’.

“Anyways, so no on games? That’s fine. Didn’t mean to waste your time,” I said, voice a little too chipper.

“You don’t,” Rachel said. “Yet.”

I played the game to the next save point, and then began to read part of a book for school, before Rachel dragged me away to help with cleaning up something. One of the dogs had peed on the concrete part of the floor, and then we had to break up two dogs growling each other like it was going to wind up a fight.

I wound up getting my shirt dirty, and when I went to wash it, I saw that she’d moved more stuff into this place. I had passed through the back storage room without looking, but I could now see some hand-weights, and what looked like a tackle box. I guess she was liking the whole ‘spend time with the dogs’ thing. I paused to playfully lift one of them up. They got pretty heavy, actually.

When I looked up, Rachel was staring at me. No, more like glaring.

“What?” I asked, a little confused.

She didn’t say anything, walking over to them. “That’s my stuff,” she said.

“Sorry, I was just looking, that’s all. It’s cool that you can lift all of that. I remember, my father’s friend Lacey once showed off. Apparently she’d been an athlete in college,” I babbled, nervously, feeling an odd desperation not to get on her bad side, “so she had a bunch of weights and stuff.”

“Your Dad’s friend?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah. She’s married to his friend, Kurt. Both of them are Dockworkers. It’s hard work,” I said, sorta rattling about, “Dad’s a dockworker too. Though it’s not a profession you’d send your kids into.” I paused, and she seemed to be relenting slightly. Or maybe just losing interest.

“I mean,” I said, “I know you don’t care, so I don’t know why I’m telling you all of this. But it’s cool,” I added.

“Cool,” Rachel said, with dry skepticism.

“Y-yeah. I mean, it is,” I insisted. “I mean, we only just sorta met, but if I didn’t want to hang out with you, I wouldn’t. And being an athlete isn’t exactly unpopular if you cared about that…”

Rachel just snorted, but after a moment she shrugged.

“I wouldn’t be able to work up to some of these,” I said, holding out my own scrawny, somewhat pale despite the sun I’d gotten, arm. “I’m more of a runner, and that’s just because I forced myself. I’m no kind of athlete.”

“You look fine,” Rachel grunted. “You have bugs, anyways.”
“Yeah, I do admit that it seems like my power isn’t one that requires me to go up close and personal. Though I do sorta want to be able to? Because people are going to get to me. The other night, I was almost shot—”

Rachel all but burst forward, her eyes intent, and I was shocked by the hard look on her face, “Who?”

“E88. I interrupted Victor and Othala, and stung her with a bunch of bees…”

I almost smiled, because it was a habit when trying to pretend things were better than they were, like now.

“And…”

“And Victor shot at me several times. And threw fireballs,” I said. “But I got away. I wish I didn’t have to run away.” I had thought I’d be braver than that, that I’d be more willing to… but it was the smart thing to do, right?

“Then don’t run,” Rachel said, after a moment. “Fight.”

“Not strong enough. Not yet.” I looked down at the weights. “And those aren’t going to help. I need more practice with my bugs. Or I need to find a partner, but I don’t want to join the Wards?”

“Why?”

“All the drama, I’d hate it. I mean, I get enough of it at school from the trio.”

Rachel looked at me, and then nodded. “I get it. Can’t be your partner,” she said, her voice hard, as if I were about to try to convince her.

“I know you can’t. It’s fine. I wasn’t asking that. You have the Undersiders. I was just frustrated that I can’t do enough. That’s the only thing I have going for…”

I stopped, and shook my head, “Well, there’s you. I mean, a new friend’s nothing to complain about.”

Rachel grunted. “Thanks.”

“No problem at all,” I said, “I’m just telling the truth. Wow, though,” I said, looking at a forty pound dumbbell. I lifted it up, struggling a little bit. Forty pounds was a lot, and I knew that I couldn’t do even one proper curl with something that heavy. Noodle arms and all of that.

Rachel took it from me, and then did one rep, the muscles in her arm moving along with the moderate effort, as she then did another, and then another. I stared at her arm.

...Geeze, she was strong, I thought, after a moment, shaking my head.

“Impressive,” I said, stumbling a little on my words.

“Thanks,” Rachel said, seeming a little baffled about the whole thing. Or maybe she wasn’t. I only just knew her, and I was still trying to get a read on her.

“So, what I was thinking is that I could show up for an hour, maybe two, after dinner on the weekdays. If you have a cellphone, I could call you on that if I can’t make it,” I said. “I can help with anything you need, or if you want to just… hang out.”
I didn’t want to sound too eager. I think I failed.

But she nodded, “Yeah, that’d be nice.”

I smiled for a moment, and then stopped myself, as fast as I could. I didn’t know whether a toothless smile would be any better, but I was still trying not to make any mistakes.

“Good, good. Do you have flashlights or anything?” I asked.

“A few,” she said, “mostly when it gets dark I just do less.”

I nodded, thinking about that. Without electricity, she’d go to bed earlier, probably, and I bet she woke up earlier, too. No burning the midnight oil for her. “Sure,” I said, already getting an idea of what to do, though first I had another patrol to try, and maybe the third time would be the charm.

******

It was the charm, really. It was not a big thing, but I’d met some Merchants dealing drugs near the end of the night, and they’d fallen to a swarm of bugs. Then I’d called it in. “Hello? This is… a new cape. A hero. I’ve caught some Merchants, and I think they have drugs on them, could you--”

“Where are you currently, ma’am,” the operator asked, “how many of them?”

“Well, four,” I said.

“And what is your name?”

“I… don’t know.”

I hadn’t actually thought of a good name, even with an extra week. “I’m working on that,” I said, to cover up the brief moment of silence.

“Alright, ma’am, we’ll send someone down to check.”

Close enough. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

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Then came the school week.

******

Monday, usually the worst day of a week. And it was true I was pretty tired.

******

“Morning, Taylor,” Greg said. “You finish Hero Commander?”

“No,” I said, “didn’t have time, sorry. I’ll give it back to you as soon as I finish.”

“You seem in a good mood, though. Oh, did you figure out that combo thing I was talking about for, with Orasmus and Helios?”

“No,” I said, “I did get to play a little, but I wound up distracted.” I yawned a little, covering my mouth.
“Oh. Well, uh, I hope you check it out soon, it’s pretty cool and I think you’ll like it and there’s this secret entranceway to a bonus boss!”

“I will,” I said. Greg always sounded as if he had been told he had five seconds to speak and was using the most of it. He was blond, with a bowl cut, and was dressed in a thrown-together way, at least today.

He was nice enough, though also pretty obvious about some things, and oblivious about others?

“Okay, good. I really gotta hurry, though, my class is on the other side of school!” Yes. He’d gone out of his way to talk to me, which made one person at school.

******

Our school has a library, and even library computers, despite them being ancient, and if it wasn’t for the fact that they close an hour after school finishes, I probably would just use that rather than going to the local library as much.

It wasn’t really a safe haven, because I’d been ambushed in here before by the trio, but I did like it, and it had a pretty good selection. I wasn’t at my limit, and I didn’t owe any money I hadn’t paid off, so I got a few books. A book of dog breeds and pictures, one on caring for dogs, and then three different books that had dogs in it. Including one that was about a dog and Christmas, so I was sure it’d be alright, though it seemed a little basic. More a middle-school or even grade school book, just from flipping through it.

Eh, why not give it a try? I could ask her what kinds of stories she’d like later. The idea was simple: maybe she wanted to hear a story? Or something. I wasn’t sure, but it seemed like a good idea.

*******

In the late afternoon light, Rachel glared at me as I held out the book.

“I just thought, maybe you’d like to listen? I mean, I love to listen to books on CD,” I said, trying to be firm and not back down. Her toned arms were crossed, her whole strong expression now turned to one of startling hostility as she glanced down at the book and then up at me, and then back down at the book again.

I didn’t smile. I wasn’t very happy, anyways. Instead I was frustrated. I’d come, and it’d started normally. By now I knew the name of all of the dogs, and they knew my smell or whatever, because they were very excited to see me, and the food I’d brought. Then we’d snacked, and I’d tested out her taste in food by offering her a candy bar. She accepted, and I made a note to ask her what she thought about it later.

So far, so good.

Then out came the book.

“If I wanted to read--” Rachel began, “I’d read.”

“Rachel, I mean. I thought it’d be fun to give it a try in a very… like. This book is probably really wrong about what dogs are like, and so I’d read and you’d point out how silly it was and we’d both sm… chat about it or whatnot? I mean, if you don’t want to, that’s fine.”

I have to admit, I sounded hurt.
Rachel finally stopped glaring, but she didn’t say yes. Instead, she just sat down next to me, close and yet distant, her body radiating warmth.

Even though she already felt familiar, she wasn’t. I couldn’t expect to know her already, and I hoped I hadn’t ruined everything.

*****

Tuesday is officially the worst day of the week. Maybe month.

*****

The trio kept it up, and I tried not to care. I had homework I’d fallen behind on, and so I tried to throw myself into it on the bus, and in between class, but I kept on thinking about it. What was I supposed to do? If she didn’t want to read, then that was that. But what if she did and she was just too stubborn? I knew stubbornness, it ran in the family, in different ways.

Maybe I’d try the games? Either way, I checked out another book, and tried to endure. I was planning on going out on patrol on Tuesday night, if all went well.

*****

Rachel seemed surprised to see me, but still no less annoyed than she had been, and when I followed her in, after I’d said hello to all of the dogs, she gestured to the shovel.

“The shit’s been building up. Get it out of the short grass.”

“I’ll say what I said before,” I said, “and that is that if you want to go out there with me, two hands make lighter work. If not, then no. I’ll do plenty of things if you want, tonight.”

She looked at me, her eyes hard, and then she said, “Yes.”

“Yes?” I asked, confused.

“Read the book out loud if you want. I’ll listen I guess.”

“So, there’s a book about a homeless dog during Christmas—”

“Does it die?” Rachel asked.

“No. Though I get why you’d think that,” I said, drily. “People are pretty obvious with that sort of thing.”

“I saw a movie once,” Rachel said, “about some dog that died. It sucked.”

“Oh? Well. The dog doesn’t die. The other one I have, The Call of the Wild, has a dog that lives too. Though I’m not sure how realistic it is. And then I have a short story about an idiot who dies because he doesn’t know anything, and his dog survives.”

“Christmas dog, I guess.”

And so I began reading it, wishing that I’d looked over the book earlier in more detail to figure out how to read it. But I decided to just wing it.

She sat opposite of me, on another pallet entirely, and didn’t really seem to be paying attention. I read anyways.
Wednesday was a day I never liked. The trio tended to have patterns if you watched them long enough. I was tired from a patrol, this one having turned up nothing, and they were often bored, having gotten back into the swing of the week, but not yet looking forward to a weekend that didn’t involve tormenting me.

They seemed to be holding back, as if they were waiting to pounce, and I instinctively kept an eye out, just trying to get through the day.

On PHO, it was clear that Lung was after the Undersiders. There was a locked thread filled with threats from some random ABB fan, who said that the Undersiders were going to get it. Some other user who got infracted egged him on, making fun of him as he spiraled out into rather obscene ranting. It would have almost been funny, except that my chest hurt when I thought of someone after Rachel.

I couldn’t even tell her about it, because surely she knew already.

This time, she sat next to me. Not that close, really, on the other side of the pallet, but even though it was not an adult book, she seemed to be listening. Not closely, and eventually she declared that she was done and went to play with the dogs and check up on what they were doing, but it felt like a sort of progress.

Her face seemed softer too. There was a harshness about it, even at the best of times, but that didn’t mean anything.

Not really.

Thursday. This time, she was right up next to me, looking over my shoulder, pressed up right against me, like a dog trying for a treat. I flushed at the closeness, but I didn’t want to tell her to stop because the intent way she was clearly listening as I tried to read.

I wanted to finish the book tonight, however long it took. We were getting towards the end. The dog had accidentally saved the day a half-dozen times, warning people of a fire, all while running away and not realizing he was a hero, and now he was at death’s door, exhausted and lonely and probably the unluckiest dog alive, and on Christmas day, too!

If I were younger, I probably would have been really moved by it, honestly, and it wasn’t that badly written for a children’s book.

Rachel sprang up when I said, “It’s a little too dark to keep reading.”

She brought me a flashlight, and I continued reading the last few chapters, the light barely illuminating both of our faces, as she pressed closer. Until at last the book was done.

“Huh,” Rachel said.

“If you want, you can keep it, for a while, if you wanted to read it any more,” I offered, “there are sequels, actually, though I have no idea where I’ll find them. But yeah, there are other adventures.
And of course, there are the other books… if you wanna continue this.”

“Yes,” Rachel said, and her voice was full of a strong, sturdy sort of enthusiasm. She wasn’t jumping up and down like Greg did whenever he beat a video game. It was more meaningful than that. She was happy, and she was eager, and I could see it in the way she leaned in, pressing herself against me.

She was so warm, and there was a moment where I didn’t know what I was doing. Where I just sat there, not even thinking, and not sure why I wasn’t thinking.

Then I handed the book to her and stood up, checking my watch.

“Holy shit!” I said, “I’m really late. I gotta get home. Sorry for taking up all of your time, Rachel, it’s probably bedtime for you. And me too.”

I hurried home, and endured Dad’s questions without giving real answers, and didn’t even feel I had the time and energy to go out on patrol, let alone do my homework.

I’d do it on the bus.

I didn’t really care about it. I was just thinking about the book, and what I’d read to her next.

********

Friday:

“Ew, she smells like dogs.”

“Well, what do you expect?” one of the girls asks, “she’s homeless, isn’t she? Cause her Dad’s some lazy good-for-nothing, and so she has to sleep with a bunch of dogs for warmth.”

I gripped my pencil tighter, frowning. I wanted to turn my head, to tell them that they could go and shut up about me. But it was also because it seemed like it was almost about Rachel, and I didn’t like that. But I knew what fighting back would get. ‘I wasn’t saying anything, sir, she just started insulting me.’ They’d done it before.

I let out a long, angry breath, and resisted the urge to smell my shirt. I’d woken up later than I expected, having forgotten to set an alarm, and so I’d had to just roll out of bed and throw on new clothes.

A little later, I hurried to a bathroom stall and gave a sniff. Yes. I smelled like dogs, though it didn’t seem as strong as it should? I mean, I guess I was just getting used to what Rachel and her ‘house’ smelled like. If it’d smelled as totally overpowering as it had six days ago, I’d have just been late for the bus and tried to jog to school or something, rather than not take a shower.

Well, I knew what I’d do when I got home, but before I went out to see Rachel again.

*******

When I got to her shelter, the dogs didn’t bark. That made me suspicious, and I knocked on the door carefully, letting my bugs slip in through the back. There were other people there, people besides Rachel. Actually, Rachel wasn’t there, though maybe she was… oh, there she was.

My bugs knew Rachel by now, and she was walking with someone else. I got the impression of blonde hair just before the door opened.
I hadn’t even knocked.

“Ah, Taylor, so good to finally meet you,” the pretty blonde said, “I’m Tattletale. No, this isn’t an ambush or anything, but we all have been missing Rachel, and so we thought we’d pay her a visit.”

Rachel was glaring, her arms crossed. She was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, and shorts, her hair looking like she’d mussed around with it. Or like she’d been busy with something else.

“A… visit? Missing?”

“She’s only visited our evil lair once in the last week. All but living here,” Tattletale said, with a wide, hostile looking grin.


“Really?” I asked, stepping forward, “well, I wouldn’t want to interrupt your get-together. Rachel, are we still on for hanging out on Saturday if you want?” I still kept on waiting for her to get bored of me, as she surely had to be doing.

Or turn on me, like most of my other friends had.

“Nonsense!” Tattletale said, still grinning in that unnerving, weird way. “Rachel’s mentioned you. It’d be interesting for you to meet everyone, and we aren’t going to bite. I’m not, at least,” she said, though her smile almost seemed to be saying otherwise.

She tugged onto my arm and, my stomach felt like it was dropping down to my knees.

But it was too late. I was swept up by her, and she closed the door behind her.

Chapter End Notes

So, here's another. Lisa's a busybody, news at eleven.
Ruff 1.4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tattletale was a striking girl. She looked older than me, but wasn’t any taller, and had dark blonde hair that was kept in a bun at the moment. Freckles dotted her face, and her green eyes looked back at me. She was dressed pretty plainly, in a somewhat long skirt and a blouse, a look that seemed to be striving not to be noticed, but not in a noticeable way.

It wasn’t like how I wore heavier clothes to hide my body, this was more that she wanted to come off as just a normal girl. Which I supposed was part of the point.

I fidgeted, and her smile dimmed for a moment as the door closed. “You can call me Lisa,” she said, holding out a hand.

I shook her hand, glancing over at Rachel, who already seemed to be bristling, retreating into herself. But it felt different, actually, and I wasn’t quite sure why. I’d only known her a week, and so I tried to give a mental shrug and even smiled back for a second, before stopping myself.

Now there was a problem. I’d mentally readied myself for Rachel, but now I was getting someone else, with different social rules and norms. It made me nervous and afraid I’d make a mistake, or that she’d judge me harshly. The fact that she was so attractive almost reminded me of Emma, but I knew that wasn’t fair, and so I tried to tamp down on any judgements.

After all, if I’d gone by my first impression of Rachel, that’d have been a disaster.

“Nice to meet you, Lisa,” I said.

“Rachel’s been hanging around here all the time, and my teammates were worried. They also caught wind of your existence, and aren’t quite sure about that,” Lisa said, earnestly, “but I’m sure we can work through any confusion there. It’s good that Rachel has someone to talk to, really.”

She said it all breezily, chattering away, but then there was that look in her eyes. Curious, as if she were taking me in.

“It’s good to talk to her,” I said, hefting my backpack a little. “I didn’t expect this at all. They won’t attack me, right?”

“No, they won’t,” Lisa said, stepping back slightly and turning. “You shouldn’t have to worry… what can I call you?”

I frowned. “How much do you already know?”

“My power lets me figure things out, make guesses and inferences. It can annoy people sometimes,” Lisa said, with another of those grins, “but I do think I’ve guessed your name. But if you want to hide it…”

“I don’t have a cape name yet. I’ve been thinking about that. So why not just… Bug?” It wasn’t a real name, and I didn’t like it, but it’d work for now.

Lisa nodded, her face friendly, though the grin still made it hard for me to cope. Because my natural reaction was to start smiling more, to match her actions, I thought. Monkey see, monkey do. But
Rachel was there, and she was the one I really wanted to talk to, now: I’d brought books and everything.

From the way she was looking at us, she didn’t like this, didn’t like it at all. I wondered what she was thinking, what her problem was with all of this. She didn’t like her team, maybe they didn’t like her back? Lisa seemed awfully earnest, and yet could she really be so clueless as to not realize that she was acting in the wrong way to get close to Rachel?

I wasn’t sure what was going on here, and I have to admit, that made me feel nervous. That feeling I had before one of the trio tried a prank, before something went wrong. My hands sweaty, my body twinging, alerting me to every little ache and pain just in case they were relevant. I licked my lips, which suddenly felt dry.

Lisa moved towards the door, and I said, “One second, Lisa.”

“That’s fine, we’re not in that much of a hurry,” Lisa said, and she sounded like she meant it. It was easy to like someone who was trying their hardest to be friendly, and yet, Rachel’s own tension was almost rubbing off on me, leaving me a little conflicted.

I stepped towards Rachel and gestured a little farther from the door, and asked, “Rachel, are you okay?”

A long pause. “Yeah.”

“Listen, you’re not usually one to mince words, right?” I asked, “I want you to be blunt here.”

“No, I’m not fucking okay.” she said, turning to glare over at Lisa. “They’re just here to make fun of me and get me back there. Caged in that stupid apartment where they can keep me at heel.” She crossed her arms, looking as if she wanted to move somewhere.

It made me nervous, actually, because I’d seen that kind of fidgety energy before, the way a body just wanted to act but couldn’t. But I’d seen it on someone I didn’t like, and I liked Rachel. Either way, it was the kind of thing I just realized was liable to explode in an instant into… something. Something that’d wind up with the room rearranged.

“You like it better here?” I asked, trying to keep a calm, even voice. Trying to work through the words. “And, they’re not so sure about that?”

She nodded, turning to glare at Lisa.

“And so now they’re coming to check up on you, and you think they’re trying to pressure you? Then just tell them no. They can’t force you to do anything, right?”

Rachel’s eyes hardened a little more, as if she were gathering herself up for an attack, and she nodded again.

“So, I’ll just go in there, I’ll meet and talk to them, you’ll brush off their attempts, and then they’ll leave and we can just do other stuff.” I shrugged, trying to sound as casual as possible, since I knew I was talking her through something in a way that might annoy her.

“I hate talking to them. They’re all assholes,” Rachel admitted. She looked like she tried for a shrug, but there was none of that retreat I’d seen before. When she was angry with me, she retreated a little, and bottled it up. This was a sort of… offensive holding it in. Like someone carrying a knife in plain view. From the way she was tensing, she’d had bad memories of talking to them.
That could be her fault, I knew, because she could be hard to get along with, but that didn’t make it any less troubling.

So I just didn’t say anything either way. Sometimes that was smarter than talking in a panic.

Lisa walked over to the door, the dogs already barking, and opened it up. On the other side was one boy, who I’d already gotten a general impression of from the bugs, but seeing him in person was a little different. He was a tall pretty-boy, with dark hair that curled up over his fine features, and pale skin, wearing a white shirt and black pants.

He looked like he could be a model, or a vampire. Or a vampire model, for that matter, and he even had the look of disdained boredom I associated with them. Rachel was behind me, Lisa ahead, and it was Rachel he first addressed in a lazy, faintly accented drawl, “So, this is your little friend, Rach. My, my, mighty fine to finally see you.” He looked me up and down, a sly smile on his face that still managed to show teeth.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, stepping forward as the dogs swarmed me. I crouched down to pet the dogs, getting a little distracted. “Ah, Brutus, not so… yes, yes, I’m happy to see you too, boy, but—”

I looked up at them, distracted already. “What can I call you?”

“Regent. I see that you’re taking to the dogs already. It’s always charming to see,” he said, in the kind of way I’d feared Lisa would talk like, “a bond between man and beast.” The way he said it made it sound almost obscene, and he sat up a little more fully as I got closer to Rachel.

“Where’s Grue?” Rachel asked, her voice harsh, “is he fucking around with my stuff?”

“He’s in the bathroom,” I said, “unless there’s someone else.” I had a bug on him at this very moment. From what I could tell, he was talking on a phone? Or at least, a bug had briefly flown across something that seemed like it was a cellphone. “Talking to someone?”

Regent whistled, “Huh. Is that your power telling you that?”

“Yes. She has control over insects,” Lisa said, “which is a pretty useful power, really.”

"Could use it to spy on people," Regent suggested, off-hand.

“I wasn’t spying,” I said, defensively, “just checking to see what was going on.”

The dogs were still swarming me, though a few of them had backed off, hang-dog, when it turned out I didn’t have any food for them at the moment.

In one of Regent’s hands was a ball, and there was a single dog that was repeatedly licking that hand, while he completely ignored her to talk to me.

“Well, yeah, he’s messing around in the bathroom. Unless you keep anything in there, he’s not doing anything.” Regent shook his head. “So, Bug, Grue’s a hypocrite or whatever, thinks that Rachel should stay in the apartment because it’s safer, yada yada, Tattletale agrees because she’s the planner and junk, and so now we’re here to check up on you. Make friends or whatever.”

“Well, I’m pleased to meet you,” I said, rather unenthusiastically, as I leaned down a little and finally fished out something from my backpack. I did have a few treats for them, or at least some luncheon meat, and now that they saw I did have something for them, all of them went for me, at least the ones that weren’t checking out Lisa or saying hello to Rachel.

Rachel made her way over to a corner, arms crossed. As if she wanted to watch the whole room for
an ambush. Because that was the feeling, like this was a fight, and nobody else had realized it yet.

The hair on the back of my head was standing up just looking at her, and I wondered whether Regent knew it. Or whether he cared, for that matter.

I was torn. Part of me wanted to go over to Lisa, try to draw her attention to it. I had new people to talk to, and having another friend wouldn’t hurt. But, I also just wanted to go by Rachel, figure out what her problem was.

“I’m sure,” Regent said.

“So, yes, Rachel, I am a little worried about you being out on your own. Ever since the raid on the dog-fighting ring, you’ve been distant. I hope you understand,” Lisa said, her words soft and a little too coaxing. Like she was talking down. “We just need to make sure you’re alright and that there’s nothing you don’t need. We can always talk to people, if that’s what--”

“I’m fucking fine. I can do whatever I want,” Rachel said, each word spat out.

“See? There’s the Bitch we know,” Regent said, “face it, Tats, you’re not going to Thinker your way into being her friend.”

“What are your concerns?” I asked, turning to Lisa. Maybe the best way to do this was to talk to her. That’d be the smart thing.

“She’s isolated, and an easy target for attacks. We’ve survived so far by hiding. Lung doesn’t know where our lair is, so he can’t attack us. But if one of us is on our own, then that’s someone that can be kidnapped or killed to attack us,” Lisa said.

And really, that did make sense.

“But at the same time, this is a little out of the way, even if it’s a very distinctive building in other ways,” I said, “and I don’t know what your policies are. But is she showing up for teamfights?” I flushed. God, Greg was starting to get to me.

“Team fights?” Regent asked, raising one of those thin eyebrows of his.

“You know, or heists, or whatever,” I said. “The point is, if she’s doing everything she’s supposed to, then you can’t just tell her she has to do something or else. Hasn’t she slept here before?”

“Yes. Once or twice,” Lisa said, “the concern is when it’s every night. It feels like pulling away, and it makes it hard for us to get in contact with her.”

“Well,” I began, ideas starting to bubble up, “you could...”

“Did I miss anything?” a male voice asked. A little deep. I turned, and saw...

Well, I saw.

He was a tall, well-muscled young man, with rich brown skin, and musculature that wasn’t too overbearing. Practical muscles, for a practical looking young man with a strong jaw and deep brown eyes.

I was staring. Yes, I was, my face flushed. I mean, trying to be blunt and open about this, he was just pressing a lot of my buttons.

“Not much, Bug here was just going to tell us what she thought,” Lisa said.
“I think you should all just leave,” Rachel said, her voice a growl. I blinked, turning away, my blush slowly dying as she strode forward. “I’ve said no. I’ll play your stupid little games, but I don’t need you to watch me every second—”

“If you get hurt, we won’t be there. If you hurt this team,” Grue said, stepping forward, until he was right up against Rachel, who had reached him as fast as she could, “then that’s good for none of us, understand? Think about this logically. Just think.” He loomed over her, tall and powerful, clearly trying to stare her down.

And it almost seemed to be working for a moment. I saw her shrink down a little. Like a dog shying away from a challenge, and trying to appear non-threatening.

I think he saw it too, because he relaxed.

But she was a person, and a person can draw back to leap out, and so I opened my mouth, “Don’t!”

Just at the same time that she lashed out, shoving him back so hard he stumbled, more out of shock than pain, and almost fell over.

He was fast, rising up almost at a leap, going right at her and then grabbing her arm when she tried to punch him and just holding it as she struggled.

“Rachel. Don’t. We can work this out,” I said, “if you keep a cell-phone, you could just call them if anything happens. Grue, don’t touch her.”

He wasn’t being gentle. His grip was leaving her skin white around where he was grabbing, and her teeth were bared in something between anger and pain.

Now I saw why she didn’t trust smiles, because there was no way to mistake it for a smile, at least for her.

“She’s her own person,” I said. “And so I don’t think—”

“Please stay out of this,” Grue said, quietly, but firmly. It was a controlling sort of voice, the voice of someone who was used to being listened to.

“No. No I don’t think I will. You could have confronted her some other time, when I wasn’t coming around—”

“You’re always here,” Regent said, “like you wanna move in with her, be her roomie.”

My face was hot with embarrassment, but I just tried to step forward, reaching Grue along with a cloud of buzzing flies.

The dogs backed up, dismayed and afraid, as I began gathering bugs into the area.

And then I made them buzz. Rub their bodies together. Make all of the noise they could.

Grue looked up, and he realized, I think, that I had an army of insects right about to fall down on both of them if they didn’t stop.

He let go of her arm, and nodded, “Maybe. And if that doesn’t work?”

“She makes her own choice, she deals with her own consequences,” I said. “Of course, if she does get… kidnapped, was it, call me. I’d show up for that.”
“Why?” Rachel blurted out.

“Why?” I replied, confused. I shook my head. “Anyways, does that seem like it’d work? If it doesn’t, you can always talk about it later. I’m Bug, by the way. Or you can call me that now while I try to think of a name.”

I wasn’t sure if I liked him, attractive or no, but he did nod in an almost friendly way. “Sorry about that, I was trying to get my point across.”

I frowned. “You did. Anyways, I hope we don’t wind up crossing paths.” That was a thought that had begun to worm its way into my head, the fact that as an independent hero, I might have to go up against Rachel. Maybe I could avoid that, or try to convince her not to take part in anything I needed to stop? We’d only known each other for a week, though, so I knew that was far too much to ask, and not likely to go down well. “Professionally, I mean,” I added, feeling a little flustered.

Rachel let out what seemed like a growl, but shook him off and stormed off.

“I hope not, either. It sounds like an impressive power, used right, from what Tattletale has told me.”

Here I was, surrounded by villains, and I was more worried about Rachel’s feelings. It was bizarre, and probably not a good mindset to have.

“Thank you. It’s not much, and it doesn’t really help with finishing enemies off,” I said, “but--”

“That’s what you have a team for,” Regent said, “or something.” He shrugged, as if he’d read this once on the back of a cereal box and wasn’t sure if it were true.

“Maybe,” I said.

“Bug,” Lisa said, “could you walk with me for a moment?”

I frowned, and then nodded, watching the way Regent was sidling towards the door to the back section. I followed her out into the yard. It was still sunny, and the yard needed the poop scooped up. Some of the dogs followed me, and I stopped as Kuro and Bullet came up to say hello. Kuro was a black mutt with a little bit of everything, and Bullet was the white and spotted girl that had been injured serving as bait for dog-fighting.

I looked around for a stick. She needed to run a lot, but she was injured so it wasn’t as much of an option, but she still did like chasing after things. It was in her blood, it was who she was, and that wasn’t going to change.

Lisa stopped when I did, and then said, “Thank you for what you’re doing with Rachel. She does seem happier. I’m… not always the best with her. My power can tell me a lot, but the way I learn to interact with other people doesn’t work on her.”

“Your advice wasn’t needed, but thank you for giving it.” Did I like her? Sort of, so far. But I could see things about her that would get on anyone’s nerves, and I knew exactly why Rachel didn’t like her.

“She’s had a hard life. Her parents--”

“Lisa,” I said, “I know that what you’re going to tell me is important, but I almost want to learn it on my own. I want to learn it when she’s willing to talk about it, not from someone else.” I tried to sound firm, even though I was curious. “Everyone who got superpowers went through a lot, and I can guess that she didn’t have it easy.”
“Ah,” Lisa said, quietly. It was a knowing sound, and she nodded as I threw the stick for Bullet to go after.

Kuro just looked at me like he was asking ‘Hey, where’s mine’? Dumb mutt, I thought, fondly.

“Ah?”

“You’re already a close friend of hers. I’m surprised. She doesn’t take to people very quickly.”

“Maybe you were just doing it wrong,” I said, and then paused. “Sorry, that was probably a bit rude.”

“It’s fine, Bug. Just watch out for her, alright?”

“She’s not dangerous,” I said, and this time I did feel angry.

“For her. As in, to help her. She could use a friend, and I’ve tried to get close to her, but…”

Lisa gave a shrug, “It hasn’t really worked. But you? She likes you a lot. You can just tell it, even without powers. And with powers, it’s practically being screamed at the top of her lungs.”

“Maybe, but she’s only known me for a week. I…”

Huh, was that it?

“What is it, Taylor?” Tattletale asked.

Bullet came back, I took the stick from her and stroked beneath her mouth gently. I knew she always liked that. Or at least, she’d liked it this week. “Who’s a good girl, you are, you are,” I said, in a cutesy, silly baby-talk voice that I didn’t use in case Rachel heard me, usually.

I didn’t want to seem lame to her or anything. It mattered, even if I wasn’t sure why it was so important. It wasn’t like I’d cared about seeming lame with… Emma. So maybe that was it? If I seemed lame, she’d ditch me, or something. Find someone else to hang out with that wasn’t mourning her mother’s death. Or who wasn’t making silly jokes or doing any of the things I’d done before life had just worn me down and made me wonder what the point of that kind of shit was.

Now I’d managed to think myself into a bad mood, I thought, frustrated.

“I was just thinking, and I think that some of it might be that Rachel feels the same way I do. That--”

I heard her growl, and the dogs started barking. I leapt up, at a run, and Lisa was close behind me as we stormed into the main area, only to see Regent backing away slowly from the dogs, who were being held back by the fact that Rachel was at the front of them, and those of them that she’d trained were waiting to follow her lead. Grue was standing off to the side, hands gripped into fists.

Regent had the book in his hands, the Christmas Dog book. “It’s nice to see that you’re enculturating yourself, Rachel. I’m impressed that you--”

“Let it go!” Rachel said.

“No, you’ll take it from me? I just wanted to see what it was you’d hidden away.”

“Stop it, Alec,” Grue said, and that had to be his name then. “This is not helping anything.”

“Oh. What-ever,” Alec said. “So you’re not going to take it back?”
“No,” Rachel said.

“Why? You afraid it might tear? Is it a gift from your Bug?” Alec asked, then he rolled his eyes and, just as quickly, tossed the book back at Rachel. I blinked, surprised, even as I was moving forward, fists gripped together, in a cloud of insects. He was just some fucking asshole who toyed with people and didn’t even have the dedication to mean it. He’d wound her up, he’d made her evening worse, and then he’d just backed down, and not even in a way that could seem like victory to her. In a way that made it clear that he’d do it again if he wanted to, that he was not going to be told to play nice.

A fly went straight in each of his eyes. “Agh!” he yelled, and I felt my knees buckle out from under me, landing me flat on my face.

I bumped my elbow against the ground, and rolled, frustrated and angry. I could hear Rachel yelling out an order to her dogs, and I knew this was going to be a fight. How dare he. How dare he do something like that to Rachel!

“Stop!” Grue yelled, and then I couldn’t see anything. Could barely hear anything too. Just inky darkness.

I struggled to stand, and then when I did, a bunch of dogs crowded around me, confused in the darkness, licking at me. I could smell that one of them was afraid, via the most obvious way possible. Finally, I managed to stumble out of the darkness, and when I did, there was no fight at all.

Grue was standing in front of Regent and Lisa, and Rachel was in one corner, hand on Brutus and Angelica’s collar, in the perfect position to start bulking them up if it came time for a fight.

“Are you--” Lisa began, her voice sounding nervous.

“Get out. Everyone. Get out. This is my place, and… and…” Rachel said it quietly, but I could see that she was fuming, that she was holding onto the leash of her own fury with all of her might, and that if I stayed, that if anyone stayed, she’d just blow up at someone. I didn’t even get why she hadn’t done so already, since she hadn’t seemed to hesitate before.

“Rachel,” I said, quietly, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She didn’t respond.

I didn’t get much sleep that night.

*******

I woke early, stressed and annoyed, my elbow still aching, and my chest hurting a little, in an odd way.

I’d had a nightmare, and I wasn’t sure which one it was, but it was probably the same sort of one I had all the time. Of Emma abandoning me, turning her back on me. Of me not being good enough, or--

While I was awake, I didn’t blame myself, I don’t think. But at night, I suppose something was brought out? Something illogical and sick and probably unhealthy. My Mom died, my best friend became my worst enemy, and neither of them was my fault, but it felt like I should have been able to do something. Or like I’d done something and not known it.

And now Rachel had, what if she--

I didn’t shower, I didn’t mark off my calendar, I just hastily scrawled a three-AM note and stuck it on
‘Going out. Will be gone for a while. Don’t worry. Couldn’t sleep last night, had a few nightmares. I’ll give you a call a little later..’

He would worry, of course he would worry. He loved me, and that meant worrying about people, sometimes. Plus, I knew I was being sketchy.

I jogged a while, not wanting to go see Bitch when she wasn’t going to want to be seen. And since she was probably asleep, that was a good idea. Eventually, the jogging broke into a run, and even though I kept to the area around the house, I knew it was odd.

Three o’clock gave way to four, and by then I was soaked in sweat, and didn’t really care. Then I started walking towards Bitch’s, thinking I’d stop at a fast food place on the way to get some breakfast. I’d brought some money in a wallet, I could afford it.

If only there was some kind of food she really liked that I could get at this hour, then I’d be able to bribe her or something. As it was, I wound up spending a while in the bathroom, waiting for it to be closer to time, and pacing around outside the fast food place, which smelled of grease and sadness at this hour of the day.

Then I continued onward, hefting my backpack filled with food and hoping that she’d be awake at five-thirty.

The dogs were barking, at least.

When she came to the front door, she was dressed even more hastily than usual, and looking almost as sleep-deprived as I was.

“Taylor?” she asked, sounding like she’d just woken up from a dream.

“Sorry if I’m early, I just thought...if you want me to go I could go and I mean, I know that--”

“Come in,” Rachel said, yawning.

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There was something to say about routine. We fed the dogs, we cleaned up any of the obvious messes on the gravel and concrete, we got them water, and then I waited while Rachel brushed her teeth and ran her hand through her short hair with water, in what I assumed was meant to be preparation for the morning.

There wasn’t a shower here, and so she smelled a little. Actually, I wondered at that, but that wasn’t something to ask.

Once the routine was done, then there was just the awkward silence.

“You asked why,” I finally said, after far too long of us staring at each other. “Why what?”

“Why are you friends with me?” Rachel asked, slowly, as if wanting to make sure I understood it.

“Because I like you?”

“The others, I don’t like them. but I know they’re more normal.” She said it as if ‘normal’ didn’t mean anything to her at all. “Lisa’s pretty and popular, and you were staring at Brian like he was a side of beef.”
I flushed, “I mean, yes. I sorta think that Lisa’s alright, but there are things about her that annoy me, and none of that… I mean, do you really think I’d just stop being your friend to be either of theirs?”

I did want to get to know Lisa a little more, or rather, it seemed like she might be alright to hang out with. She had parts of her that were really, really annoying, but then, so did Greg sometimes. I didn’t hate her like Rachel did, but that didn’t mean that she was super amazing and I was going to leave her behind.

“Especially… Brian’s? Is that Grue?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, he was…” I flushed, “but he also seemed kind of rude to you? And too serious.”

“He was what?” Rachel asked, and I wondered if she was enjoying dragging me over the coals, or whether she was just trying to force me to say it.

“_Attractive_, okay? So's Lisa and even Regent if you like creepy pretty-boys, but why would any of that matter? I’m your friend because I like you and I like hanging out with you, and I like reading to you. We haven’t known each other long, but I want to know more about you. What you like, what you dislike? I have food in my backpack though it’s probably gotten cold, but your favorite color, what you eat… just. Stuff would be nice. And I’ll tell you stuff back as well, because it’d be stupid and unfair otherwise. I mean, I came in here afraid that you were going to dump me. As a friend! I didn't mean it like..." I shook my head and took a breath, trying to get to the point rather than dancing around. “It’s happened before, friends just turning their back on me.”

“Oh.” Rachel said, her voice quiet as she looked at me, brow furrowed. Her eyebrows were thick, but they gave her face a certain intense look to it, really, as if she were focusing her gaze in on whatever she was looking at. “Grey or brown,” she said.

“Ah, good. And… Greek food, I’d guess?”

“Meat in general,” she said, sounding a little dazed, as if this hadn’t been how she expected this to go, “Lamb is great.”

“Ah, so gyros it is,” I said, trying not to smile. “My favorite color is green. I like it a lot, especially dark green. It reminds me of camping, actually, but I also just…”

Green’s totally your color, Tay.

“Like how it looks,” I said, stumbling over the words, “and I guess I really like chocolate? And pancakes? The two of them together would be great. And burgers. I’m not really that picky, though I’ve gotten a bit more ever since I started cooking.”

“You cook?” Rachel asked, frowning.

“Yeah. Ever since my Mom…’ I trailed off for a second, and then pressed forward. It felt like shoving a pin into my heart. “She died in a car crash a few years ago. I’ve had to help out around the house ever since. I still miss her all the time, and then Emma, my former best friend, suddenly turned against me the fall after she died, and then started giving me shit. Harassing me, making fun of me, starting rumors, and her friend Sophia kept on attacking me, pushing me. Just on and on until… until I triggered.”

I didn’t want to talk about what had happened there, and I hope she understood.
“But you have bugs?” Rachel asked.

“If I do that, I can’t try to be a hero, I’ll…” I just stopped speaking for a moment, letting out a breath, “I’ll lose the only chance I have to, I dunno. I just don’t want to get revenge.”

“I’d do it. Never knew my fucking mother,” she admitted, leaning into me, “wouldn’t have wanted to know her.”

She didn’t say more. She didn’t give her story, or even the outlines of her story, like I had. But I had a color, and I had a favorite type of meat, and I thought that she was listening to what I said, that she cared about what I liked.

Or rather, cared that I liked them, since I knew she wasn’t me.

I didn’t even mind her warmth pressing against me, or the smell, or the way the dogs occasionally came over to sniff us. I just sat like that, and then eventually I closed my eyes.

I felt almost like I should be crying, because something felt like it’d come unstuck. Like the pin being pulled out of my heart.

“So, I don’t know, now I’m trying, and… and we’ll see if it works. I just can’t keep on not doing anything,” I admitted.

Then I was silent for quite a while longer. Rachel didn’t get up, she just pressed herself closer, and after a little while, I did feel her brush a hand against my hair, once, almost curiously, and then stop. Probably trying to figure out how to comfort me.

Finally, she asked, “Do you have that… story or whatever?”

“Yeah, I do. The food’s gone cold.”

“It’s fine,” Rachel said.

“None of it is good, but—”

“It’s. Fine.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, getting up and grabbing the book and then returning to where I sat. It was a book of short stories, and I opened it to the right one.

“To Build A Fire, By Jack London,” I said. I paused, taking in a breath, and scanned the first paragraph just to be sure I knew how to read it right without stumbling.

“Day had dawned cold and grey when the man turned aside from the Yukon Trail—”

“Yukon?”

“It’s in Canada,” I explained.

"Oh."

“He climbed the high dearth-bank where a little-traveled trail led east through the pine forest. It was a high bank, and he paused to catch his breath…”
To Build A Fire is a public domain story by Jack London, and thus you have no excuses not to check it out. It's pretty fun, and rather short, and I thought when I was writing it that its message would probably resonate pretty well with Rachel, honestly.
“Later, the dog howled loudly. And still later it moved close to the man and caught the smell of death. This made the animal back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky. Then it turned and ran along the trail toward the camp it knew, where there were the other food providers and fire providers,” I finished. It was nice to have an appreciative audience, and that was one thing Rachel definitely was. She hadn’t interrupted me at all during the story, except a few times to ask questions, and those polite and quiet, as if she were afraid of breaking the spell.

“What a dumbass,” she said, as soon as she could tell I was done.

“That’s the idea,” I said, “and the dog actually knows what’s going on, and is smarter than the person, so he goes off and survives.”

“I liked it,” Rachel admitted, as if this were some sort of guilty secret that I now needed to guard with my life, rather than just an opinion on a work of fiction.

“I thought you would. The dog lives and everything,” I said, “it’s not really a happy ending, but at the same time, he clearly wasn’t cut out for what he was doing.”

He’d gone in against the advice of men wiser and older than him, he’d repeatedly failed to show sense or survival instincts, and finally he’d died and his dog had done the smart thing and gotten the hell out of dodge before he died too.

Which was a sort of moral to the story, albeit not the one people usually peddled about dogs.

“Yeah,” Rachel said, reaching a hand down to pat Brutus, and then Milk, a pale white dog that always acted pretty calmly, and finally, sniffing up last, Stick, who was probably the thinnest dog she had, to the point that he was definitely going to outgrow that name if he kept on eating as much as he was. “I liked it,” she admitted. Then, a pause, “Sorry about your book—”

“It didn’t seem too roughed up, the library book,” I said.

“It wasn’t,” Rachel said with a shrug, her cheeks darkening a little. She was scowling a little, and I guessed it had to do something with the reading thing.

“Are you enjoying reading it?” I asked.

Rachel hesitated, and looked at me closely, still pressed up against me, as if she were looking for a hint of mockery. “It’s rough.”

Rough to read it, I thought. Who the fuck had…

I took a breath, startled by the sudden anger welling up. But someone had let her down, someone had failed her. A lot of someones, starting with schools and ending with parents, but not including herself, not really? “You could practice,” I said, gingerly.

“Maybe,” she said, with a shrug. Which was about all I was going to get out of her on this.
“So, you’re living here all the time, now?”

“They talked to me. Called me,” Rachel said, “got a cellphone now. I’ll come back at least once every day to check in, get a shower, that sort of shit.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” she said, stretching a little, and then, after a moment, standing up. “I hope they’ll stop bothering me.”

“Regent was an asshole,” I said, with feeling.

“Yep. He’s an annoying runt who likes fucking with people,” Rachel said in a matter-of-fact way.

The impression I got was almost more frustrating than something more consistent. As if he’d bully someone for a while just because he was bored, get bored of it, and then pick it up later because he was bored. As if, in other words, none of this mattered at all.

“I got that much,” I said, shaking my head. “So, Rachel, I do want to leave a little after lunch, because Dad’s worried. But I’ll be coming back tomorrow, I promise. I just want to make sure he doesn’t freak out.”

“Yeah, I get that. What happens if he freaks out?”

“I don’t know. I mean, what do I do if he forbids me from going out all day on the weekend? I don’t think he’s like that, but I know that it’s been hard for him.” Sometimes, a show of force was not a sign of strength, but weakness: an inability to do anything else. If he did immediately jump to that sort of thing, it’d just hurt both of us. It had only been a little more than a week, but I think I was really benefitting from knowing Rachel. Or at least, it felt like I was, and that’s what mattered.

We’d have to see.

I let out a sigh, and Rachel said, “Stand up to him.”

“I can try, but he’s my Dad, I mean… maybe I should just tell him enough of the truth to count?” I thought about that, biting my lip a little bit.

“Like what?”

“I’ll figure that out. Not too much,” I said, and then stood up myself, “but let’s not think too much about this right now. There’s still a few hours until I have to get out of there, and Ginger has some fleas, I don’t know where she picked them up, because…”

Rachel nodded, apparently grateful for the distraction, and thus encouraged, I started talking about the dogs and their health and mood, parroting things I’d picked up from her, and things I’d noticed myself.

Seeking approval and confirmation that I was on the right track, that I was learning all of this stuff down pat. I didn’t talk to her about my Dad, not any more than I had, and I avoided the topic of capes entirely, though I did, towards the end, talk a little about school in a vague, general way. About classes I had and lessons I’d learned. We even exchanged numbers, in case we wanted to talk on the phone at some later point.

She seemed to be paying attention, at least, but reserving her judgment, holding it back in a way I appreciated.
Maybe I’d eventually be able to tell her more without holding it back, without censoring myself out of some fear of looking as if I were doing something wrong.

Eventually.

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Dad was waiting for me, again. His shoulders were tense when I stepped in. The television was on, but he immediately turned it off. “Taylor, I got your note.” He said it slowly, and then nothing more. Encouraging me to fill the silence with words or an explanation.

“Sorry, I… okay. So, I had a fight with Rachel, that friend of mine, last night. And I was so worried about it that I wanted to make it up with her. I… had nightmares,” I said. “So I got up and went jogging, and then visited her about when I normally do.”

“You woke up at three in the morning with nightmares, so you went running?” Dad repeated, like he was making sure I didn’t want to change my story into something a little more plausible.

“I didn’t know what else to do, and… I don’t know. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I was afraid and worried and wanted to patch things up, not let them fester and fall apart like they did with Emma.”

Dad blinked, surprised. He had to have guessed that I wasn’t as close to Emma as I used to be, since she never came by anymore, and I hadn’t slept over at her house in forever, but from the look on his face, he hadn’t known that we hadn’t simply been drifting apart with time. “You’re not friends with Emma anymore?”

“Not since the fall after Mom died. I… I don’t know why. She just dropped me,” I said, the words bitter, the real truth clawing at my throat. It almost hurt not to tell him that she was the one bullying me, that she was behind the incident, but what would that help? “And I was afraid of that happening again with a new friend. I wasn’t thinking.”

I really wasn’t. I’d been feeling, feeling that pain in my heart and that ache of half-remembered nightmares clustering around me, trying to drag me down.

“Taylor…” Dad said, his voice a sigh, “I wish you’d told me that earlier.”

“So, Rachel’s my first friend, other than this kid named Greg that I talk about video games with, that I’ve had in a while. I mean, does what happened to me in January scream ‘tons of friends’ to you?” My voice came out too hard at the end, because ultimately he’d done all he could, had pushed the school to do something about it, and he’d failed.

I didn’t want to say he’d failed me, because I loved him and he’d done all he could. It was just that all he could hadn’t been enough, and so now here we were, dealing with impossibilities.

“No. No it doesn’t. But you’ve made a friend, now?”

“I think. I haven’t known her for long, but she’s nice,” I said, “or at least, she’s being nice to me. She has some friends she doesn’t really like, but has to work with anyways, and she got into an argument with them while I was there. I sorta got caught in the crossfire. But, it’s fine.” I tried a wide smile and added, “Or at least, we managed to patch things up. We’ll see where it goes from there, you know? Take things one day at a time.” I took a deep breath and said, “Though, right now I really need to get a shower. I probably smell of dog.”

“Probably?”
“I definitely do,” I said, seeing the look on his face, and the way Dad’s nose wrinkled as he waved his hand back and forth dramatically, the universal sign for ‘pee-yew.’ “She’s really a dog person, and it’s kind of nice. Caring for dogs is interesting, but it isn’t the sort of thing that can be done without taking plenty of showers.”

“That’s what you do?” Dad asked, “care for dogs? You said she was dog-sitting…”

“Some of them. And some of them are dogs she already has,” I said, my lie not very smooth at all, I realized. “It’s just a lot of dogs to deal with. But there’s no such thing as a crazy dog lady, and so it’s okay.”

Dad smiled at my weak joke and said, “So, Taylor, have you had lunch yet?”

“No, actually, I haven’t.”

“Want to go out for something? Burgers, maybe?”

He was smiling so hopefully that I couldn’t say no, not to that look. Dad wanted to make up for the fact that he’d missed something about his daughter’s life, and… well. I liked my Dad, not just loved him. It was a distinction with a difference. “Sure, that sounds good.”

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Saturday night’s alright for patrolling.

I went out, ready for a fight. My range, which had temporarily gotten better, had gone back down all the way almost to a low. It was hard to tell why that was, but I needed to keep on going out and keep on patrolling. I’d done a few good things, and now, in the dark of the night, I almost wanted a fight. I’d managed to gather a few more wasps and other bugs, and once summer hit I knew I’d be able to really draw them together.

And if I found a way to keep all of the bugs warm and safe? Perhaps some sort of carrier or whatnot? It was easy for me to keep a beehive, if I actually found one in the first place. I could make sure they didn’t sting me when I dealt with it, and it wouldn’t be hard to get them the food they needed to keep it up.

It was all about space and money, I thought, pulling on my costume and running a hand through my hair to make sure it was hanging just right. I had an idea, or at least I’d thought about one, for my cape name.

I just needed a chance to show it off. I was a hero, and I was a girl who had a friend, and a loving father. I needed to stop worrying, stop feeling so trapped. It wasn’t easy, and when I mentally sat down and tried to hype myself up, it all felt almost hollow.

But I went out anyways, walking as fast as I could. I didn’t need to go slow to scan the area, because I made sure I had bugs on everyone. I was starting to realize that I needed to be more proactive, and that meant knowing where everyone was and what everyone was doing so that I could judge the situation ahead of time.

Going up against Victor and Othala had been a mistake, I should have waited to see if there was a chance to ambush them. And I should have been more vicious. Bugs should have flown straight in both of their eyes, maybe down their throats too. I knew that it was vicious, but it was what could help me win a fight without a team.

So I tried to steel myself to do that, when I next got a chance. It might not be tonight, though.
There were a bunch of people gathered in the alley, and... huh.

Someone flying in the sky. A cape? I slowed down. I was in a pretty bad part of town. How bad? I'd passed two payday loan places in the last block. There was a liquor store just down the corner, its bright red neon sign declaring it was open '24/7' and advertising a sale of some kind.

The street stank of cigarette butts and body odor, and I could smell something else I couldn’t quite place. The people in the alley were moving all around, going towards what looked like a box, and then back.

And then nearby, there was a pair of people moving. The one on foot was following the flying one I’d noticed earlier, and the only thing that made sense was that it was some kind of patrol. I couldn’t quite tell who, but my bugs tried to keep on them. One of my flies buzzed off of the cape on the ground, only to suddenly disappear.

What? I blinked, moving forward as the two groups grew closer, though from the pattern it seemed as if they’d merely pass by, one of them all crowded in a dingy, dark alley, the other looking for trouble.

I hurried forward to try to meet both of them, in case this turned into a fight, and rounded the corner to see who it was. The one flying I recognized for sure. I’d looked up all of the Wards, again and again, not sure if I should try to join them or not. But I’d seen what a system could do, and I’d known what kids could do to other kids. I didn’t trust the squeaky-clean online bios that made each and every one of them look like angels sent to earth to help people.

Kid Win was someone hard to miss. His armor was red and gold, and looked a little non-functional, like plates on a bodysuit more than chainmail or plate mail or anything like that, or even anything out of a video game. It looked like the kind of thing a starter player in some science-fiction MMO would wear until they got power armor, but I knew that it was the real deal. So was the visor he had on, which rumor said online was potent tinker-tech.

Of course, rumor online said that everything was potent tinker-tech. It was just like Thinker powers, something where everyone and their grandma could make up whatever they wanted.

He was pale, and riding on a hoverboard, which looked like someone had added glowing red jet bottoms to a regular skateboard, and he had a pair of laser pistols, one in each hand. You could tell they weren’t guns by the silver and gold coloration of them, and they reminded me, briefly, of toy guns.

Down below him was Clockblocker, a member of the Wards whose power was to freeze people in time. Like that insect he’d touched, actually. I couldn’t see his face to know if he was hostile or friendly, because he wore white armor, complete with plates, and a blank face-mask that looked rather unnerving. The armor was segmented and looked more realistic than Kid Win’s, but the clocks that were drawn on at places made it look off, as did the way the larger plates seemed to almost shine in the streetlights. He had both hands up and out, a little cautiously, as if he felt like something was up.

I was nervous, but I stepped towards them, and they saw me and moved forward.

Right into the path of the crowd of people in the alley. Who saw them.

“Hey! Fuck-faces!” a deep male voice yelled, “Fucking wonder kids! I got magic too!”

Kid Win had to dodge out of the way of a thrown bottle, juking right. That didn’t seem like a
parahuman power at all (or magic for that matter).

Then I heard a bellow, and a huge, pasty-skinned man leapt out of the alley. He had an overabundance of muscle and fat, a thick beard, and he was dressed in rags. The man’s eyes, though, were wide and dull, and yet were glowing faintly, unnaturally, red.

A swarm of bugs tore out of the alley to intercept him, and he turned, temporarily distracted, to swipe at the bugs, who died in agony when his fingers brushed up against them.

Which… shouldn’t have happened. More bugs slipped past his guard and started stinging him. He didn’t even seem to notice as he bellowed and turned back towards Clockblocker and Kid Win.

Meanwhile, the rest of the people in the alley were spilling out behind him, their own eyes glowing different colors, and this was… shit. Red, blue, yellow, green, and then one person in the back whose eyes were glowing white. All in all, there were sixteen people in that one little alley, all cramped together, all glowing oddly.

It looked like some sort of powers thing, but this many people couldn’t have powers, could they? There were men and women both, all of them dressed raggedly, though a few looked like it was more along the lines of drug dealer wear than homeless bum wear. All of that combined made me think of the Merchants at once. I started throwing swarms of bugs, drawn from everywhere, right at them.

A few ignored it, especially those with red eyes, but most of them screamed and twisted, moaning and making strange sounds as my bugs threw themselves in suicidal charges at their mouths, in stings towards their eyes that I knew would do some real damage.

The leading man was knocked aside just before he went at Clockblocker by a bright bolt of energy, and yet he stood up a moment later, seemingly completely unharmed.

One of the ones with glowing blue eyes spat out what looked like blackish mist, looking surprised, and other colors seemed to be moving odd, or…

The colors represented powers, perhaps?

I just kept on stinging them, having spiders crawl up their body and bite, and even some of the red-eyed ones began to go down, bellowing. It was sort of a domino effect. Each one that went down seemed to lead to another distraction, another person who didn’t know what to do and was afraid enough that some of them were already turning and running, or trying to use super powers that they clearly didn’t understand.

I watched someone’s arm (red eyes) swell up into something grotesque and ending in claws, only for them to go down screaming. I watched someone summon what looked like a glowing green knife (white), only to start choking on a fly. I watched again and again as this or that power fizzled out in the face of no time to practice or understand them.

In the meantime, while I was halfway distracted taking out most of the others, the leading man had charged at Clockblocker, who just stood there as he got closer and closer. And then Clockblocker dodged to the side, faster than expected, and tagged the man.

And just like that, the few of them still standing were running, and the fight was over. I was surprised how quickly the violence broke out, and I was just as surprised at how quickly it had ended.

“What was that?” I asked, muttering to myself.
“More importantly,” Kid Win said, “who are you? What are you doing here?”

“I’m a new hero, I’m patrolling around here, and I saw them ahead of time. Part of my power, really, controlling bugs.”

“Right,” Clockblocker said, “but what can we call you? Bug Controlling Girl? We’ll have to fill out a bunch of reports, and having a name, well. It’ll stop my writing hand from cramping.” He waved his right hand back and forth.

It’d have come off as playful without the costume. As it was, it just came off as weird. I took a breath, and thought about all of the other names I’d thought about. I wasn’t going to find a name I really, really liked, so I might as well go with something at least a little classical.

“You can call me Arachne.”

Chapter End Notes

Thus she gets her cape name. Also, I can say this outright since this is complete: pay attention to the information about the fight here, it’s going to be significant. Just keep it in the back of your mind because it’ll show up again.

Arachne, of course, was a mortal weaver, a proud woman who challenged Athena to a contest. Depending on who you ask, either she or Athena won, but of course either way Athena turned her into a spider because even one of the less-shitty Greek Gods is still a Greek God.
The mystery of just what was going on with all of those people who had suddenly gotten powers, briefly, was going to remain just that, a mystery. Because on that dark night, I wasn’t a member of the Wards, which meant that when the PRT vans showed up, and spilled out with troopers, I wasn’t going to be one of the people in the loop.

The perils of being an independent hero, really.

I should have been offended or annoyed, but I was really just glad that I’d survived and that nothing had gone wrong, and that now they’d know my name, and that I was a hero. Or at least, that I claimed to be one, and I was going to prove that my claims were right. I was going to make sure to patrol even more from now on, I resolved when I slipped back home and went to take a shower.

I didn’t know whether things were looking up or not, but it did feel as if I were at least going somewhere, for better or worse. I needed to figure out new ways to use my powers if I was going to keep it up, but I’d at least made it easier for the two Wards to catch as many of them as possible, and that was something, even if they’d never been in that much danger.

That night, staring up at the ceiling, I began to feel as if I just needed a plan and things would start to all come together.

*******

Routine could be good or it could be bad. The routine of having to go to school every day, knowing that the Trio might have something planned? That made my stomach wrap itself into horrible, painful knots. It had led to a few sick days, actually, and I hated how I sometimes knew when a trap was coming, but couldn’t stop it.

I had known Emma better than any other human being I’d ever known, or I thought I had, and that’s part of what made it so painful. The gaps in my knowledge through which she’d driven a knife, and the fact that I knew her well enough to see the glee in her eyes, to see the way her stance shifted right before she made some comment that she’d thought about for way too long.

She practiced what she said in the mirror, whether it was a good thing or not, and I’d been there watching her practice for some sort of speech in a school play, and I’d seen that same cock of her hips, that same shifting of her weight, as if it was her job to ram it all into reality, to say it was best she could.

Whether it was a cute speech in a silly play when we were each eleven, or a barbed insult driven with Ahab-like fury straight into me.

I’d tried to build up resistance, had tried to be able to ignore it or not care about it, but I’d failed entirely. I’d retreated within myself, and it hadn’t even solved anything. I knew that, but knowing wasn’t the same as knowing how to fix it.

And that routine? It just kept on going on. But it seemed almost bearable now, with another pair of routines in its place.

I visited Rachel on Sunday, and then every evening for the rest of the week. She was quiet, and we
mostly just hung out, or read. It was clear that she wasn’t going to tell all about her trigger and neither was I, but there was still something worthwhile about just hanging out. I shared a few of my games with her, and tried not to laugh at the adorable look of concentration on her face when she tried to play them.

It was a look that seemed so intent on that one thing that I could imagine her trying the same game again and again and again until she succeeded or the battery ran down. She was stubborn, that much was obvious as I tried one game after the other.

She liked a few of them, mostly the ones that didn’t involve reading, because while she wasn’t illiterate, I could tell, now that I was watching, that her reading speed was rather slow for any sort of RPG filled with context based words. How was she supposed to know what Aereos did, or understand what the Ascension Project even meant? I mean, in the case of the game I was thinking about, the creators clearly had no idea what they were talking about, so why should she?

But she had decent reflexes, and she was no worse at pattern memorization than anyone else, really.

“Damn it,” she muttered, sitting on the ground surrounded by dogs, as she took out a game and handed it to me. The first time she’d completely failed, she’d gotten so angry she’d almost thrown it, but she quickly learned that I didn’t like that.

It was a Wednesday, and I should have been reading more “The Call Of The Wild” but she’d decided she wanted to play a video game. And so that was that. “Well, let me try,” I said, trying not to smile.

“Yes,” Rachel said, but despite the gruffness of her voice, she leaned over my shoulder, close to me, as she watched me play. And it felt like having someone there who actually cared about what I was doing changed everything.

Made it harder to win, but easier to have fun.

Sometimes Rachel made it hard not to smile.

*********

The days passed quickly, really, when I was trying with all my might to just press on through to the other side. On the other side of a day at school was an hour or two with Rachel, and then after that, a night out patrolling.

So when Sophia accidentally bumped into me at lunch, spilling some of my mashed potatoes all over my top, I just smiled at her and went to the far bathroom to get it washed off, not trusting the nearby one to not be the scene of another bullying attempt.

A part of me wanted to confront them, to get right up to them and growl and scare them away, but I didn’t think that’d work, and I was afraid to try. Afraid of things getting worse. It was easier to just continue on in silence, knowing that school would be done with before that long.

And so the days ground on, and I kept up with my homework, but no more than that. I didn’t have time for the attempts to get ahead of the curve in order to get grades that would let me transfer schools (one of my ideas that hadn’t panned out), and I didn’t put in more effort than I needed to.

The only educational thing I really focused on was looking up more books about dogs, and trying to figure out whether I actually knew how to teach someone to be more literate. I knew there were programs for that kind of thing, but I also knew what would happen if I suggested them to her. And that wasn’t counting the practical fact that as a known villain without a secret identity, she couldn’t
exactly apply to a class.

But perhaps the same food that she would have rejected from a foreign hand, she’d accept if I was holding it out? If I knew the right way to help her understand how to read and spell a little better. It wasn’t a big thing, and I knew that it wouldn’t change her life or anything, but maybe she’d wanted to read more books about dogs. Maybe she’d find a series she’d like and that’d be another thing for her to do, to stave off boredom some rainy day.

Some rainy day? I started to worry about things like that. What if it rained? I mean, then she’d be wet and cold unless she hid in the backroom and there’d be a lot of wet dog smell to follow her around. Or what if someone attacked her while I wasn’t there? It was the same worry that had driven the little fight, but now it had seemed to infect me.

But I tried to ignore it, tried to focus on the good feelings that all of this had engendered, and on my patrols, on the work I was doing to try to be a hero.

Because I picked up the pace there, too.

********

Every night I could, which was every single night, I went out that week. I tried to patrol as much ground as possible, even though that meant I didn’t get a chance to fight, because I was gathering bugs. I was finding bugs that were liable to stay in the area if I put them in the right place near my home, and yet would be useful.

Not all bugs were created equal. The average beetle, as cool as it was, wasn’t really doing much for me. I needed poisonous spiders, flying insects to make their way into people’s mouths or fly in their eyes, or just to ‘bug’ them so I could keep track of them, and stinging insects. Masses of insects were useful, and I could probably eventually use them to throw people off, but it was still important to get more bugs.

And then, once I got them, find a way to keep them. I wish I had money, because if I did, I could create boxes for the bugs, or habitats. As it was, I just felt the expanding range of options and used them a few times.

Most drug dealers weren’t Merchants, which was to say that when they saw a cape that they didn’t know, they either surrendered or ran. They weren’t there for a fight to the death, or to murder a teenage girl only to learn she was a valued Ward or something like that. At least, that’s my assumption. The Merchants postured more, and a few tried to attack me, only to go down in a swarm of bugs and give up after some inventive lessons in English invective. Even they mostly just scattered.

It wasn’t very useful, but it felt useful, and that meant something. I wasn’t sure if I was ready for another fight, not really, and when I thought about it too much, it felt like the months of planning and delay I’d fallen into. It felt like I was afraid, and I hated that feeling.

I wanted to talk to Rachel about it, but I wasn’t sure what I could say, and I wasn’t sure what she would say. I could guess, though, and I doubted it’d be helpful.

At the same time, it was an odd sort of fear, because I’d felt fearless during the fight with the Merchants. It’d been so fast, and so brutal and yet decisive, that I hadn’t had time to worry, I’d just acted and it had worked out.

Maybe I should do that more often? Or at least, try not to think about things, and just push all of my
focus into my bugs and what they were doing.

I wasn’t sure, and that wasn’t a good thing.

And I felt the same uncertainty with Rachel, though I wasn’t sure why. Dad at least wasn’t asking anymore, but I could feel that he suspected something, that he was just biding his time and not trying to push too hard. There was only so much I could say without making my worried, and all of my experience with not telling Dad the truth hadn’t actually taught me how to lie to him.

But the situation, such as it was, was stable. Online, there were rumors about something big coming, and Lung’s cronies were still spouting insults and threats at the Undersiders, but when things changed, it was pure luck.

Friday night I’d decided to patrol a little more south. I was still suspicious about all of those Merchants who had suddenly and briefly had powers. It felt like it could be something new, and so I made my way down there.

Several times I had to shift out of the way, there seemed to be a lot of traffic jams, and so I wasn’t actually entirely sure what was going on at first. I didn’t want to get to close to the cars in the jam, in case it was an ambush. Squealer was known as a tinker who did her super-tech on vehicles, so it was plausible, if I was being paranoid.

I kept on going through one alley and another, my bugs clearing the way ahead of me, until I felt someone on the roof above me.

Two people, in fact, moving across the roof. I looked up above me, carefully, and saw that there was not much of a gap between one building and the next, and as I was looking up, two figures leapt across.

One was so recognizable that I immediately realized what was going on, or at least who was going on.

Pale skin, the kind of pale that didn’t occur in nature. Alabaster. And the other one? I looked closely, and I was guessing it was Victor, though they were quickly out of sight, if not the range of my bugs.

Then I managed to hear something, as my bugs continued going to the limit of my range, which had started to expand during the week, though I wasn’t sure why. Mush barreled through an alley on the other side of the road, and I stepped forward, still keeping to the shadows and watching.

He was grappling with a tall woman in weird armor. It had wings on it, and it was steel and grey, with a closed helm, but it also had boob plate and yet the sword she had and the shield seemed entirely and completely real.

Mush was one of the Merchants, a disgusting cape whose power was to gather garbage and debris to himself to become a strong golem with a squishy human at the center. Or something like that. In the right area, like here, he could be really impressive.

Dark and barely human shaped, he pounded at what was either Fenja or Menja. They were twins, who could each grow in size and strength, and yet Mush was matching her blow for blow, though I saw, behind her, a muscular, shirtless man I knew to be Hookwolf step up.

Ready to attack at the first sign of weakness. I spread the bugs out, and, farther from that, I could see with my bugs, in an alleyway off and behind Hookwolf, a dozen or so figures all clustered together.

I drew out my bugs as far as I could go, and began to notice clusters. From the way they were
The E88 was pushing into the Merchant’s territory, and the Merchants were pushing back. But then, why were Victor and Alabaster on the roof, unless there was someone nearby?

Bugs crawled into houses through windows and doors, searching apartments as fast as they could, my mind spread out in a dozen different directions at the same time. I was barely paying attention to my body, marking everyone with flies while trying to figure out what to do.

Victor, why would he be up there? He was a good shot, could it be an attempt to just straight up murder someone? But if so, who?

In the basement of an apartment building to the right, a crumbling brownstone, there was at least a dozen people, each of them standing stock still, and one person pacing in front of them. I didn’t know what that was, and I knew I needed to find out.

This was something big, that was for sure, and I was glad nobody had noticed me. It was a warzone out here, and I was tagging as many people with bugs as I could, but I was honestly running low on flies, just spreading them all out, especially since people kept on moving.

Flies had incredible senses when you thought about it. Think of how hard it was to actually squish a fly. You reached down, and the fly saw it immediately, felt it in a dozen ways, and was already moving. So flies were actually pretty good for sensing movement, and I focused, moving them up and round each of the figures, trying to find details.

For instance, two of the figures besides the ones I’d seen in the fight involving Mush, seemed to be wearing armor of some sort, though I couldn’t make out more. It was more a guess that it was armor in the first place, and my supposition was that this was Fenja/Menja and… maybe Kaiser, the leader of the E88? He was said to create his own armor during each fight using his metal-controlling powers.

The other of the twins seemed to be fighting a figure who was making a lot of sounds, and a bunch of other people who weren’t. The movements on Fenja/Menja seemed like she was slipping and sliding around, which meant… the other figure was Skidmark?

I focused, though, on the other impressions, such as sound. I was pretty sure that it’d be hard, if not impossible, for bugs to pick up speech. Or at least, it seemed absurd. But they could notice vibrations in the air and interpret them. That meant, in theory, I could tell if someone was talking.

And down below, in the basement, the pacing figure was definitely talking. From the strange impression of force, I felt like they were perhaps yelling.

So, add it all together, and what did you get? Some sort of huge fight between two gangs, and here I was in the middle of it. I gathered as many insects as I could, having them cling, fly, or climb up to where Victor and Alabaster were in general, assuming they hadn’t moved too much. I’d need to hit them hard and fast if I was going to stop whatever their plan was.

And then, at the edge of my range, I saw it. Figures moving across the rooftop on the same side as Mush and most of the rest of the fighting. And I also sensed movement coming along the street to my right, approaching closer to where Victor and Alabaster were set up.

I was almost out of bugs, this was too much to monitor. But at the same time, there was this odd, detached feeling to be able to see an entire battle going on. It felt like I was just a spectator, as if this were a game, rather than people living and dying. I didn’t know if I liked it or not, but I knew that I
had to act. I still couldn’t figure out a lot of details.

Insects had an interesting sense of smell, too, but it wasn’t tuned to tell humans apart, obviously, it had more important uses, the same with a lot of their senses. Plus everything was on a smaller scale, when you thought about it.

I felt like I recognized the dogs, at least, that were moving along the rooftops. It was this vague sense of visual impression, of a muzzle here, a spot of fur there, all of it confusing and hard to interpret. It made my head ache, but if the Undersiders were here, then what?

Were they going to ambush both parties?

I tensed, trying to figure out my next move, taking way too long to do so, and that was when the choice was taken from me.

There was a scream of rubber, and then Squealer came into view, riding on what looked like a pink, purple and yellow monster car, with a machine-gun strapped to the front. There was no glass on the windows, and it stood higher than I expected, elevating the grubby white girl, covered in grease and filth, far above everyone else.

One hand was on the steering wheel, the other on the gun as she aimed it straight at Menja or Fenja. Of course, being elevated like that meant she was also a target. And unlike the valkyrie, Squealer wasn’t invincible. Victor was going to murder her.

My bugs pounced, stingers stabbing into Victor’s skin. He screamed, as I began to try to bring up spiders, which were a lot harder to get up there, though I’d had them crawl through the building to the roof access.

I could feel Alabaster moving to help his comrade, as Squealer screamed out insults and fired on the valkyrie, who roared in pain and fury. As the giant turned to try to confront the Merchants more fully, she was slammed into a wall by Mush, who seemed only larger and more grotesque.

Hookwolf moved in to stop him, and I made sure to cover Victor in bugs and sting as hard as I could at Alabaster. Bugs flew right into his eye, tearing it out, because Alabaster reset every so many seconds. Short of killing him, nothing I did would actually hurt him for good.

I expected screaming when the black widows bit and the hornets blinded him, but instead he was quiet, almost deadly quiet, backing up and waving his hands, grunting almost too softly for me to hear.

Victor more than made up for it, as Mush was driven back by Fenja and Hookwolf combined.

Hookwolf was in his wolf form, a horrific beast to say the least. I was lucky that nobody had seen me yet, since I was pretty sure it’d take mere moments for Hookwolf’s spinning barrage of metal to get through my spider silk armor.

So I hung back, wondering when and if anyone would notice me.

Someone was entering the room where the one… man, I think, and the dozen other people were. They reached a hand out and squashed the bug I had on them. But I had bugs on everyone else, so I could tell that the speaker was… maybe female? It was hard to tell, but the voice seemed a little different to my bug’s senses, though it was hard to draw even that out.

I needed to practice whatever this was, perhaps put bugs on everyone in school and see if I could multi-task? Or something.
The fight was continuing, and now that Squealer was driving back and forth and firing, it was a lot more even.

But then there was Rachel and her dogs, which were growing larger and larger, biting at the bugs I sent for them, and others on the roof.

Waiting. Waiting…

As Mush finally drove the twin back for a moment, darkness fell on the area, and then these… things leapt down from the roof. Rachel was riding one of them, and I had to assume that Grue and Regent were riding the other two.

If I hadn’t known that they were dogs, I might not have guessed at all. They were huge beasts covered in spines and armored plates, their color all evened so I couldn’t even quite tell them apart by the usual methods. Each of the dogs was hugely muscled and vicious looking, and I knew that inside each of them was the ‘real’ dog, beneath this huge mass of flesh. I’d never seen her go full out, and with the darkness hiding things, I couldn’t make out much of what was going on, even with bugs.

I stepped forward, a part of my focus still on harassing Alabaster, and Victor, who wasn’t moving at all. Down in the basement, the talking stopped. One figure left, the others began to follow her, and then she branched off, running up the building, seemingly trying for the roof.

I focused my swarm, preparing it to go after whoever that was, too, only for the darkness to clear.

My focus dropped the moment I saw what had happened.

The valkyrie was down, and small again, unconscious and being pulled up onto the back of one of the dogs by Regent, who was dressed like some parody version of an Italian merchant-prince, complete with a scepter or something.

But that’s not what drew my attention and made all of my bugs begin to collapse on that location, not even bothering to monitor anything else.

Rachel was on fire, and rolling around on the ground to try to get rid of it even as Hookwolf shot more fire at her. Mush was moving to intercept Hookwolf, who must have been using Othala’s powers, but what if she was hurt?!

What if she was--

“Arachne!” a voice called from up above. It was Tattletale, I thought, dimly, even as a swarm of bugs harmlessly threw themselves at Hookwolf, trying desperately to slow him down.

“Sting Alabaster! Bitch’ll be fine! I’m trying to get him down and locked up!”

The remaining bugs on the roof swarmed at Alabaster, and he went down, still silent, but unable to really hurt them, not with just a few weapons.

There was a bang like someone slamming a huge dictionary down on a table, and then Alabaster’s movements slowed. Another bang, and then I felt Tattletale approaching, even as I was striding forward, trying to draw Hookwolf’s attention.

Rachel, her costume burnt through at places, had gotten back on one of her dogs. Now they were headed my way, retreating with their… hostage? Or something like that. The dogs must have been strong to take out the valkyrie so fast, and I was trying to figure out what to do when a body fell from up above.
Alabaster, an albino man, in handcuffs. He hit the ground, and there was a cracking sound as bones broke that would, no doubt, heal themselves as soon as he got another reset. There was no sign of the bullet wounds that he must have sustained, but had cycled through. It was just like going for the eyes when you know they have Othala.

There’s no need to actually be nice, or to even hold back at all. As long as Alabaster was still alive at the end of his reset time, then it didn’t matter either way.

“Get on the dog when it shows up!” Tattletale yelled, “we need to get out of here. You can capture the enemy capes, if you stay they’ll--”

Then I felt her turn, my bugs tracking her as she moved right up to the edge of the building and began to work her way down at the side.

I wouldn’t have leapt myself, but the moment when Grue’s giant dog was above her, she dropped down. She landed clumsily getting a grip at the last moment, Victor coming down with her, unconscious.

She almost rolled off, and I saw that Rachel, burnt as she was, smelling of cooked flesh, was reaching a hand out to pull me up. And Regent? He was stopping to go and get Alabaster.

It was an ambush! Grab a few enemy capes, give them to their hero ‘buddy’ and then know that I’ll help lock them up.

…but how did they know I’d be here? If I wasn’t, what would they have done?

I took Rachel’s arm anyways, and even burned, even with one arm, she lifted me up effortlessly, pulling me tight against her as Hookwolf ran after us, and Regent remounted just in time.

And then off we went.

********

My heart was still racing, I was still clinging to Rachel as we raced through the dark of the night, which wasn’t very dark at all. Streetlights lit our way, and when I finally got the sense, I called the Protectorate. “Hello? I have… Alabaster, Fenja or Menja, and Victor. I’ve captured them.”

“Yes? Who is this?”

“Arachne,” I muttered, “I’m Arachne. Please send someone before the rest of the E88 catch up to me to try to rescue them.”

Rachel turned, clearly in pain, once I’d finished the conversation, and we journeyed into the lee of a dark building, halfway across time.

I finally got a good look at Grue, who was dressed like the biker from literal hell, as he stepped off the dog and said, “Tattletale, we need to go.”

“It’s true,” Tattletale said. “We have them knocked out or handcuffed, but we should stay close by for at least a little bit, until we’re sure that the Protectorate is on the scene.”

“Okay…” I said, “can someone tell me what the heck is going on here?”

“We decided to teach the E88 a little lesson,” Regent said, waving his arm as if it were nothing, “and then you showed up.”
“Rachel, are you okay?”

“Fine,” Rachel spat out between grit teeth. “Just fine.”

Tattletale got off of the dog, climbing down slowly, and walking over to me, as Bitch whistled and the dogs moved back. Grue was leaving too, trying to get far enough away not to be immediately attacked, but close enough to watch if someone tried anything. Alabaster was still in handcuffs, though it looked like he was trying to work on breaking his own wrists to get out. It hadn’t worked yet.

And then we had two unconscious capes, one of them rather badly mauled, and another covered in insect bites.

“Hey, Arachne,” Tattletale said, quietly, when she saw that everyone else was far away enough. “You should visit Rachel tonight. She’s hurt, and she’ll need someone to be there, but it can’t be any of us.”

“Why are you telling me this? I think you have some sort of scheme going on here,” I admitted. “This feels like… something. Manipulation.”

“It’s not.”

“How did you know I’d show up? Were you planning on taking on Hookwolf on your own, or just grabbing one cape?”

“Not quite. I’m not sure how much I can tell you, but we expected someone to show up and help, but weren’t completely sure who it was. Now, I need to go before--”

And in the distance, there was the roar of Armsmaster’s motorcycle.

********

He was a hero worth looking up to, and also a very, very curt man wielding a giant halberd. “Good work on capturing them,” he said, somewhat perfunctorily, as Velocity, who had come with him, kept watch over the enemy capes. “How did you do it?”

“I interrupted a fight between the Merchants, the E88, and then later the Undersiders.” What do I say? I took a breath, and decided on a short of truth, “We decided to work together, because they wanted to hurt the E88, and so they helped transport some of the capes I’d taken down here, and then left.”

“And you trusted them?”

“I trusted that there was no way they could hold the villains,” I said, trying to sound earnest, but I felt my palms sweating. I wanted to get out of here and help Rachel. She was hurt, I had to do something, even if it was just being there for her. “And it seems to have paid off.”

“Is that the only reason you helped them?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” I said.

“Very well,” Armsmaster said, with a curt, almost dismissive nod. There was something about his frown that seemed different. “Anything I should know about any of the prisoners?”

“A lot of spider bites, including black widows, on Victor. He’s an adult, so it should be fine. Black
widows are rarely fatal,” I said. For whatever reason, Velocity started at that. But it was a pretty obvious fact, wasn’t it? Despite their name, they weren’t impossibly dangerous, though they were still useful enough. “Alabaster is fine with everything, as you’d think,” I said, “and I think that Bitch-“

“Who?” Velocity asked.

“H-hellhound. She doesn’t like being called that, though. I’m not sure why,” I said with a shrug, as if it didn’t matter, “That she had her dogs attack this person. Fenja or Menja, I’m not sure which one she is. But that should heal, over time. She’s not bleeding anymore, at least.”

I knew that wasn’t exactly the best sounding defense ever, but what was I supposed to say? It was a cape fight, of course it was a little brutal.

“Understood,” Armsmaster said. “We can take it from here.”

And just like that, I was dismissed. In other circumstances I’d be fuming all the way home, annoyed at the way I had been brushed aside, and afraid of being suspected to be a villain or something because of being associated with the Undersiders.

Instead, I just relaxed as soon as I was out of sight and went to an alley to change back from Arachne to Taylor. I had a friend to visit.

*********

I’d never been to Rachel’s place so late at night. It meant that there were very few lights, and when I went up to the door, only one or two dogs barked at first, though a few more joined in, roused from sleep, before Rachel finally opened the door, glaring out.

She didn’t have a shirt on, and in one hand she was holding what looked like a burn salve.

I flushed, out of surprise more than anything, and said, “Rachel.”

“What?” she asked, angry.

“I just wanted to check up on you,” I said, my words tripping over themselves, “if now’s not a great time then I could just…”

“Come in,” Rachel said, after a moment.

She turned, and I followed her in, closing the door behind me. It was dark, and I could barely see her, but it was still. I don’t know. It felt too private? She opened the door to the main area, and then walked over to a pallet, picking up what looked to be some sort of lamp.

It was like something you’d use out in the wilderness, with no chord. Probably battery powered? I supposed that was one thing to buy with your money, as she switched it on, revealing her torso.

She had a burn just beneath her breasts, which were covered by a blue sports bra, and then just right at her collarbone. She was sweating, clearly in pain, her flat stomach, which I could probably have bounced quarters off, sometimes retracting slightly in little spasms of pain as she tried to apply the salve to herself.


“You could?” Rachel asked, speaking between grit teeth.
“If you need me to help apply it, or do anything, or hold your hand while you do it,” I said, “I’m your girl.”

“Okay,” Rachel said, looking at me intently, the light casting strange shadows on her body, on her face. She looked different in the dark, in a way I couldn’t quite place. My stomach was a ball of stress, and it seemed to be getting worse as she handed me the salve, opening it up.

I pushed on the tube, and getting one finger, I began to spread the salve over her collar-bone. “Shh, shh, it’s okay. Don’t hoot so much, you’ll wake up the wolves,” I muttered, remembering that my Mom had said that once, when I was really sick and she was trying to apply a salve for a rash that had broken out.

“Wolves?” she asked.

I didn’t know what I was talking about, my finger trailing past the bra to rub underneath. I couldn’t quite figure out why I wasn’t breathing.

Then it was done, and she stopped wincing. “There, is that better?”

“Yes.”

“…if you want to talk, I’m here. I’ll be in tomorrow,” I said, standing up. I didn’t know why, but I wanted to leave right now. I, something was…

“Wait.”

I stopped, halfway towards the exit already, ready to retreat. I turned. “Yes, Rachel? I didn’t mean to leave, but I can’t really sleep over, Dad would flip…”

Rachel looked conflicted, which startled me. She seemed like someone who had very little self-doubt. She stood up, striding towards me, until she was face to face with me, looking up slightly because I was taller than her. She was staring at me as if memorizing every single feature of mine.

And then she spoke, casually, matter-of-fact even.

“Wanna fuck?”

What.

**Chapter End Notes**

I decided to post this now. This counts as tomorrow’s, but I didn't want to forget to do it. So, btw. I'm actually following canon in Rachel's actions, if not her sexuality.

Cite:

“You should offer to sleep with him.”

“I-uh, what?” I stammered. Relief mixed with embarrassment, and the abrupt change of topic left me struggling to get my thoughts in order.

“It’s what guys want. Tell him you’re available if he ever wants to fuck. He’ll accept
right away, or he’ll start thinking about you as a possibility and he’ll take you up on it later.”

“That’s- It’s more complicated than that.”

“It’s complicated because people make it complicated. Just cut the bullshit and go for it.”
--Buzz 7.04, and part of the inspiration for this fic
Ruff 1-A (Jeff)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It didn’t matter that Jeff couldn’t hear the Eurobeats, because that didn’t mean they weren’t there. If Amanda kept on listening to that trash when she was supposed to be helping him do important analysis, he was going to throw a fit. Or file a complaint. Either way, it wasn’t fair that he was stuck doing all of the real work, and whatever she said about how it helped get her in the ‘zone’ was all a bunch of nonsense.

He looked around the small, cramped room, and then back at his computer, where he was writing a report.

Two new capes that needed analyzing, and then updating of that analysis, and they were both overdue. They’d really dropped the ball so far, but the PRT Analysis Team would get it done before the weekend, that was for sure.

He wiped his brow, wishing they’d turned down the temperature a little. Would it kill them to use the A/C? Sure, it’d cut down on their shiny-shit budget, but--

He took a breath, trying to rein in the annoyance and the fury. He knew he was like this, he knew that sometimes he could just spiral out into criticism and anger that didn’t really matter, that didn’t help him with his job.

First cape: Arachne. She seemed straightforward at first, but Jeff had followed a hunch or two, and now the picture he was getting was very different than he first expected. She’d helped out with this Merchant attack, and in doing so she’d impressed Kid Win and Clockblocker (he hated that name with a passion, hated every time he was forced to write it in a report) at least a little bit, enough so that their analysis hadn’t exactly been unbiased.

But there was the attack on the E88 earlier, wasn’t there? With Hellhound, a member of a minor, petty criminal gang. That seemed like someone who was playing both sides of it, and that’s what his report was going to say, and if she would just talk to him, what Amanda’s was as well. You always made sure there were at least a few reports for every issue, even if capes tended to trust their own foolish ‘gut instincts’ over the professional analysis that guided the PRT.

PRT officers weren’t going to have powers and arrogance to back them up, they needed to know what the situation really was. And it was bad. If she really was part of the Undersiders, then that meant that there were two new villains in town.

And while her power didn’t seem that impressive at first glance, Amanda had at least emailed him a few notes on the kinds of things that bugs could do, and the report by Kid Win, despite being a little given to tangents, had basically summed up how useful her power had been.

Arachne wasn’t a cape who could singlehandedly change the face of Brockton Bay, she wasn’t going to be toppling Lung or becoming anything too dangerous, in Jeff’s professional opinion, but that didn’t matter. A single small weight at the right part.

He pushed himself up, standing to his full height of six feet. He was tall, and if he exercised more, he might have even been imposing, but as it stood, he knew that it wasn’t his good looks that had put him so high up in the analysts pool.
Amanda was a short, brown-skinned woman who moved as if she had an itch, jittering one way and the next, her rolling chair moving with her as she typed.

He loomed over her until she tabbed to what looked like a video channel and muted the music.

“Yes?”

“Have you finished your analysis of Arachne?” Jeff asked.

“Yes. Half an hour ago. I think that her working with the Undersiders is clearly pragmatism. She sees an opportunity, she takes it. She’s an indie hero, you know the statistics with those.”

“Ah, and maybe you would have been right an hour ago,” Jeff said, “but we just got in more data.”

The key was to always change the analysis with the data, rather than sticking to an outdated theory.

“What?”

“She worked with the Undersiders in some kind of fight. Three E88 capes captured, and she apparently claims it was just as you said. Just pure pragmatism. But when he asked: ‘Is that the only reason you helped him?’ that new Tinker-tech of his registered her answer of yes as a lie,” Jeff said. “Or at least, a likely deception. What does that say to you?”

“I’m… not sure. Are you saying she’s an Undersider?”

“I’m saying that you shouldn’t discount that in our analysis, and that if you don’t want to look second-rate, you should pay attention to these sorts of things. Agreement is important when we have to push something through, and we need the PRT to understand that she might be hostile.”

“Are you sure?” Amanda asked.

“Of course not. We work in probability, but that’s what I’m going to put in my report.”

“What if she’s had positive interactions with them? Reports from the gang members are that during the dog-fighting they worked together well. Which could be a hint of collusion, but it could have led to positive feelings. And collusion itself isn’t enough to get her labeled a villain. Not if she’s acting outside the law.”

“Ah, you’re right,” Jeff said, wiping his forehead. “But I still think that you’re missing the forest for the trees. We need to make sure that it’s clear what we want to do.”

“And what do we want to do?” Amanda asked.

“Force her to make a choice. Confront her with her links to the Undersiders. I’ve looked it up, and they have murderers in their midst. Force her to choose between the Protectorate and the Undersiders, or rather the Wards and the Undersiders, and that’d be a feather in Piggot’s cap, and you know that she’s reasonable to those who help her.”

Amanda sighed, whirling around in her chair to look at him more closely. “Yes, but she also wants accurate analysis. Yes, this hardball sort of thing is the Director’s specialty, and it’s how she got Shadow Stalker—”

Jeff’s latest triumph, actually. He’d been the one to suggest confronting her with Miss Militia, that it’d give a chance to see just what she did. And it’d paid off, more or less. His analysis had even been correct that the two of them would share enough that it wouldn’t come down to a fight.
“It is. And it’s how she’ll get Arachne. You yourself said it, her power can be very useful. Imagine if she could track entire gang movements? We can’t attack a cape’s identity, but if we find out where their men are hanging out…”

“Ah, that makes sense,” Amanda said, relaxing a little bit. “I’ll make sure to note that in my report. What about the Chemical Tinker?”

“We need to figure out their capabilities, and fast. If we don’t, we’re going to keep on getting surprise, we’re going to keep on running into tricks. Being able to temporarily grant powers is dangerous, especially if they actually knew how to use the powers. We have only one sample, thanks to Cl… the Ward’s ability to freeze someone in time, the rest of them had no signs that they’d taken a drug at all.

“Clockblocker?” Amanda said, with a faint smile at Jeff’s wince.

“Yes, exactly. Him. The Merchants are now more dangerous than ever, and I think that we should back off the E88, especially if the Undersiders and their newest member are focusing so hard on them.”

Amanda was frowning now, though he couldn’t quite tell why.

“After all, the E88 is too big to get any quick, easy victories out of. Once we have the Merchants out of the way, the E88 will go too far, do a few too many hate crimes, and they’ll be ripe for the picking.” Jeff smiled, proud of his idea. This could be a real victory for the PRT, and a feather in his cap as well.

“Is that so wise? If we don’t know what the tinker does. You know that Director Piggot likes to keep the pressure up on E88.”

“Yes… yes, that is a problem, but I’m sure that we can figure something out, together, to convince her.”

“Yes… I suppose we can,” Amanda said, and she seemed to be acting a little odd. Distant, in a way he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

“Well, I’m going to get back to work. You know what to write, I’m sure, and if you need any help with analyzing the reports, feel free to shoot me an email and I can point to the really important parts that decisively prove what I’m talking about.”

“Of course,” Amanda said, nodding.

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Summary of Suggested Course of Action (Jeffery Wiles): “By applying strong and decisive pressure regarding the actions of the Undersiders, Arachne can be recruited as a useful asset. Once the Merchants are out of the way, she can be used to bring the E88’s own numbers against them, in a plan outlined above. If Arachne does resist, then it is certain that she’s a member of the Undersiders under a classic independent hero guise, and should be treated as such.

The new chemical Tinker is highly troubling, and more study is needed as soon as possible, and should be the primary priority of the PRT forces for the moment.”

Summary of Suggested Course of Action (Amanda Wallen): “Keep in positive contact with Arachne, but make sure she understands that alliance with the Undersiders has its downsides. Do release information involving Undersiders re: murder at time most convenient, and continue focusing
on the Empire Eighty Eight for the moment, while trying to watch for signs of the Merchant’s plans.

Based on an analysis of Skidmark’s psychology, he’s going to want to push out with his stronger forces, boss. He’ll make a mistake sooner, rather than later, and we can catch him out without putting extra effort into it.”

Chapter End Notes

This is actually rather important context. But because 1-A is not what you were looking forward to, I'm going to also post 2.1 in just a little bit. In the meantime, enjoy the inside of the PRT.
The thought became a word: “What?”

“I’ve seen you looking,” Rachel said, as if this was just a thing people did, “and I know you want to do something.”

I blinked, trying to work my way through that logic. So she apparently saw that I was attracted—and boy was that news to me!—and so she offered to have sex? Instead of anything else, up to and including a date?

Actually, maybe that part made sense, I thought, looking away from her. My face was so red and hot that I could imagine steam coming out of my ears. If I’d felt awkward and uncertain before, it was only worse now. But Rachel did seem like a blunt kind of person, I just hadn’t ever imagined it’d extend to something like this, because I was silly.

“I… do?”

“I saw it,” Rachel said firmly. “And I’m attracted to you. So do you want to have sex?” She explained it slowly, patiently. As if I just had to see the logic and then there you go.

“Whoa, whoa. Uh, you’re hurt. And I’m not attracted to you! I mean, not that… I mean.”

I wasn’t going to win, was I? And Rachel wasn’t buying it, though I was surprised that she wasn’t blowing up or getting angry at the fact that I was rejecting her and trying to let her down easy. Except I was stumbling over everything I was saying, and then I’d think back and a part of me would wonder if I was missing something.

“Not that?” Rachel asked, in no mood to help me dig out of the hole I was so diligently digging all the way to China to join the Yangban.

“I mean, there’s something about you that, I’m sure you could find someone. I didn’t know you were attracted to girls, in the first place.”

“Yup. Gay or whatever,” she said, as if the label didn’t really mean anything. “So, something about me?” She wasn’t smiling, but she felt amused to me, in a way I couldn’t quite place. She was gazing intently at me, not blinking, just watching my movements.

Wait, did she say she was attracted to me?! Why? How? That didn’t seem right, really. “I mean, there’s something striking about your features and I’m sure you can, I mean.”

What, do better than me? Was I really going to insult myself? But at the same time, yes. She wasn’t attractive, in a traditional sense, but she did look interesting, which sounded like an insult, but wasn’t. Not really.

“Do better than you?” Rachel asked, finally helping out, though her voice was something of a bark. I could feel the frustration behind it, and I realized, did she think I was making excuses?

“Probably, yeah. I mean, I’m not much to look at. Beanpole Taylor, and—wait, why are we even talking about this. I’m not…”
I searched desperately for a way out, my heart racing, feeling like I was being backed in a corner. “I’m not attracted to you, I swear, and that’s not meant as an insult to you. Besides, you just got your skin burned, surely you’d want to heal it anyways before you did something like that.”

“True,” Rachel said, glancing over at the dogs, who had perked up at the argument, and now Milk, Brutus, and Stumpy were all coming in to check out what the fighting was about. “Think about it.”

Think about it? I stared at her, mouth so open I could have choked myself to death with flies, and at the moment that didn’t seem like the worst possible option to get out of here. “I… will?” I promised, not sure what to say, terrified that this friendship would founder on some sort of mis-applied assumption about what was going on here. Yes, I could be attracted to girls, but that didn’t mean I was attracted to her. I just liked her company a lot, and liked hanging out with her. She was an impressive person, in some ways, even if she was also damaged.

She was strong, she was decisive, she cared a lot more than she let on, at least about certain things.

“Good,” she said, still standing there without a shirt, which was making it hard for me to talk to her. I turned, pausing just long enough to rub Milk’s head and show my other hand to Stumpy so he could get the message that I didn’t actually have any food for him. No late night scooby snacks for him, I thought, with nervous comedy.

“Uh, have a good night, Rachel. I’m glad that you didn’t get hurt worse than that, but you should be careful not to overexert yourself. I can do the heavy lifting tomorrow.”

“Sure,” she said, as if nothing had happened. I knew that this had to be some sort of… what? Trick? But Rachel was the last person to play tricks. She was straightforward, at least as far as I’d seen. If she disliked you, she’d shun you, give you shit jobs, or she’d just punch you if neither of those worked. Maybe she just wanted it out there? Get it off her chest.

I fled.

That was the word for it. I fled with my tail between my legs, and when I snuck back into my room, I just threw myself down on my bed for a minute.

And then two minutes, and yet I couldn’t sleep.

I stood up, going over to the mirror and looking at myself for a long moment, trying to find something, anything, that was attracting her. My hair? Maybe she liked tall people who looked like they were part giraffe? I didn’t actually know, and that just frustrated me more. It made me want to look at myself and see something that’d just… I dunno. Make it all make sense. But the more I stared in the mirror, the more I began to think and wonder.

When I finally got to sleep, I must have had some kind of dream, because I woke up more stressed and out of it than I’d gone to sleep. I also woke up a little later than usual. I rolled out of bed and then stared in the mirror again. Just exactly the same, only with messy hair.

Had it really happened? I’d helped capture several villains, and I’d worked with the Undersiders. And I’d been propositioned by someone who probably qualified as my best friend even though I’d only known her for two weeks.

“God, that Taylor. She’s a creepo. She was always hitting on me, even when I asked her to stop.”

I shuddered, angry and frustrated and defensive, and more than that, Dad was going to be up by the time I got down. Would she think I was skipping out on her?
I got dressed as best I could, deciding to skip the run again, and then I headed downstairs. Dad was cooking, and he looked surprised when he saw me, peering at me through his glasses as if across from a far longer room than this.

“Oh, Taylor, I expected you’d be gone,” he said.

“No. I wound up staying up late, doing some reading,” I said. “That sort of thing.”

“You could have come down, watched some television with me,” Dad said, frowning a little bit.

“I should have, but sorry. Just catching up on a few things. And thinking about stuff. I’m not sure how long I can stay for breakfast, but… are those pancakes? You know, uh.”

Shit. Her arm. I didn’t want to be the kind of friend who forgot all of her loyalty over the lure of pancakes. “Can you get me some to go?”

“Going to give any to this friend of yours?” Dad asked, too carefully for comfort. He clearly suspected something, but he kept on holding back on pushing.

“Sure. It’s just…”

That she burned herself fighting a fellow supervillain and then hit on me and so now I both need to help her out with the dogs and make sure she doesn’t think I’m going to abandon her just because she’s gay.

“But tomorrow, I swear. I’ll tell her I can’t get in until later and that she’ll have to handle the dog feeding on her own,” I said. “Then we can have a breakfast together.” It was a compromise, and more of one than he’d expected me to make.

I pulled out my phone as he began to ‘box’ up the food. In this case it meant finding a bunch of paper plates and trapping the pancakes between them, then taping the lid. We used a plastic grocery bag to carry them all in, and I called Rachel.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Hey, sorry I’m late. Woke up later than usual, should be around.”

“Oh, good,” she said, sounding rather tired herself. I wondered if she’d been worried or not. “Anything else?”

“No.”

“Kay.”

She hung up.

“So… that was Rachel?”

“Yes. I mean, I could put you on the line sometime if you really wanted. We just talk about pretty normal things, really.” I shrugged, trying to appear as casual as I could.

“Normal things?”

“Well, we take care of her dogs,” I said, “I’ve been letting her try some of my games, and I have this book I’m sharing with her.” As I said it, I realized how little that seemed to be the basis of a friendship. But it was hard to quite put it into words, and even harder now that there was the… thing
between both of us.

“Uh-huh. I’d like to meet her sometime,” Dad said, “you could invite her over for dinner.”

“Sure, why not?” I asked, the reasons just lining up the moment I said it. Starting with the fact that I wasn’t sure how good of table manners she had, moving onto the fact that taking her to meet my Dad wasn’t going to convince her that I wasn’t interested, and ending in the fact that it’d be a total disaster in general.

“Very well. Ask her about it, of course,” Dad said, firmly. He was trying to box me in, or at least trying to make me show Rachel off.

“Yes,” I said. “So, I’ll see you a little later, Dad.” I gave him a nervous smile and departed with the food.

The walk through the city was a little different, now. I kept my bugs up, trying to split my focus as many ways as possible, just to see if I could. And then I tried to focus on telling whether people were talking, and if so who was saying what. It was really hard, and liable to give me a headache, and more than that, it was tough to do that while also walking.

But I kept up the practice, because when I was doing this, it felt calming in a way I couldn’t describe. My focus was so broken up that I couldn’t find the emotional closeness to panic. Everything felt distant, or at least, that’s what I thought it might be. People were laughing and swatting at the flies, a woman was jogging, almost running, passing me by after I spent a block following her movements with my bugs. She hadn’t even noticed me.

Soon enough, I was close to Rachel’s home. I thought of it as Rachel’s home, but another thing I was starting to wonder was how she’d gotten it? Somehow, the Undersiders had seemed to know a lot more than they should have, and that was definitely suspicious. They’d known where the ambush was going to be, and one of them had talked to someone and convinced them to flee.

All of that added up to something rotten in Denmark, I just didn’t know what. Not yet. This speculation only briefly got my mind off of the larger Rachel problem, and when I knocked on the door and the dogs started barking, I kept on wondering what would happen.

She opened the door, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. “Hey. Come in. I’m going to be putting the dogs through the paces, training them for my powers. They gotta know how to listen. Can you help?”

She tilted her head, her thin lips pursing a little. Her nose looked twice-broken, but even despite that, I still found myself thinking of what she’d asked. I flushed, not sure why I was so embarrassed.

“I can, Rachel,” I said, and then I followed her. When the door opened, we were both greeted by the dogs, enthusiastically. She talked to them, she really did, though not in the way most people talked to dogs.

I rubbed their ears and knelt down and said their names and talked a little cutesy, but Rachel talked to them in a more firm tone, but there was a warmth there that made it feel the same. I knew they had to notice it, or why would they react so strongly to her? Another thing I’d need to ask her about, sometime.

I watched the girl who had asked if I wanted to have sex with her scratch the dogs’ ears and rub their bellies, getting right down on the ground and interacting with them.

I watched her stand up, and it felt like a sort of ‘Carthage must be destroyed’ of thoughts.
“Hey, this way,” she said. She had asked me to have sex.

“Ah, alright, so you’re going to get into training?”

“Already started,” Rachel said.

Which surprised me. I’d heard her giving orders, but I’d thought that this was just… stuff.

She was stretching a little, looking at the dogs as they clustered around. I moved in next to her, close enough that I could almost feel the warmth coming off her skin. She had asked me to have sex with her.

It just kept on echoing in my mind, and it made everything awkward and everything oddly charged. The way she moved her arm, the way her broad, strong shoulders looked in the T-shirt, the look on her face when she turned to me. I wasn’t attracted to her, I didn’t think. Was I? It was just weird and making me think about it, that’s all!

“Gotta check now, make sure they obey all the orders. You wanna try? Need a firm voice.”

“Me?” I asked, a little baffled, my face red. I knew now that her power didn’t involve any control over the dogs at all, which meant that teaching me how to command them was probably a sign of trust. If they’d listen to me, that could mean conflicted loyalty.

Trust wasn’t supposed to hurt like this, not even as a good pain, but there I was. I stood there, trying not to smile, despite the painful happiness, while she waited. I took a breath, and composed myself, “So, I order them to sit?”

“Them? No. Pick one. One by one. They each need to know it. Might take a while, but just watch.”

“Milk,” Rachel said, and Milk trotted forward. “Sit.” The dog sat down, looking up at Rachel hopefully. “No begging,” Rachel said, firmly, though she sounded more amused than angry. Rachel stepped through the dogs carefully, going over to stand by the wall. “Come.”

Milk trotted over, and the other dogs looked like they wanted to do it too. I moved towards them, holding out my hand for them to sniff.

She moved down to a crouch, and Milk began to snuffle around her, licking her hand. “Off,” Rachel said.

Milk backed up, and Rachel grabbed a stick she’d placed on the ground and threw it out into the yard. Milk watched it, not moving yet.

“Fetch.”

And then off she was, like this was a race.

With the stick presented, Rachel said, “Good girl. Sit.”

The dog sat down, and Rachel pulled out a treat from her jeans.

“Do you teach them to attack?” I asked.

“Yes. I got given this dummy. It’s in the back room,” she said, gesturing over to the door as she kept on rewarding Milk.

“Oh, huh,” I said, “right. That makes sense. I have a few questions, actually.” I’d been wondering
about her powers, but it hadn’t really seemed polite to ask, but now was the time. “How many dogs can you empower at once? I’ve seen you put more or less into them, but what’s the limit?”

“It hurts, the more I do it, the faster,” Rachel said. “Sorta, powers vibrating outwards, into them.” She frowned, “Prefer to do it slow, it’s a fucking hassle to hurry it up.” She sounded put out about that, as if her teammates had tried to make her do that more than once. And I had to admit, I understood where that stress would come from to get her to bulk them up as fast as possible, if it came down to a fight.

But by being able to plan an ambush, she’d had the time she needed.

“Is there anything you want to know about my powers?” I asked.

“Nah.” Rachel frowned, and then asked, contrary to her previous statement. “How far?”

“I… don’t know. Sometimes it’s a block or two, or thereabout, and sometimes it’s a lot more. It’s trended downward, lately, but I’m working on it. I’m also working on trying to hear through the bugs, but it’s really confusing.” I rubbed my eyes. “But right now, I’m aware of everything that could be coming here.

Or at least, I have bugs I could spread out, have touch on anyone who gets too close to here.

“Do it.” Rachel crossed her arms and explained, bluntly, “Practice.”

“But does that really work? I was looking online, and people were saying all sorts of different things. That your power was your power, or that you could train it up—”

Rachel shook her head. “I think train?” She shrugged. “Lisa’s always talking about shit she’s practicing with her power.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “So, what do I need to do with the dogs?”

“Give them an order, and make sure they obey it,” Rachel said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. She wasn’t acting like she had asked if I wanted to have sex last night. She seemed no different from usual, really.

“Okay, I can try that…”

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“Bullet. Sit,” I said, trying to sound firm. I could try that, but that doesn’t mean I could always succeed. Or succeed at all. It had been a frustrating time with each of the dogs. After watching Rachel go through all of them effortlessly, it had seemed a lot easier than it actually was.

Bullet looked at my wagging finger, and then up at me.

“Sit.” This time my voice was a sigh.

“Firmer,” Rachel said, crossing her arms. “You need to be firm with dogs.”

“And with people?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, with a nod of approval that warmed me.

“Sit,” I said, and I gestured with my finger, downwards.
And this time the dog sat. Well, alright then, I thought, looking at Bullet suspiciously, as if this were some sort of trick. All that work, and finally, there we go. I didn’t smile at Bullet, but I sorta wanted to, because that was… one dog that’d obey one command. Only a half-dozen commands, consistently, for each dog to go.

“You know, this gives me a new appreciation for what you do,” I said. “I mean, it seems difficult--”

“It’s easy.”

“For you,” I pointed out, “most people don’t do so well.”

“I know. Fuckers beating their dogs, starving them, thinking that hitting them teaches them anything except to be afraid,” Rachel said, with a vehemence that might have startled someone else.

I just nodded. It was easy to take her point of view when you’d been around her and the way she treated dogs. She was firm, but not violent, at least not with the dogs. She’d manhandle them if they were struggling to get out of a B A T H, but that was just normal stuff. She paid a lot more attention than I would have, and it seemed like she was a little more open now.

“I get that,” I said. “It still really impresses me. It’s not something I could do.”

“Don’t say that before you try,” Rachel said. “Giving up like that’s just stupid.”

In my experience, sometimes you needed to know when to give up and flee. There was a reason it was fight-or-flight, not fight-or-fight. “I’ll try,” I admitted.

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It went a little better once I got the hang of it. I knew these dogs, and I was starting to get a feel for their personality, for the things they would do and wouldn’t. They felt real to me in a way I wouldn’t have thought before, and which I knew was some sort of echo of what Rachel felt. She was everyone, moving one way and the next, looking after the dogs while I messed around trying to train them. They seemed to be picking it up faster than expected, which I put down to the fact that Rachel had trained them to obey orders already, they just needed to know that I was included in this.

I kept on wanting to stop her, to ask her what her game was, but I knew that she wasn’t the kind of person who played games. But I was watching her carefully, looking for what she thought she thought I saw.

She thought I was attracted to her. Which meant I kept on looking at her as if trying to decide whether or not it was true.

And that didn’t make it any better, not really. After the dogs were trained up a little, and after I’d started to get bored of working with them, she’d started to explain things to me. Feeding dogs, caring for them, how she would watch their shit--something I should have noticed she’d been doing, but it hadn’t even occurred to me--for signs of health problems.

She knew so much, and she cared about it so much, that I wished I had more to share with her. She didn’t even read all of this out of a book, she knew it, in a way I can’t say for sure I knew anything, even bugs. I’d spent a lot of time researching them online, after all, because I needed to know any special abilities they had.

“So, how’d you end up with the Undersiders?” I asked, when we’d just gotten settled in and about to either read or play video games, depending on how she felt.
She was leaning against me, only now it felt… well, it should have felt awkward, but it didn’t. I didn’t know what to think of that, so I tried not to think at all.

“Eh. Came here, got the offer, woulda just kept on annoying me until I joined.”

“Huh,” I said, surprised. That meant that her ties to them were very, very loose. What was holding her was not some deep pack loyalty or anything like that, despite the way it was totally possible to bond with her at least a little.

“So, circumstances made you into a so-called villain?”

“I needed food, I got food. I needed money to get food…” Rachel shrugged, her voice level as she said it all. And it made sense. She had her identity revealed to all, she’d clearly had a rough life, and so she went off and did her own thing, and stole and did all that she did to survive. It didn’t make her Jean Valjean, because it wasn’t just a loaf of bread, and if she was attacking people with empowered dogs, she was probably hurting them badly, but it made sense. I could see myself, or so many other people, doing just about the same in that position.

“I see. I… understand.”

“Do you?” she asked.

“I think I do. I know what it’s like to feel trapped with nowhere to go. I still do,” I admitted, and it hurt some more, to say that. The kind of ache that wouldn’t go away easily. “I think that’s why I have to be a hero?”

“Huh?” Rachel asked, frowning a little, her thin lips pursing, as she stared at me with those intense eyes, which told me to say more. I couldn’t resist, not when there was someone I could finally tell.

Yet when the words came out, they were stumbling, and more than that, uncertain. I didn’t know why I was doing a lot of the things I was doing. There was only so much introspection you could do before it drove you mad.

“I got stuffed in a locker full of filth. Bugs and mud and needles I didn’t know weren’t used, and tampons. Used ones,” I said.

Rachel winced, angrily, “Fuck that.”

“It was a locker, so if I’d actually been thinking, maybe I could have kicked my way out a lot faster than I did. I wasn’t even in there but for a few minutes, and most of that was spent freaking out, and then triggering and freaking out again.” I took a breath, my hands clenching and unclenching, “But I was trapped, I felt trapped even when there was a way out, because they’d been doing stuff like this so many times before, and I knew there wasn’t a way out. But you can know things that aren’t true, that are bullshit. You can learn things like that. So I squirmed and struggled and… and I got powers.”

“I’d have sent bugs after whoever the fuck did that,” Rachel said, firmly, as if she didn’t understand why I didn’t.

“And… but that felt like what they wanted, even if they didn’t know it. Go Carrie. They spread rumors about how I did drugs, about how I didn’t bathe, about how I fucked teachers, male and female, for decent grades, how I was in the Merchants or the E88, though they did that quietly because gangs wouldn’t take kindly to that—”

I was lucky that they didn’t have such an imagination for misery as I had. Imagine if they’d made it
look like I was spreading rumors that I was with the E88. They could have gotten a few of the Empire fans in school to beat me up to ‘teach me a lesson’ about pretending to be something I wasn’t.

Rachel made a noise that I supposed meant she was still listening.

“And if I did that, I’d be showing them that I was trapped the same way they thought I was. I guess I…”

I hadn’t thought through the logic to the end until now. “I want to think that next time I’m trapped in a locker I’ll kick my way out?”

Rachel leaned closer, and against all expectations gave me a brief hug. “That… makes sense.” She sounded odd though, her voice hard and heavy with emotions that I’d never heard from here before.

“I don’t know if I’m even doing it,” I admitted. “But I’m trying.” I shrugged, and she leaned closer and gave my hand a squeeze.

My face only got more red, and I found that I liked the close contact. I couldn’t, could I? Though even if I was attracted, that wouldn’t necessarily mean anything. I was attracted to Grue as well, but that didn’t mean I was going to date him. Plus, there was that word: date. Whereas she was talking about just having sex, and wasn’t that supposed to be wrong? It was the same sort of thing that Emma had accused me of doing, one of the many things. Taylor the gang-banger, Taylor the smelly, Taylor the vicious, Taylor the slut. All sorts of Taylors that I needed to avoid being with all of my might.

I hate what they did, and I hated that here I was, saying that--

I let that thought cut off, it wasn’t going anywhere except a downward spiral, and I didn’t need that right now.

“Sorry I dragged down the mood.”

“It’s fine,” Rachel said, crossing her arms.

“So, do you want to try this new game? Greg loaned it to me, and I thought you’d like it.”

Rachel nodded, well aware that I was changing the subject, but then, I had told her a lot, so she should just let me back off. It wasn’t as if she’d revealed much of her own past, anyways, and yet here I was, talking about things better left buried.

Sometimes, what mattered was relaxing and having fun, though even this, pressed against each other, seemed freighted with meaning. But I just tried to enjoy it as what it was, and not try to think about what else was going on.

That worked right until I got a text message, at a little past two.

‘Hey-->TT. Can we meet @ mall? Gotta tlk, no trx.’

I blinked, looking over at Rachel who was distracted by the game, or rather by being frustrated at some part of the game that wasn’t going quite as well for her as she’d hoped. “Hey, Rachel, I might leave an hour early, if that’s okay? I should get back to talk to my Dad, make sure he’s not… oh! I forgot.”

“What?” Rachel asked, pausing the game and looking up, shoulders tensing.
“My Dad wants to talk to you sometime. Probably doesn’t believe you exist, or thinks you’re a bad influence. I just wanted to get that out, tell you. So we can figure out how to avoid it.”

Rachel frowned, then shrugged, “Sure.”

“Sure you’ll work with me to get out of it, or sure you’ll meet my Dad?”

“Either.” She didn’t seem like she cared all that much about my Dad either way, actually. Or maybe she was trying to be casual. She’d hidden more than I’d expected, I realized. If she’d been attracted to me, I hadn’t really… noticed it. Which was probably a sign of how oblivious I was, but still.

“Well, I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. “I’ll be here tomorrow, unless something comes up, alright?”

Rachel nodded, and I knew she had no reason to doubt I’d be there, though I was glad that doubts weren’t springing up, especially after what had happened a little more than a week ago. It felt like forever, but it wasn’t, wasn’t even close to that long.

Subjective time was rough.

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The mall was a little run down, too. Technology marched forward, and despite the growing violence around the world, as well as poverty, online ordering was still a big thing, at least in America. It’d gone downhill in terms of being sure to ship a package from England to America, or rather the uncertainty of the Endbringers and the economic downturns that had followed all through the end of the 90s until today meant that it was a lot more expensive.

So the mall had survived, but it was still less of a big deal than it must have been back in the 80s or whatnot. Still, I’d spent a lot of time with Emma here, time that I’d considered very, very happy.

Now it all had a different feel. A feeling a little like my friendship had been. It was decayed now, darker than it used to be, and every closed store felt a little like a statement: time moved forward, my friend was gone, and in her place was someone I didn’t like to spend time with, didn’t want to have known at all.

It retroactively made everything worse, and combined with how much people at school hung out at the mall, it meant that I only went when I had to. I’d seen Emma here, sometimes, trying on clothes with Sophia, laughing and joking and happy, and once I’d even managed to do so without her spotting me, and she’d seemed like the same Emma as before, the Emma I’d liked. But harder, crueler, just little edges to the jokes she made, and the opinions she gave.

But close enough to her old self that at the time I’d seen it, almost a year ago, it’d wiped any traces of a comforting illusion that she’d really changed that much. Did that mean, if she hadn’t turned against me, she might have been a horrible person to someone else, and I’d have stood alongside her and smiled as she did so and talked about how they deserved it for some arbitrary reason? Or was it that Sophia had brought out the worst in Emma? Either way, it was a depressing thought, the kind of thing that left me trapped and alone, without anywhere to turn.

The mall wasn’t doing all that brisk business, today, and so there wasn’t much of a crowd to try to fight through. It made it easy to note the architecture, to muse on the trees that they’d planted inside the mall to make it look a little more ‘normal’, and the fact that I didn’t want to be here.

It also made it easy to notice Lisa, who was wearing a black pencil-skirt and a white blouse. Give her a pair of professional looking glasses, and you could imagine she was an intern at a business firm. It didn’t help that her hair was held up in a bun. Her green eyes were shifting one way and the other,
watching everyone as they passed.

It was her stance, too. It seemed ready and alert in a way that reminded me, in an odd way, of Rachel. Perhaps that was just people who had gone through certain things.

When she saw me, she gave a friendly wave, and I made my way over to her. She was standing next to a smoothie place, and I suddenly felt like that’d be a nice treat.

I walked over to her, and said, “Hello, Lisa, how’s it going?”

My bugs had been spreading out, though I tried not to violate any health codes. The last thing I needed was to accidentally give people food poisoning or something, because my bugs had been in all sorts of places that shouldn’t even be thought of in the same sentence as food. But from what I could tell, there was no ambush waiting, and so I was relaxed.

This would be a bad place for an ambush, anyways, because it was out in the open and it’d draw attention fast. People would be snapping photos and calling the police before a dozen seconds had passed, and why would they do so in the first place?

I hadn’t made an enemy of the Undersiders.

“Fine, fine. I’ve been dealing with a few things. Would you like to get a smoothie before we talk?”

“Sure. I don’t know how much money I brought, but…”

“No. No, I can pay. You provided us with a good deal of help at the right moment yesterday. Honestly, if you wouldn’t reject it as blood money, I’d even be willing to give something to you as a thank you. I could even find some money that’s been invested, not necessarily dirty. But I’m pretty sure I know your answer.”

“Thanks, but no. But paying for a smoothie?” I asked. “I’m fine with that.”

So I had a strawberry banana smoothie, and Lisa had some sort of weird smoothie with whey and protein and non-dairy creamer, and if she could have ordered it on the rocks with cream and not too much cream, and then give it a two page long name and double the price, I’m sure she’d ask for it.

“You drink that?”

“Not normally. But I thought I’d try it. It was recommended to me, albeit by someone who probably doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” Lisa said with a sip. She wrinkled her nose as we walked in the mall. “No. Not doing it for me.”

I sipped my own perfectly normal smoothie. It was really hard to mess up a strawberry-banana smoothie, and they used fresh fruit, so of course it tasted good. “Mmm, I can taste the lack of soy milk,” I said, teasingly. “It tastes delicious.”

“Show off. So, how have things been with Rachel?”

“Things?” I asked.

“What has she told you?”

I took a breath and said, quietly, in a rushed whisper, “She asked me to have sex.”

“Ah. So she finally said it. By her standards, my understanding is that she waited quite a while. She’s very… blunt about such things, and it’s been obvious that she’s been attracted to you for over a
week,” Lisa said, “and I assume you said no?”

“Of course.”

“Despite being attracted to her?”

“I’m not attracted to her,” I said firmly. “Why does everyone think that?”

“Well, Taylor, if you want me to be honest, it’s the way you stare at her.”

I blinked. “Oh.” Then after a moment, I asked, “I stare at her?”

“Yes, you do. You did it during our meeting. You were watching her, taking in details, paying enough attention to her that it could be something else. Wouldn’t have noticed it without my powers, but with them, it’s pretty obvious.”

“Pardon me if I don’t trust that. Why would I…”

Lisa shrugged. “I’m not you. I’m not particularly interested in Rachel, or anyone else for that matter. Blame my power. Though I do think that you’re good for her, as a friend or otherwise, and so I don’t want to interfere too much.”

“Well, then let’s not talk about this. I’m not attracted to her, I’m not sure why everyone is saying it, and she’s just a friend,” I insisted, aware that that sort of thing never actually solved anything. Nobody said, ‘oh, well okay’ with a denial like that. But I had to make it, because I thought it was true, right?

“Well, then there’s something else I’d like to talk about. Recently I had a little idea, actually. It’s something I thought you could do that might help your career as an independent hero.”

I cocked an eyebrow, watching her curiously, silently, trying to imitate the way that Rachel just made me keep on babbling as if I’d say the right thing that would make her happy.

Lisa, on the other hand, seemed totally immune to the technique. Finally, after a few more sips of smoothie, I bit, “What?”

“I was thinking about how many members there are of Empire Eighty Eight. Not just capes, but also civilians. There are actually unofficial rules that I should clue you into, but the basics are that you don’t go after someone’s civilian identity. A cape’s, that is. But if you can track some of the E88 gang members, you can find out where their bases are. Hit them early enough at the right time and you’ll catch a lot of E88 capes half-dressed or not yet ready for a fight.”

“And then you arrest them?” I asked. “I assume you won’t take part in any of this?”

“Not unless you need a little backup. Though you should be careful. After all, people might talk. But the basic idea is that with the Protectorate, you can finish them all off and hit them at multiple locations at once, and once the E88 is no longer on our tails, we benefit too. That’s the idea, basically. And even if you don’t go along with it, knowing that you can use bugs to track people’s movements is important.”

It sounded like a solid plan, actually, and that made me suspicious.

“I knew that,” I said.

“But did you think about mapping it? Your phone could get a map app,” Lisa said, “and then from
there you could draw lines to track where each of your targets went. And then by combining all of
them, I bet you could see patterns of movement, places where people congregated to stash drugs…
all sorts of things.”

I blinked. I hadn’t even thought about using technology that way. She had ideas about my powers
that even I didn’t have, which was pretty impressive. “Well, I could try, though I have no idea how
I’d do it. Are there really apps for that?”

“There are ones for planning movement, and they could be used to… well, maybe I’ll email you a
link, if you tell me an email I can use? There’s a program I was looking at.”

I was always looking for a way to use my powers better, and it made sense. My powers were
somewhat useful on the offensive, but the long range and the way I could monitor everyone at once
meant that I could do so much more in other roles, especially if I figured out how to listen in or tell
other details.

“Oh, well go ahead, I--oh.”

I felt them enter. Or rather, I felt someone enter the mall at one end, and I could just barely see them
from here. It was the Trio, dressed up for a day at the mall. Rather better dressed than me, actually.
They didn’t see me yet.

“Oh?”

“We have to get out of here,” I said, aware that I sounded panicked. “I mean, it’d probably be best
for both of us.”

“Who is it?” Lisa asked, and then frowned, probably using her power on me already. “Ah. Well, we
can leave, if you want, though I’m sure they have no idea you’re here.”

I was running scared and they haven’t even arrived. I was furious at myself, but I nodded. I didn’t
want to talk to them, didn’t want to have to mess with them, not when I’d finally been on the
upswing. Every day when they were around was another way things could keep on getting worse.

So I avoided them. Once again, I ran, and felt like a coward as I did so.

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I managed to get away, or rather, we exited out the other end of the mall, with them none the wiser,
and when I arrived home for dinner, I felt like I was at the bottom of a well.

I’d let them control me, I’d let them tell me what to do and how to do it, and they hadn’t even known
it. It was a sick feeling in my stomach, but not one I could do anything about. I had to focus on what
I could do.

After dinner, I went out dressed as casually as possible, and then I went to a few households. I made
sure that I was as normal looking as possible, just a girl going out for a walk in her neighborhood.
And I found a few kids from my school that I suspected were running with the E88, and then I
followed them.

It wasn’t hard, my range was decent, a few blocks, and that meant that unless they were driving in a
car, and only then on a long open stretch, I could keep track of them. And the app? I’d pause every
so often, and trace my finger in a line, trying to get a vague feel of what was where.

Five guys and two girls all seemed to be heading in two directions. I picked the one that had the most
guys, and was rewarded with following it all the way to what seemed like a warehouse party of some kind.

The guy at the front, though, I recognized one of his tattoos. It was an eagle clutching what seemed to be some sort of twisting, strange germanic rune of some kind or another. It was on his shoulder, and I only saw it when he shifted a little bit.

The big guy was a bouncer, just like at the dog-fighting ring, and that meant, what?

Inside there were hundreds of people, and I could hear the music even from where I was hiding. It was horrible, really, the kind of stuff that people called noise. I thought it was probably Metal, which meant that these were skinhead tunes and the like.

At least, if that was who stepped out for a smoke break. Without the skin-tight red suit it was harder to tell who she was, but something about her seemed familiar. She was frowning, nervous, clearly worried despite coming out.

Everyone knew that Othala always stuck around Victor, too often for it to be anything other than some kind of relationship, platonic or otherwise. When two people hung out that much, it usually meant something.

She glanced one way and the next, but I was hidden in an alley. I’d picked up a half-finished cigarette, in case I needed an excuse for what I was doing.

I could even have gone in, maybe, if I framed it right and had been wearing the right clothes.

Instead, I hung back and smiled.

Gotcha.

Chapter End Notes

This Taylor is going to be using bugs a little differently from canon ones. Just in a few ways as far as emphasis goes.
I probably should feel like a creep. After all, here I was, following person after person around and noting down where they went. It was a heck of a way to spend a Sunday afternoon and evening, after I’d gone and helped Rachel out earlier. I wasn’t spending quite as much time with her lately as before, but I tried to explain what I was doing.

She’d just nodded, in the kind of way that told me that she understood the idea of busy, even if she didn’t see the point of all of it. And to be fair, I wasn’t really doing anything yet. It was going to take a while before I had the right places to attack. Because I didn’t want just a warehouse where they listened to people screaming ‘songs’ about how the Aryans will slaughter the jews or whatever nonsense they got on about.

I didn’t really care about the specifics, just that this was a gathering place where they relaxed and listened to music. But beyond that, where did I go next? I needed to follow them to their bases, to their houses, and that was a little harder.

At first. But I followed Othala back to an apartment, keeping a block and a half away at all times. She went up, she went in, and one of my flies came with her.

If only I could figure out exactly how to use my power. It was frustrating and stressful, trying to understand all of the inputs. To a bug, every sound was far different than it should be, every sight was bizarre and even a little unnerving, and there I was, trying to interpret it. The bugs were giving me ‘good’ data, it was just that what they considered good wasn’t the same as what I considered good.

By now I thought I could almost tell when someone was talking, and I could also almost maybe tell voices apart in a very, very general sense. This seemed like progress, but it was the kind of progress that gave me headaches and made me wish I could just skip straight to the understanding, since it did feel as if it was something I could practice and improve. It was far easier to deal with that then figure out exactly what I was going to do about Rachel, or how exactly I was going to be more threatening in an actual fight. I had the bugs, and if I could get more of them, then that was more of them.

But anyone who couldn’t be taken out by bugs was just going to laugh at it. That was a problem without an easy solution, and in fact I had thought about it a lot, over dinner or those blank moments when I was just relaxing by Rachel’s side, enjoying life in general.

But of course, all good things came to an end, and that included the weekend.

*****

I was walking to my locker when it started. I had been prepared for it, sort of, and so I half-dodged Madison’s outstretched foot, merely stumbling a little, but that still led me to careen into another student, who turned and said, “Hey, watch it!” His voice was loud, his veins bulging, clearly not glad to be back at school.

“Sorry, sorry,” I said, gritting my teeth and turning to smile at Emma. Well, not smile, but I’m pretty sure that’s what she saw it as as she stepped up the stairs, keeping close behind me, which meant that Sophia was somewhere ahead, ready to harass me. And indeed, that’s what my bugs told me as well.
“Having trouble walking straight?” Emma asked.

Part of me wanted to snap back. There were so many insults I could give out, but another part of me knew that it’d do no good, wouldn’t it? But I wanted to get right up in her face, I wondered what she’d do if I really fought back, not just ignored it or tried to force her to quit it.

“Should be asking you that,” I muttered, too afraid to come out and say it. I knew the kinds of things they did to get revenge whenever I actually tried to make things better. When I tried to tell a teacher once, or when I got too close to some kids who didn’t give a shit about me either way, and thus were willing to talk to me as long as I didn’t do anything.

They didn’t like the idea that I’d fight back, they didn’t like people who resisted them. But if that was all it was, then it’d be easy to get out of it. If I fought back enough, they’d go on and pick on an easier target. But instead, Sophia and Emma both seemed to take any hint that I still had any strength left in me, anything other than an instinct to lay down and die, as proof that they needed to redouble their efforts.

It frustrated me, and it made me wonder sometimes how they had a life when they spent so much of it on something like that. They weren’t doing it because they were bored, and that only made it worse.

I opened my locker, wary of them getting up behind me and trying it again, though I doubted even they’d be fucked up enough to do it again. Not after all of the trouble it’d caused… at least for a while.

Inside, though, all of the locker was painted. Not even a horrible color, just wet grey paint layered all over the locker. If I set down any of my books in there, it’d make a mess. How had they gotten access to it, and why hadn’t anyone noticed…

But those were questions for another time. I slammed the locker, wishing I had somewhere to put all of the books I’d had to haul around. My mood was turning sourer and sourer, but I tried to focus on the positives. My bugs were spreading out carefully, and I’d hopefully get some good practice in. When I started to think about my power less as “the bees! Oh no, not the bees!” and more as spying and the like on top of bees, then that meant I could practice it anywhere and everywhere. So I tried to just drift through classes.

It was Monday, so it wasn’t as if I was alone in that. The teachers seemed like they’d rather be anywhere else, and so did the students. Everyone was a little too tired to give me that much crap, other than a few whispers here and there.

I wondered what Emma would say if she knew about Rachel. Except I didn’t have to wonder at all. If she knew about Rachel and not Bitch, then it’d prove every dirty rumor true, and if she knew about Bitch? She’d report me to the police and watch as my life fell apart.

Luckily, she didn’t know about Rachel and me. Not that there was a Rachel and I, of course, besides us being friends. At least I’d managed to do my homework on Sunday. Rachel had watched me do it, and she’d even worked up a few questions about what I was doing. I wasn’t sure how much she got from my explanations, since it was clear that the school system had failed her, among other systems, but she at least seemed more willing to learn and try new things than I might have thought if you’d described her to me before.

She played video games now, as long as they weren’t too complicated, and we could have conversations about books I’d read to her, and all in all, it was just fun being around her. We didn’t share all that much in common, except where we did.
I didn’t know how and why she triggered, but I did know that this was something we shared. And sometimes when I was thinking about what she did and how she was acting, it felt like there was an echo in how I could have acted, or what I should be doing. Or maybe what I shouldn’t have done, and what I had done.

I mused a lot all the way through history and english, and luckily there was no gym today, because that was usually a humiliating process. I wasn’t as out of shape as I might have once been, but people avoided me, and the locker rooms were annoying, and probably would have been even worse now, so I gratefully went off to lunch.

At least Greg was there and willing to sit with me as I poked at mashed potatoes that had clearly been kept in a box, and meat that was grey and looked like it’d been dead far, far too long. None of the food was terrible, it was just bland and distasteful. But it always gave me the feeling that I was slowly but surely getting closer to death with every passing second, and that if I was going to do so, it shouldn’t be eating cafeteria food.

Greg, on the other hand, ate it up as fast as possible. And in between bites, he talked. “So Taylor, how’s the gaming been going?” he said, in chunks of two or three words between a round of chewing and eating.

“How?” Greg asked, almost eagerly.

“I dunno, just different expectations, that sort of thing?”

“Strong?”

“Yeah. You know, physically strong? Strong arms, and solid muscle, and she knows how to use it. She’s shorter than me, not that that’s saying much, and she has dark, intense eyes,” I said, thoughtfully, “kind of like they could just stare through you. Thin lips, and short, dark hair that she usually keeps pretty simple.”
“Oh?” Greg asked, and I wasn’t quite sure what I was hearing in his voice.

“She usually dresses pretty simply, jeans or shorts or the like, and a T-shirt. Simple, but it sort of fits what she’s going for, I guess,” I said, feeling almost like Emma when I said that, “and she has this way of standing. Sort of stand-offish, sorta confrontational, like she’s in charge and taking the lead?”

“Uh.”

“Let’s see, she usually wears sneakers, she has rough hands, sort of callused. Experienced hands, I think you’d call them, and she keeps her nails short, of course—”

“Uh, Taylor,” Greg said, and I looked up to see him red-faced for some reason, “I think I get the point?”

“Oh, sorry. But does that paint a picture for you?”

“More than a thousand words,” Greg said, and then he looked at me for a moment, his lips pursing before he said, “so, uh, you like girls?”

“What,” I said, for the second time in not all that long. “What?”

“I mean, uh… not that I’m judging or anything, I’m just curious or whatnot.”

“Just. Curious. About what?”

“Well, the way you described her…”

“Yes?” I asked, and then tried to just consider it objectively. Okay, maybe it did seem a little detailed. “You can describe someone without it being a… thing. And it isn’t a thing.”

A… thing? My tongue was tripping on itself, and I really wanted to get out of this conversation before it was too late.

My face was red and I didn’t want to think about what I’d said or what it could mean, especially since it shouldn’t matter and didn’t, right?

“Okay, fine,” Greg said, “so, about that game, have you gotten past level 9?”

“Level nine? My game skipped from eight to ten,” I said, frowning, “I was wondering if that was a glitch.”

“No, it just means that you missed a secret,” he said, “so you see, what you have to do…”

And there we go. He was distracted again, and he didn’t bring up Rachel again, though I did mention her once, when talking about one of the games.

Oddly, talking about her cheered me up a little, though that didn’t last. Inevitably, the trio kept up their rumors and their games, and by the end of the day I was glad to escape, and even more glad to be able to go to Rachel to unwind.

Of course, it was not a day I could tell Rachel all about, especially the part with Greg, but just being able to lean against her and talk about the Trio alone was enough, and that night I’d have plenty to do.

*****
I went home at seven-thirty, to return to see Dad watching television. “Hey Dad, I’m back,” I said, glancing over at the TV. It was showing a rerun of this movie about capes or something, I remember a lot of people protested at the time, back in the 80s, that it wasn’t realistic. It turned out not to matter that much, since cape movies had started to fall out of fashion over a decade ago, but at the time back then, I think it had been a big deal?

You had things like that, where they mattered once but they didn’t anymore, and you had causes that died stillbirths because time marched on. But then you had neo-nazis, I thought, still trucking along, and I should be out there stopping them.

“Hey, Taylor. How’s it going? How’d it go with your friend?”

“I just talked about my day and we played video games,” I said, defensively. I was gritting my teeth rather firmly as I ground out the words. I really wanted to not have to deal with this. I was out there fighting crime, and he thought… what? I wasn’t sure what he thought, only that it seemed like everything raised it worse and worse.

I could see the way his jaw set when I mentioned Rachel, like he was grinding out the words.

“So, how was your day?” Dad asked.

“Fine.”

“Must have been a short conversation, then,” Dad said, standing up to his full height and walking over to the fridge. Probably for another beer.

I flushed. “Okay, it wasn’t great, but wasn’t horrible. Some people tried to bully me, and someone almost tripped me, and classes were boring, but I talked about a new game with Greg. I didn’t have gym, luckily, and I did my math homework ahead of time, and wrote a little prep work for an English essay while I was at Rachel’s, too.” I had to admit I wasn’t exactly sounding friendly, and I let out a sigh.

“Good,” Dad said, rather firmly, as if he’d made some kind of point rather than just getting me up in arms. “So, do you have any more homework to do?”

“A little,” I said, trying to sound casual, for he’d stumbled on another secret, and that was that I’d already done most of it, and I was going to save the rest for the bus tomorrow, because I had mapping to do.

And then tonight, I’d have a long night of geography homework, up close and personal. Too bad I didn’t have any clothing that’d make it look like I was out for a night of partying. But I’d done other work that should make it possible to sneak out and get some good knowledge.

A lot of it involved not wearing a costume at all, and a lot more of it involved looking up maps online of what was where.

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When you imagine someone staking out an area, you don’t picture them at a fast food joint, nibbling on fries, do you? I was wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that were both a bit ratty and old, and I was carefully not smelling how rank this particular hole-in-the-wall chain was. It was the kind of place where you hoped that the grease didn’t kill you, and where, especially at nine at night, the people were dead-eyed and clearly didn’t want you there.

But nearby there was a house that was used for E88 parties, and I’d be traveling from one greasy
restaurant to the next. It’d be less plausible the later it got, but for the moment, my bugs were able to
monitor a few things.

First, where everyone was. Second, I could sorta interpret the sound if I focused, as either a lot of
people talking or a few, as either people who were probably-maybe male and those who were
probably female. That wasn’t exactly great data, but I’d already checked this area, and I knew that it
was actually an abandoned old house, at least most of the time.

I checked the map on the phone, trying to imagine how I’d change it, given time. If I had a smart-
phone, I’d be able to easily do it in real time, but even looking at the map, something became
apparent.

The members of the E88 were young, all in all, and they liked their parties. They partied, they did
drugs, they had dog fighting rings, though we’d broken up the biggest one, I think. They were not
holed up in the middle of nowhere, guns trained at the entrances.

That meant that I could guess that the capes were the same, or at least, for all that Kaiser had to keep
some distance, the capes mingled with the powerless.

I tried to keep my bugs out of the dark corners of such places, since the last thing I wanted to do was
notice when people were having sex. Plus, having a fly buzz around a couple like that would be way
too noticeable.

Visual data, as I was trying to think about it, clinically, was harder to get. Harder to understand too,
for that matter. But I could get a decent feel for the scope of a room by sending bugs this way and
that to land on walls, so what I really wanted to do was figure out how to listen in.

If I could do that, then I could just sit in a room and write down details and information while they
spilled everything.

As it was, though, I was building up a map that I knew was going to get more concrete. It was
concentrated in places, and I could imagine it as a series of webs. Spider webs were often imagined
to be these beautiful things, but they could sometimes be clumps, or even balls. Spiders were weird
and fascinating, and so was the map.

There were webs and nexuses, and I’m pretty sure if I spent enough time I could identify the stash
houses, the dens of iniquity, and so on and so forth. But at the moment, I was really mostly just
trying for the places they hung out, and their meeting grounds.

Because like some team before the big game, when they were going out, they stopped at one place,
the better to communicate face to face. The Protectorate had lawyers, and they had capes who could
build devices that easily tap any phone conversation without any of the hassle or complexity that
regular technology had to go through. So, face to face was the best way to make sure nobody knew
what was up, as long as they missed it.

So, if I identified the warehouses and houses that they were using most often, then I could enact the
next stage of my plan.

Calling it a stage probably implied a lot more scheming than was actually involved, like I was a
secret mastermind who was carefully orchestrating everything to my end, rather than a fifteen year
old girl who wasn’t sure what she was doing.

But the plan was simple enough that hopefully even I could pull it off, with some Protectorate help.
There were two, maybe three, centers of activity that I had identified, all of them somewhat close to
each other, and each of them important to the gang. There was an old house that they used as a base, there was a store that secretly sold drugs on the side and served as a way-station too, and there was a warehouse that had used to be used by a tech company that had gone belly up and been eaten by its competitors. And this warehouse had, from what I could tell, slipped through the cracks.

If I hit the drug depot, then they’d come swarming out after me like a hive of insects, and if the Protectorate was waiting outside their doors, well? Insects, meet flamethrower.

I was sure they’d agree if I laid it out right. I hadn’t spied on anyone’s privacy in a way that broke the rules, and they wanted to get at the E88. The three people they held would probably bust out eventually, and now was the time to strike if they really wanted to weaken one of the largest and most powerful gangs around.

The real weak link was the fact that I was going to be going against a bunch of gang-bangers protecting a drug stash all alone, but I’m sure I could manage it, and perhaps I’d get lucky and a few of the people would be less powerful capes that I could sting and harass.

It all relied on me being able to convince people, and I hoped that things would go well. I wasn’t going to tell the Undersiders about the plan, and it’d need to be on a Friday night in order to get the most targets.

So I choked down some fries, and I planned on keeping that up until I knew what I needed.

*******

The days passed with glacial slowness, and then Wednesday came, which didn’t mean anything in particular, really. I was halfway through the week, but I didn’t think that it’d be anything special.

Except halfway into just hanging out, Rachel dropped a question on me.

“What are you doing with Lisa’s shit?”

“Her shit?” I asked, looking at Rachel. She was wearing a short-sleeve shirt, and the temperature out that evening certainly justified it, as well as the shorts she was wearing. Little detail I’d noticed #35: Rachel didn’t shave her legs, to the surprise of absolutely no one. Not that it really mattered.

“Plan, whatever. She mentioned it,” Rachel said.

“Well, I’m going to strike out on Friday,” I said, “hopefully with the help of the Protectorate.”

Rachel stepped closer to me her arms crossed, and I felt uncomfortably warm. It’d gotten harder and harder to just be around her, and it was like my heart was… but I couldn’t, I mean. It’d just…

Okay, I thought, as I found my world filled with annoyed, maybe even pissed off Rachel…

Maybe I had a very, very small crush. Physically, that was. I was allowed to, I thought, without it being anything. I had crushes all the time. Wait, no I didn’t. But I could have them all the time, and I was attracted to Brian but that didn’t mean that I was going to start dating him. Plus, Rachel hadn’t exactly asked about dating, had she? And I didn’t want to be--

*Look at that slut. Probably puts out before the first kiss. She once tried to molest me during a sleepover. That freak. Don’t be friends with her, unless you’re looking for an easy lay--*

My stomach churned, and I felt almost sick. Sick and nervous and wanting to be anywhere but there. Rachel, added up objectively, wasn’t that attractive. Yet somewhere and somehow, subjectivity had
told me a different story. It talked about her closeness, it looked at her arms and the odd intensity to her, it added all of that up and came up with a different solution. Two plus two equals five, and I couldn’t exactly tell myself I was wrong.

Actually, I could, and I was. I didn’t want to be someone who got into crushes that easily. Not after what they’d said. It was a sick, disgusting feeling, worse than that sensation of my bugs the first time, that had led to a freakout and a stay in a psychiatric ward.

Crazy slut.

I wasn’t.

“I’m going,” Rachel said, reaching out and taking my hand firmly, as if to anchor me back in the world.

“What?” I asked. For the second time in less than a week, I was startled and confused. She had a real skill at surprising me.

“I’m going with you. Fuck it, I don’t have anything else to do, and you need protection.”

“You’re going to… protect me? I don’t need protection, I’m not some princess in a tower or something,” I said.

“I know. People need backup sometimes. A pack at their back,” she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “And I can help out. You’ve done all sorts of shit for me so far, like helping with the dogs, so just call this repayment or whatever.” She shrugged, as if it meant nothing.

But I knew Rachel too well. I knew that look on her face. Stubborn, but also oddly concerned. I realized that she would do this for me. She’d try to protect me and work with me, because she was my friend, and perhaps there were other reasons, but I wasn’t sure.

Rachel seemed like someone who was loyal once she found a friend, but perhaps a little hard to befriend.

I was blushing so hard, and I thought about it for a moment and then said, “Alright, why not?”

Rachel nodded, and then hugged close to me for a moment, and then backed off just as quickly, leaving me confused and dazed in her wake.

Chapter End Notes

It's as if bullying can affect a person's ability to truly realize things. Yes, she's being held back in part by the scars of what Emma and others did.

But yes, she's actually pretty involved already?
Bark 2.3

Armsmaster had come. He was standing impressively in the alley, having gotten off perhaps the coolest motorcycle I’d ever dreamed of seeing. He was impressive, to say the least, and the fact that he was there to listen to my idea meant a lot. I’d taken time to try to convince him that I had a good idea he needed to hear, but who knew whether he’d agree. If he didn’t, I’d have to hold on, because there was no way I could do it alone, or even just with Rachel’s help.

So I leaned against the wall, watching him, hoping my costume wasn’t too lame. I’d met him before, but it was different now. Before I’d had something for him, some villains, now I needed something from him and the Protectorate. A lot of something, actually, considering how dangerous the E88 was. They had the numbers, they had the capes, but that only meant we needed to attack harder.

When the enemy bared their teeth, you went for their throat, I thought. Being weaker just meant you needed to bite harder and hit faster. At least, I thought so. I hadn’t exactly put this into practice. It made sense, though. Call it a lesson from Rachel.

“So, you said you had a plan. Please tell it to me.”

“I’ve been looking around, following members of the E88. Seeing where they go, and using that to create a map of sorts as to where they hang out, and where their capes change and base themselves from,” I said.

“You have?” he asked, and there was something about his voice that I didn’t like. There was an edge, and I found myself bristling already, as if I was going to be attacked.

“Yes. And I’ve located three areas they’re coming from. If we just attack them, they might see it coming and scatter because they’re afraid, but there’s another way to do it.”

I had spent a long time thinking about Rachel and how she could help, and I was thinking now that maybe it was a great thing that she’d convinced me to do this. I could totally make this work if I planned it right.

“Ra...Bi...Hellhound has agreed to work with me to make this plan a reality, because the Undersiders seem to have a real hatred of the E88, which is sort of understandable, really. Everyone should hate them,” I said, nervously, “she’s agreed to stick with me for the first stage. There’s a store that serves as a front for drug dealing. I attack it with her, and they think that the Undersiders are raiding.”

Armsmaster was watching me, and I babbled on.

“That means they’ll come out in force, because they have the numbers to crush the Undersiders, and they’ve lost strong capes to them. Trap the Undersiders, beat them to heck, and then perhaps leave them for the police to capture after that. But if the Protectorate is watching the other two main hideouts, then they sally forth right into an ambush, you take all of them, and any others will have to choose whether to go after me, and the supposed Undersiders that aren’t actually attacking, or go after you.”

Now his frown was almost thoughtful. “This could work in theory. But you realize that you’re telling us to trust you with a major part of the plan. If this falls through, or is just an excuse for an Undersider smash and grab, then that leaves us in deep.” Armsmaster looked severe, and I knew he thought I was capable of it.

But why?
“I… understand that, but the worst case scenario is that we miss this opportunity. Eventually they might think to find a way around the bugs. Right now, though, despite what I’ve done, Armsmaster, I’m not well known. But that’ll change, and it’ll be harder to figure things out.”

This might not be strictly true, but I wanted him to think so.

“Understood. I can pass on the request. When?”

“Friday night, if possible. Everyone would be out and about then, and that’d include me,” I said.

“So, are there any major problems with the plan? I can tell you where they are, but don’t hit them too early.”

“I can’t promise that, I can only promise that we’ll keep in contact with you,” Armsmaster said.

“Well, then…” I trailed off, frowning, trying to figure out what I was going to do. It was a good thing he couldn’t see the look on my face, because I was worried about this. If I gave him the information and he just charged in and tried it on his own, then… maybe he’d succeed, since he was a member of the Protectorate, but I felt skeptical. “Well, I can still do it.”

“Good,” Armsmaster said, as if there had been no doubt at all that I’d do as he said. “But there’s something else I need to warn you about. The Undersiders are not as you seem to think. In fact, for instance, two of them are murderers, including Hellhound.” He sounded a little wooden, and I had to imagine he’d planned this.

That didn’t stop me from staring at him in shock. She’d… killed people? “Is that so?” I asked, trying to keep the tremble from my voice, despite the fear I felt. The fear that I’d opened myself yet again to someone who’d just turn out not to be worth it. I’d opened my heart to Emma, and she’d used it as a weapon against me, and now?

“Yes. Multiple people dead because of what she did,” Armsmaster said, “on top of the assault and theft she’s participated in. She’s not the only one. All of them are dangerous, and all of them shouldn’t be interacted with.”

“It’s just pragmatism. I don’t have the support you have, and I know what you’re going to say. But I’m not ready to join the Wards just yet,” I said, “so don’t bother asking. I understand they aren’t good p-people, and I’ll ask Bitch about this when I get a chance…”

I didn’t want to. It was like a weight in my stomach. I was barely keeping it together, and I felt like I was back in the locker, trapped and surrounded by things that were driving me wild. I felt like I needed to run.

My words were coming more haltingly. “So, can we…”

“You still need to tell me where the locations are.”

“I could just email it to you, if that’s okay? I-I’ll do so as. As soon as. I get home, yes,” I said, trying to relax. My bugs were all swarming towards the area, as if I were about to get into a fight, but this was exactly the wrong instinct. I knew it, and yet a part of me just wanted to do it anyways. I kept the bugs back, out of sight, and slowly forced myself to make them spread back out to monitor the area.

I tried not to breath heavily, or reveal how dangerous my instincts had been.

“Very well,” Armsmaster said, apparently unaware of what I’d done.
My hands were at my side, my posture defensive and my teeth bared, while he stood there with his halberd, not afraid of me, and not worried about anything I could do. And why should he be? He was a powerful hero, and I’d seen underwear with his face on it before. Action figures.

So on top of feeling frustrated and nervous, I was jealous as all hell.

“Anything else?” he added, after a long silence.

“No, Armsmaster,” I said, “that about does it. We should keep in contact, so I’ll also email a cell phone number as well.”

“How well,” he said, “though we already have the number on file.”

Oh, right. I’d called them, and they’d taken it down. Luckily, he couldn’t see my blush, and it did do a little to calm me down. Embarrassment replaced anger, and I nodded. “Alright, well... see you later. I’ll look into what you said.”

“Good,” he replied, and I stalked off, uncertain and nervous and sweating, feeling as if I were about to either do something great, or fuck up so badly that it’d be talked about for weeks, if not more.

He had agreed to the proposal, and yet somehow it seemed as if that wasn’t as much of a victory as I thought it’d be. I didn’t know why, it was just a feeling, just an instinct. How could I know to trust my instincts? I considered where I led me, and wasn’t reassured.

Friday was the longest day ever. The trio should have been eager to get out of there, but they seemed to want to linger, make Friday the worst day of all. I was almost tripped again, and the rumors kept on getting worse. It was really inventive, the part where I was now into beastiality on camera for money because my Dad was so poor.

And by inventive, I mean so disgusting that I’d had to grit my teeth as hard as I could and just sit there, because I was just getting sick of it all the time. I’d thought that things were getting better, but instead, I kept on running through things.

She’d killed someone. Multiple someones. How? Why? Where? When? I wanted to look it up online, but I knew it’d be really hard to find anything. I could ask on the fan sites.

Yes, the fan sites. Believe it or not, villains often have fan sites if they aren’t too odious. Uber and Leet had a site, the E88 in general had a site, there were tons of fans of Lung because of the dragon thing… not the Merchants, though, almost nobody online would admit to being their fan unless they were a gang-member themselves.

And Bitch had fans. Plural, even. I’m almost completely sure she knew nothing about the dozens and dozens of people online who thought she was incredibly cool and made up shit about her to make her seem like some sort of quiet, cocky badass rather than, you know, who she was.

I say dozens and dozens, but I suppose it might have been more than that. Either way, if I asked I had no idea what I’d get. And asking her? I couldn’t imagine a quicker way to sink our friendship, if it still existed.

It did, I told myself, but at the same time, I was supposed to be a hero. And Armsmaster coming out and telling me that felt like a signal. A sign that if I stuck with her they might start questioning whether or not I was a hero. They might trap me into being a villain and then lock me up and throw away the key.
The idea of prison made my hands shake when I thought about it, the idea of being locked up, controlled, by a bunch of assholes who judged me for things I hadn’t done, who sat there in control of everything and yet…

I spent as much time as I could just avoiding everyone and everything that Friday at school, going to the bathroom at least once a class to just sit on the toilet and use my bugs to make sure they didn’t sneak in to dump anything on me or attack me. It didn’t help that my stomach was starting to cramp a little.

I hadn’t exactly been paying attention to that kind of thing lately, and so it had snuck up on me. It wasn’t too bad, but it still made it annoying.

So all in all, I was miserable and just passing the time, but eventually it did pass.

Then came the next obstacle: Dad.

********

Of course, one way around the obstacle was to not confront it at all. I left a note to Dad that I was going to eat dinner with Rachel, after I made something for him to heat up, and then I got working on something that he could microwave. I wanted to spend some time with Rachel, see if I could work my way up to actually talking to her about what she did, and if not, at least plan things for when I briefly went back home and ‘went to bed’.

So I cooked as fast as I could, not exactly paying much attention to the taste, and then hurried out of there. I didn’t bring my costume, since I’d be coming back now, but I made sure to hide it really well.

Dad didn’t trust me, and I was worried that if he got involved he’d discover something. I hadn’t thought about what it’d lead to, about what it’d mean that he knew I was a hero, except I was sure that he wouldn’t trust it. He was nervous and finally getting involved after so long of drifting away, and wasn’t it my luck that when he was getting involved, it was to doubt me?

But then again, if Armsmaster was right, it could be that Dad was right as well. Either way, I showed up with a backpack of games and books, and I didn’t really want to think about any of that.

********

Rachel greeted me like normal, of course she did. Unsmiling, but there was something about how she stood and a dozen other factors that I couldn’t really register consciously, that told me when she was in a good mood. It was a bit of a cut-rat replacement for just smiling, but I was glad I’d been able to figure it out.

Each time I figured something out about her like that, it felt like a triumph in a way that I knew was probably a little weird. But then, I was the one attracted to her, and she was apparently attracted to me, so perhaps being a little weird was just typical.

“So, are you ready for tonight?” I asked.

Rachel shrugged, as if she hadn’t been worrying about it at all.

“How many dogs are you going to bring? Since we’re going to be a bit off, you could spend the time to build them up,” I said, “I think I know of somewhere where you can bulk them up where nobody can see you.”
“Three. More is a waste, and they’re not fully trained yet,” Rachel said. “Soon.”

More is a waste. Of course. Her power exhausted her if she used it too much, too fast. Even with slowly bulking them up, three dogs was a lot to do, and adding more wouldn’t necessarily do much unless she was pushing herself, or making each of them only a little stronger.

“So, I was thinking,” I said. “Not that I’m going to tell you your job.”

“Good.” Rachel said, firmly, “Yes?”

“Maybe you should bulk one or two up to full size, while keeping one of them smaller, in case we need to work in tight quarters. It’s a business, after all. A hardware business, in fact, that’s the front.”

I frowned, wondering why they’d chosen that specifically. It was far less prominent than a lot of other options, and when I thought ‘drug front’ I didn’t think hardware, and so maybe that was the point.

The dogs were barking, eager to see me, and so I mused about it. It made more sense when I thought about the kinds of things people brought and bought. People drove in vans, to buy boxes of tools. Both of which could hide a lot if you wanted to move it, and that’s what its purpose was. There was some drug buying here, yes, but most of the people buying were dealers, or members of the E88 who wanted a good deal. People bought, or were given a package, and then they moved it.

I’d looked this stuff up online, to be sure I had the basics of it, but it was all this big pyramid scheme, really. The people smuggling this stuff up and making it took the biggest cut, then the middle-men like the E88 or Merchants at the top took a large cut, and then the dealers at the bottom made a pretty penny, yes, but not more than that.

And even within that, there were dealers who were big or small, contracting to smaller-time people who stood on street corners selling shit.

Nobody knew where the E88 got their drugs, just that they always had a lot of them.

“Sure. That works,” she said as she opened the door.

I was almost bowled down by dogs. “Oh, hey! Hey, Milk! Calm down a little, Bullet...aww, good to see you too buddy,” I said, “and Angelica, nice to...ew, not my lips.” I shifted a little, rubbing their ears and noses and bellies, trying to remember what dogs liked what.

Milk, for instance, loved belly rubs, but ear scratches were boring, while Bullet loved being rubbed up and down on her side.

It was all the little details, just like you were supposed to learn for interacting with people, but, in the case of Rachel and to a lesser extent me, you didn’t completely learn. I hadn’t really had to stretch my social muscles for a long time, until I met Rachel. And even then, from the way Lisa had failed to get to her, typical social skills might even be counterproductive, in a way, if you couldn’t learn to switch off of the parts of them that didn’t work.

So I played with the dogs while Rachel watched, and I wondered again what she saw. She looked at me and wanted to… well, have sex with me. I wasn’t entirely sure what she wanted, but--

Slut.

But I didn’t want to ask. I didn’t want to get involved with any of that, not when I still wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do about this silly, out of place crush.
So we just hung out. Keeping a secret like that was tough, and more than that, it made me feel as if I were always on the verge of blurting it out. I wasn’t bad at keeping secrets, but I hadn’t liked it. I still didn’t like it, and yet I found, more and more, that the secrets I was keeping were piling up like a heap of shit, and sooner or later I’d have to shovel it, whether I wanted to or not.

“So,” I finally said, once we were settled on a pallet next to each other. Suddenly all of her closeness felt different in a way I wasn’t sure about, but I still snuggled up next to her anyways. My face was red, but hopefully she just thought it was because I was awkward, rather than that I was…

Anyways.

“So.”

“You want to watch out for me, I get that,” I said, “but it still seems a little odd.”

“Nah. You’re cool,” she said with a shrug.

“I doubt you’ve spent a lot of time doing heroing, though. I mean, that’s what you’re doing, really. Acting like a hero.”


“So if things had gone differently, would you be a hero?”

“How the fuck would I know?” she asked, but she didn’t sound that angry. Just dismissive.

“So, what did you do? I mean, once you were on the run?” I asked. “I mean, how did you wind up in a gang?”

Rachel frowned, looking over at me. “It just happened. Not a big deal.”

‘How did you murder the people?’ I didn’t ask. I wanted to, though.

“Do you want to start a new book next time we meet? I’m not sure what to do, but there has to be one somewhere.”

Rachel hesitated for just a moment, “Yes.”

“You enjoying the book I lent you?”

“It’s still lame,” she said, “all sappy.”

A puppy all alone on Christmas, saving people by luck and general goodwill. It wasn’t particularly realistic, but I’d seen her reading it.

“If you want to read more serious things, I could help you.”

“Help me?” she asked, and this time I realized I’d hit a nerve.

“I mean, you helped me figure out how to care for dogs, right? So if you wanted to learn a little more about that. You trade things you know and we work together,” I argued, “cover each other’s weak points, and we can do so much more together.”

I turned, trying to convince her, and I did see that she was listening. I reached out and grabbed her hand, even though that made my face go even more red. I felt warm, very, very warm. “So, what do you say? Worst case scenario, you change your mind and that’s fine, too.”
“Okay,” she said.

Just okay.

But it was enough.

******

We waited until it was almost dark out. I say we, by which I mean me. I had to go to link up with Dad, and then I had to try something I hadn’t before. The window. I’d usually waited until it was night time to get out, and there was no tree to conveniently leap down to, but it was only the second story, and I made sure to yawn and tell Dad night. It was slightly earlier than usual, but that just meant eight o’clock. Then, once I was sure he was distracted and listening to the television, I opened the window and peered out into the late evening, just before night.

For the first time, home felt like a sort of prison.

I made sure my backpack was on well, and then looked down, frowning. Okay, so, I really should have better options than this, but I needed to be in position before nine, if we were going to have time to get her dogs powered up and wait for just the right moment to strike. Too late, and we’d be hitting a mostly abandoned place. Heck, the peak activity was actually in the later afternoon, but some people came a little late, didn’t get started so ‘early’ as the afternoon.

Drug dealers, what could you do?

So I was going to have to be very careful. I was also sure that a giant dog, for instance, could certainly break my fall, but Dad would be too likely to notice that.

Or would he?

Maybe another time, I thought, as I began to lower myself down, hanging onto the edge of the window, and then looking down. Huh. That was a little far, but if I remembered right…

I kicked my leg slightly, and it caught on a part of the outside wall that was a little worn down. Like a chunk of it had been taken down. That put me…slightly lower. I took a breath, and let go with one hand and tried to lower myself down, grabbing for the handhold. My fingers gripped worn in fake wood, and I let my other foot go. Now I was dangling half a story from the ground, or so. Anywhere else I could go to make it faster?

No. Just drop down. I did so, as gently as I could, which was to say I hit the ground on my knees and immediately regretted it. But nothing felt broken, and I stood up, glad I was wearing jeans that I wasn’t going to use any more.

Then I jogged off, making sure to stay out of the way of where he might look if he went to the kitchen to get something. Dad would be asleep by the time I got back, and so on I jogged.

This wasn’t the sort of neighborhood where people snitched at others sneaking out of the house, so I didn’t think anyone would say anything. Not unless I did it too often.

So I jogged along, and about a block later, Rachel was waiting near an alley. She wasn’t in costume yet either, and I held up a hand. “Hey,” I said, for lack of anything better to say. “Got out alright.”

“Good,” she said, gesturing into the alley.

Oh, right. The costumes, I thought, feeling a little nervous. Of course, Bitch’s costume just involved
putting things on. It wasn’t hard for her when it was just a jacket and a mask. It was a little less involved than my own costume.

I had put on a tank top and some bicycle shorts, both black, underneath what I was wearing, so at least I wasn’t going to undress in front of the girl I had a stupid crush on. I didn’t know what I’d do if I’d had to do that, and the very thought made me self-conscious.

So I changed as quickly as I could out of my upper clothes, feeling like I was back at gym. But this was worse, and my mind strayed a little bit, to wondering how the heck she looked at me and saw anything at all. But soon enough, I was pulling on the black bodysuit and the armor. I bet that when summer hit, all of this would be a little warm, or at least, the top and shorts would be, since all of my armor could breathe a lot.

If she wasn’t a villain and potentially a murderer, I could even make some armor for her. I wasn’t sure of an idea yet, but the idea of making something that would keep her safe felt a little too…

Domestic, I guess? Considering the plan was to get over the silly crush, especially since Rachel didn’t seem interested in dinner at a fancy restaurant, a movie, and flowers. Whatever normal romance was, she wasn’t looking for that, wasn’t looking for romance at all, and I should care that she wasn’t.

After all, if some guy just wanted to have sex with me, I’d judge them for that, wouldn’t I? I’d say they were being shallow, or that I wanted something deeper, and--

“Taylor, you ready?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” I said, glad that my costume hid my blush as I stood up and finished pulling on the bottom half of the suit. I’d been standing there, looking down at my shoes, and pondering my situation.

Head in the game. Head in the game, Taylor, you’ll have plenty of time later to worry about useless things.

******

Rachel stood in the lee of the building, powering up her dogs. I stood with her, my eyes closed. It was just an idea I had had. If my control of bugs was a sixth senses, then perhaps by not moving and closing my eyes I could focus on what I was seeing and hearing through them. Of course, in a fight I’d need to do both at the same time, but it did seem to be working.

There were about two-dozen people in there, five of them women, probably, from the sound of their voices.

Two seemed familiar, and I mentally tagged them as ‘Othala?’ and ‘Valkyrie #2?’ The other three girls didn’t seem familiar, and neither did the guys. That didn’t necessarily mean anything, but I did know that if there were two capes there, then there might be more.

The building had a big unloading bay in the back, that trucks could just drive into if they had a large order. That was where the drugs came and went, leaving the front entrance and the hardware store itself open for just one more hour.

There was a man at the front, slumped over the cash register, watching about five people up front. One or two of them might have even been real shoppers. That, plus the fact that Bitch was a villain, meant that we were going to go around the back. Go around the back, and start out with a loud bark.
My instinct was to sneak in, attack them from hiding, but we needed to be obvious.

Angelica was being made into this huge monstrosity, while Brutus was merely about chest-height, and Judas had merely been made into an exceptionally tough dog. We were going to ride on Angelica, who didn’t look like any angel, in order to really make the best impression possible.

I looked out, the sun having just set a few dozen minutes ago, and thus I saw very little.

What I did know was that they didn’t know we were coming. They were too spread out, and none of them were hiding in, say, the truck that was out back. That’d be a perfect place to hide if you wanted to ambush the ambushers. They still didn’t associate every bug with a potential spy, and hopefully they’d fall behind if I kept on getting better at tracking what they were doing and saying.

I could sort of hear everything people were saying, it was just hard for the bug senses to turn them into words. That meant that I was picking up a lot of noise, and instead of complaining, I tried to note down tone, any accents, that sort of thing. So I could say that the guy in the basement yawned, and then said something sharp to the second guy in the basement.

What was said? Ask me again in a few weeks or more of practice.

Either way, I got on Angelica, trying not to grin. This felt like it could be big, very big. Angelica should be able to just bust down the door, honestly. She had plates on her shoulders, and it wouldn’t be hard. Once through, she could soak be a distraction while we got going. The mission was simple, and I gathered more bugs in the basement, the better to overwhelm the two down there.

Then the bugs would all crawl up the stairs. I couldn’t have some of them slip under the door, so I’d have to open it for my bugs, and then I’d have a huge swarm, all of whom were currently hiding in the shadows, being far more quiet than even normal bugs would be.

“Alright, you ready Bitch?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s kick ass,” I said. Cocky, I know.


And then off we went.

Riding a dog wasn’t easy. There wasn’t a saddle, and I clung tight onto the dog as we bounded across a back street, and leapt over a curb, slamming down on the ground right next to a car that was driving away.

There was a startled shout from the driver as Angelica and the other two dogs bounded past.

At the same time, down in the basement, the bored conversation turned into screams as I just buried them in bugs. It was remarkable how many bugs could make themselves down into a small, dark room, one by one, and once the people were down, covered in spider bites, they crawled all over the table. It felt like a box of some kind, like a briefcase, though I had no idea why it was down there rather than somewhere else.

I also didn’t have time to think about that as we reached the door and Angelica pushed her whole weight against it.

It cracked, and then shattered, falling down just in time for a pistol shot to slam harmlessly into her
hide, as the dogs started barking, just to alert everyone.

Might-be-Othala was moving, headed towards the girl I thought might be Valkyrie #2, which meant that she was thinking about providing a boost. But I couldn’t stop her, not with a few flies, and we leapt off the back of the dog. I landed, glancing around with my own eyes. There were a lot of crates, a giant back area that was probably filled with hidden stashes, and at the moment, gang-bangers.

Shots were fired in our general direction, but none of them were good shots, and I gathered insects behind me, in the parking lot, ready to lash out with them.

“Judas,” Bitch said, “Attack.”

She was pointing, firmly, at a white girl with heavy tattoos wielding what looked like a shotgun. The blast fired, and it was close enough that my ears ached from it, but it missed Judas, who tackled her, tearing at her arm.

“Don’t kill anyone,” I muttered, as bugs began to pour out between Angelica’s legs, coming from behind. The dog looked a little startled, and even snapped at a few, but Bitch rested her hand in Angelica’s shoulder, and she calmed down a little bit.

Things were going well, so well that I was wondering when it would go wrong. Then it did.

The blast slammed into Angelica’s knee, almost knocking her over, and I turned, desperately, to see who it was.

Not someone I’d seen before, though it was someone I’d tagged. He was holding a rather large gun, which looked like the kind of thing you took to hunt elephants, and it had almost knocked Angelica down. His costume was probably offensive as all hell, if the Hugo Boss stylings of it meant what I thought it did, and the fact that it was all in black, on top of a mask painted red that still showed his grim, thin mouth, made him look as if he was about to tell the Emperor that the rebels had blown up the base on the Endor moon.

Krieg didn’t react as I sent as many flying bugs as I could at him. When they got near him, they suddenly couldn’t breath, and seemed to be moving oddly. He swiped at them, and the ones he hit seemed to be thrown halfway back to me, as if he was racketing them away. He was moving slowly, reloading, and then there, behind him, was Othala for the tag.

His movements were deliberate, as if this were more an assassination than a fight, and Brutus hurtled forward at him when Bitch whistled.

He was still reloading, so Brutus should be able to…

Teeth sunk into flesh, or should have. Instead, nothing happened, and Krieg finished reloading and aimed down.

I slammed a fly into his eye, and he didn’t even blink, but did turn the gun upwards as the dog retreated.

I went for the floor, and the shot roared past me. I could barely hear anything after that, and I had to guess he was invincible. Judas as chasing down after Othala, who was working her way around the boxes, trying to get up front, and Brutus was retreating, while Angelica whined and growled at
Krieg.

And Valkyrie #2 was still waiting in the wings, probably wanting us to over-extend. I needed to make something happen, and soon, I thought, staring at that gun.

They say that guns look bigger when they’re pointed at you, and as far as I could tell, either that was true or that was the kind of gun that only the chosen king could lift.

He stepped forward, as if nothing in the world could hurt him, and it couldn’t. Still, I covered him with bugs, letting them fly right in front of his eyes, as he ran at me.

I couldn’t breathe as soon as he got close, as if all of the air was thinner, and I gasped, stepping back as Angelica bit fruitlessly at him.

I had never been hit before. My Dad was not a violent man, and even if he was, he wouldn’t have slammed me into the wall with a backhand. The hit itself wasn’t that hard, but the wall was, and I all but flew into it, clipping a box on the way.

The spot where I hit the box was a constant, stabbing pain against the throbbing pain.

“I don’t know who you are,” Krieg said, his voice cold, “but you’ve crossed the Empire two times too many.”

“Fuck,” I groaned, my bugs crawling all over him, but unable to hurt him.

“Cockroach,” he spat, aiming at me.

Rachel leapt onto him, screaming in fury, and he turned and tried to knock her aside. But she was grabbing onto him so hard that she just flopped, limp for a moment, and then kept on wailing on him.

And the gun was big enough that he couldn’t aim at her from this close.

“Angelica!” I yelled, and to my surprise the dog whipped her head around. “Attack! Block!” I wish I’d known the commands, I thought, standing up, though it hurt so much to do so that I really just wanted to lie down for a week. God, how did capes deal with this kind of thing?

I pointed, and she went. There were gang members already lining up to take a shot, and Othala, screaming and flailing, had run into a woman who was now gaining in height. Growing taller and larger in general, though at least there was a limit if she was going to fit in this back room, which a ceiling clear height of maybe eleven or twelve feet, roughly.

But all three of them were still up, and I’d almost gotten killed. Oh god. Oh god.

Someone opened the basement door, and the bugs leapt right at him, bringing him down with a scream of high-pitched panic, as I stepped closer, but hid behind a crate. “Rachel!” I yelled, and didn’t even have time to kick myself for using her name.

She… if she died. I don’t know what.

Then I felt it. Suddenly one of my bees was able to sting him.

A large, blue-bottle fly went into each of his eyes as he winced, and they weren’t done. Other bugs threw themselves suicidally into his throat. I wasn’t going to kill him, that wasn’t the idea, but more and more forced themselves down there as others stung at him.

Suddenly, all his composure was replaced by blind panic.
But if it wore off, that meant that Othala had use of her powers again, and so I tried to use the bugs to keep her occupied, all the while cursing under my breath as he finally shoved Rachel away, who got up.

Angelica was wreaking havoc, and Judas was busy, so she called out, “Brutus! Hurt!” And pointed right at Krieg. He kicked Brutus away, the dog sailing into a stack of boxes that spilled out screws, but he was going down, already starting to twitch feebly, barely able to breath with all of the bugs crawling around there.

I didn’t think I’d be able to keep her from tagging in Valkyrie #2 unless I just knocked her out, so I had the bugs force themselves down her throat, wincing at the implications of what I was doing. She flailed, this way and that, but I kept it up, until she started to go limp, and then they began to crawl out of her as the Valkyrie charged forward.

Fenja? Menja? It didn’t matter, because she was out of costume, actually. Othala’s costume seemed as if it had been thrown on, and I suppose the girl hadn’t had time to put on armor. So she was growing large with jeans and a T-shirt, and suddenly the situation was changing. Two of them were down, and there was still Angelica to deal with.

I wasn’t sure if we were going to win, but I was pretty sure we weren’t going to die.

Which was good. I didn’t want to die in as much pain as I was low, stepping forward, my back aching so hard I needed to lie down.

I had to hope that we’d drawn the right attention.

I kept the bugs up on Krieg. We needed both him and Othala down for good, and then it’d just be us versus a giantess.

But we had three super dogs, and I felt oddly confident, as long as I could ignored how I’d been batted around. I moved towards Rachel as quickly as I could, trying to bunch up as Angelica head-buttoed the nine foot tall giant into a wall.

Fenja roared, lashing out with the sword she had remembered to bring, but the dog was already dodging back, having seen it coming. The bigger the dog, the slower they were, but Angelica wasn’t that big, and she had the right instincts for a fight.

And sometimes, that’s what mattered most.

Rachel grabbed onto me and pulled me back as Fenja (I was just going to pick one of the names and stick to it) grabbed a crate of nails and threw it in our direction.

We barely dodged, as the nails exploded from the box on impact.

Shoot. Shoot. Rachel reached Judas and began strengthening him up to Angelica’s size, while I aimed bees straight at Fenja’s eyes.

The eyes were the most vulnerable part of a body, and even if she was stronger and tougher the larger she was, her eyes would still be the most vulnerable part of her. And indeed, she dodged out of the way, swiping at the bees, which dodged around her hands as Angelica bit into her leg.

Judas was still growing, and as long as we kept her distracted, we were doing our job. But what about the rest of the men? Half of them were down by now, because I’d been distractedly covering them with bugs and biting and nibbling them to pieces, and Brutus was currently terrorizing the neo-nazis on our side of the back of this shop.
The fight was not nearly as chaotic as the one a week back, and so I tried to focus on what I could do. One of the bees finally stung Fenja in the eyes, and she screeched, and knocked down a wall, trying to escape.

It burst down, and she tried to retreat out into the night, clearly giving up this fight as lost, which was right about when Judas was large enough that she let him go with an, “Hurt!” and a pointed finger in the giantess’ direction.

Angelica was still gnawing on her leg, her claws scratching up her other leg as if she were a cat and Fenja were a scratching post, and all in all, I didn’t see much of a chance for her to escape. But once she stepped out, she began to grow in size, trying to shake off Angelica now that she was eleven feet tall.

But Judas tackled into her, and she half fell, catching a hand on the side of the building, which meant that Judas was able to bite into her sword arm. He didn’t bite quite as deep, but there was still blood flowing, a lot of blood, and now that she was out in the open, we had her.

I advanced, dodging a bullet from a gang member still active. He had four bugs on him, so I felt it when he aimed, and moved out of the way almost before I had pondered this fact.

Brutus went straight after him with a whistle from Rachel, and we advanced closer to Fenja, as my bugs kept on going for her throat and eyes. I didn’t know of any other easily targets, really. I guess her chest might hurt if I stung it, and there were other places I guessed, but I didn’t want to go down there.

I was focused on taking her down. She needed to go down. They needed to stop this.

As I advanced towards the hole in the wall, I skidded on the nails and slammed my shoulder into one of the shelves, which toppled over. Whoops. Well, a hurt shoulder was nothing compared to the back, and so I slid forward and managed to right myself, glad that my mask hid my blushing face.

Fenja kept on fighting, but with two dogs and the bugs on her, she clearly needed to escape. So why wasn’t she?

When I stepped outside, I saw it. In the distance, there were flashing lights. The PRT were coming. And she wanted to know where they were going to fan out so she could break through.

But she wasn’t getting that chance. Rachel whistled as we moved out onto the grass at the side of the building, which was freestanding, and then there was Brutus. She was going to bulk him up too, and she put her hand on his head as he began to grow. I kept watch over any of the goons inside, to make sure none of them were getting in the right angle to hit her. Once Brutus began to really grow, she crouched behind him, which was a smart move.

It was dark, and with a little cover, getting a good shot would be hard, and wouldn’t really hurt Brutus, especially since her power healed her dogs.

The vans were drawing closer, and Fenja was no closer to finding a way out, considering the way her blood was tracking everywhere. We needed to finish her off, though.

I frowned, as she kept on retreating, but I couldn’t think of anything. Yes, I could make a mass of bugs, and a normal person might trip on them, but she was too large for that, and too strong, she’d just squish them.

Too large. Well, if we had water, she might slip and fall and break her crown, but again, we didn’t.
The van opened, and armed and armored PRT figures stepped out, alongside Miss Militia.

The American themed superhero and second-in-command kept her distance, aiming what seemed like a sniper rifle?

She fired, and a dart came out of it, slamming into one of the open wounds.

Ah. The better to bypass the hard skin, though with as little as it was, I doubted it’d take her out. If it was a tranq, I thought, it’d be designed to maybe take out a bear. She was considerably larger than a bear, which really would have made me feel a little self-conscious.

I couldn’t imagine having her power. Every zit blown up, standing there for everyone to see. Powerful or not…

I was getting distracted, the pain sending my mind along weird alleyways to try not to focus on it. I was perhaps a little loopy, and I needed to sleep.

Fenja did slow a little, as another dart buried itself in one of her legs.

All of that blood couldn’t be good, and I knew that she’d need serious medical attention if she escaped, or even if she didn’t. And Othala was out and still unconscious in the store, with bugs there to fend off anyone who tried to get to her.

Fenja swayed, and swiped feebly at Judas, knocking him away just as Brutus charged in too, now taller than a person.

Then, like a tower falling, she collapsed with a loud thud.

And just like that, we won.

Woo.

My back hurt.
I lay on my bed, trying to sleep. I’d gotten out of there as soon as I could, because I really didn’t want to talk to Miss Militia about it, and Rachel had had to leave immediately, because while there was something like a truce, the longer she stuck around the more chance something would go wrong.

Which left me to just recover the three of them and wave off the damage. It wasn’t that bad, really. Perhaps they could get Panacea to patch it all up? I wasn’t sure, really, but either way, I got out of there.

I wasn’t limping away, but I did have to move slowly because of how my back felt, and it took a long time to get home, because I stopped to rest a few times, just letting my bugs watch out for any trouble.

But the only trouble I had was getting in the house without waking up Dad, which I did by moving really, really slowly and hoping that nothing creaked too much. I really needed a hot shower, because my shoulder and that point on my back were still burning. It was a hot sort of pain, though it felt like if I focused hard enough on my bugs I could sort of drown it out, as if I were spreading myself thinner.

That only helped so much, and so I was staring up at the ceiling, willing myself to sleep. We’d won, that was for sure, and hopefully we’d captured most of the rest of them. I didn’t know that, though, and I wished I had something to think about other than that.

And lo and behold, I did. I needed to look up about Rachel’s actions. I hadn’t seen anything about that online, though I knew that they usually kept too many details from hitting the net. It made it easier to recruit capes who might have made a few bad mistakes, here and there, though murder didn’t really fall under it. But unless it was something that couldn’t be covered up, there were often only rumors about the specific crimes they did, rather than a general pattern.

Unless that general pattern was murder, of course.

So all I could know was that Rachel was violent, and that she didn’t make a habit of murdering people. But considering how dangerous her dogs were, it could be really easy for her to maul someone to death without realizing it, couldn’t it? That’d be murder, though I was sure there was… some kind of degree? Second degree, maybe, when you killed someone without planning on doing it ahead of time.

But if I asked Bitch, what if she just shrugged and admitted she’d killed eight or nine people and would probably do so again? What would I do, what would I say?

It wasn’t just my back that ached that night.

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In the morning, the pain had dulled a little, but was still there. Luckily, it was a Saturday, and just as luckily, nobody was going to give me shit if I didn’t go out for a run. It was later than I expected, though, and I texted Rachel a quick apology as soon as I got up.

... actually, I probably should have started with a shower and taking stock of myself, but it seemed
like it was more important. I knew it was stupid, because I really did need that shower. My back hurt, after all.

I didn’t know what I was going to do about Rachel, and maybe I should back off for just a little bit, so that I could look it up online. Maybe someone somewhere had a hint of what had happened?

Then there was Tattletale, but I wasn’t sure how much I wanted to rely on a villain. Would she lie to push me away from Rachel because she didn’t want Rachel working with heroes? Not likely, though I was a little afraid of it anyways. The more likely option was that she’d make up a scenario where Rachel was totally innocent, because she wanted me to work with them to achieve whatever their goals were.

I thought about texting Rachel and saying that I couldn’t show up until the afternoon, but thought better of it. Still, I needed to get to the library and use the computer there to see what everyone was saying about us. I was sure that Rachel didn’t really care, but I did.

I wanted to see that I was doing something, that the pain was worth it, because that’s the only way I could feel like I was really being a hero.

Finally, after way too long lingering in bed, thinking about Rachel, I got up and grabbed some clothes, and then made a beeline for the showers.

I tried to mix it up. First, a long, hot shower, and then, once my back was good and red, a nice, cold shower. It helped me focus, and by the end of it, I could almost imagine walking to Rachel’s without regretting it. My shoulder still felt stiff and a little cramped, and my back was still sore, but hopefully that’d fade over time.

If it was feeling better this easily, then a few painkillers and it should be a non-issue, at least until I did something to make it hurt even more. Krieg had really done a number on me, and I was surprised that he’d been willing to kill me. Or perhaps it was a bluff?

It hadn’t felt like one, I thought, finally dragging myself downstairs with my backpack.

Dad, at least, hadn’t suspected anything. He was drinking coffee, hunched over a morning paper. “Morning, Taylor. You sleep alright?”

“Fine, had a little crick in my neck, though,” I lied, “what about you?”

“Oh, pretty good. Went to bed a little early, thought I’d follow your example.”

“Hope that didn’t wind up with you waking up too early,” I said, as I made my way for the bread. Maybe some toast before I left? I wasn’t sure. I could always get food on the way to Rachel’s, and I didn’t feel that hungry.

I knew that was just the pain and my distraction speaking and that I’d be ravenous the moment I started eating, but still.

“No, it’s fine. Surprised I woke up before you. You’re usually up and gone running before then.”

“I know,” I said, “but it’s a Saturday. I should be sleeping in, like any other teenager.”

“Not much of a sleep-in, really. It’s not even close to noon,” Dad said.

“I got in the habit of waking early,” I said, flushing.
“I don’t get why you started running, but I’m glad. It’s good for your health,” Dad said.

Well. Yes, yes it was. “Sure,” I said. “If you ever wanted to jog with me, you could.”

“Pretty busy,” Dad said, and it felt like we were talking around each other, like two dogs in a scrap who were just staring at each other and hadn’t yet worked up the nerve to pounce.

I wondered, would he eventually search my room, which had some sketches and designs, or the basement? It seemed like things were going downhill, but in a slow, quiet sort of way. But I knew that Dad could blow up, and I needed to defuse it. But how?

That, I didn’t know. So I just said, “Sure, but…”

“Maybe,” he said.

Well, that was something.

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On the way there, I had an idea. And the more I thought about it, the more I liked it in general. Yes, Rachel was wanted, including in her civilian identity, but how many people actually knew who she was? She was able to go to and from wherever the base was without being noticed, which meant that there was something else she’d probably be able to do as well.

Celebrate.

I knocked on the door, hearing the familiar and comfortable sounds of the dogs barking, and feeling their positions. Everything was like normal, and that was comforting. All of this felt like it was part of something I could get used to, a life I could live and not regret it: which was odd, because if she really was a murderer, then, what?

Plus, I knew that I was being unrealistic, and indulging in silly thoughts. Silly feelings, too.

She opened the door, looking just like normal. Again I looked for some cohesive whole that I was attracted to. Again, my face flushed and I felt warm just looking at her. It didn’t make any sense. Silly thoughts, silly feelings, silly attractions.

“Hey, Rachel,” I said, “wanna go out for a victory breakfast?”

“What?” she asked, her face scrunching up adorably. Or at least, it felt cute to me.

“Once we have your dogs watched for the moment, we could go out, there’s a diner nearby. I have money for breakfast if you don’t, and we could eat our fill. We did something important last night, together. Even if it was dangerous. Even if my back hurts. So we celebrate like we’re champions. With greasy spoon pancakes.”

Rachel was looking at me, and then she tilted her head and let out a bark of laughter, short and sharp, and yet, a moment later, she nodded. “Sure.”

“Is that weird?” I asked.

“Nah, let’s do it. Do I need to get dressed up or something?”

“Yes. The official wardrobe for a victory breakfast is a skimpy black dress.”

Her eyes narrowed, and at least she actually suspected sarcasm. She could be pretty blunt.
“No, you’re fine. You look great just like you are,” I said, and then added, “I mean, for eating.”

For… eating.

I wasn’t exactly the best at talking, especially today.

“Sure,” she said, with a shrug, just going along with my weirdness.

Which I liked. She could be judgmental and harsh in her own way, but if she was in a decent mood, she’d go along with a lot, or at least not object. Maybe that was just me, though, though I didn’t know what ‘just me’ involved. I didn’t know anything about her, well, romantically. What did she act like around someone she was attracted to?

How much of that was that, and how much was friendship, and where was the line anyways?

Best not to think about it.

Hal’s Diner was a pretty good place, if you wanted cheap, but tasty food that probably fulfilled your calorie count for the day. It had waitresses in old-fashioned outfits that were somewhere between iconic and a little lame, and a huge breakfast menu mostly composed of variations on usual themes, but with a few exceptions. They had Johnnycake, they had baked beans, they had fish cakes. It was a New England greasy spoon, which meant the grease was a little different.

I had pancakes, eggs, and for the meat, a few fishcakes, while Rachel, who seemed to intimidate the pretty brunette waitress, ordered a Meat Lovers Breakfast, and at my urging, got a few Johnnycakes to try.

“You really should,” I’d said, tempting her to the dark side. “They’re really not bad.”

The feast filled most of the table, especially what Rachel had gotten, which included four strips of bacon, four round sausages, and a thin side of breakfast steak, as well as eggs, toast, hash-browns and some beans.

“Wow,” I said. “Breakfast of champions, like I said.” I began to pour strawberry syrup on my pancakes, and then began dicing them up, adding butter as I did, watching Rachel the whole time.

She was oddly careful when she ate, cutting the food up, but eating fast, as if someone was going to steal it all away. “So, that went pretty well, I think,” I said. “It could have gone worse, and we took them out.”

“Yep. Damn nazi.”

“Thanks for saving me, back there, with Krieg,” I said, when I was sure that the waitress, Shawnee, wasn’t listening.

The Johnny Cakes sat off to the side. Little round cornmeal cakes, usually eaten with butter or syrup, so a little like a pancake, though my Mom had actually liked them with applesauce, of all things.

Rachel shrugged, and picked up one of the cakes, eating it as if it were a muffin. Then she paused, and grabbed for the butter, to help make it taste better.

“Acquired taste, but it really isn’t that different than pancakes. Just different,” I said, smiling at her.

There were crumbs on her lips. I barely kept from smiling, covering my face with my hand to hide it.

“What?” she asked, suspiciously.
“Nothing. You have crumbs on your lips,” I said, not sure why it mattered.

“Kay,” she said, brushing them off. She kept on eating, even more carefully this time. But quickly. She demolished her food while I kept on switching from one to the other. A fish cake and then two bites of pancake and then more of my scrambled eggs. She took to the Johnnycakes.

“Never had them before?”

“Nah.”

“Not from around here?”

Rachel frowned, and then leaned in a little. I could tell that she didn’t want to answer, or at least, that her first instinct was always to clam up. It was a pretty normal one, really, and I completely understood it.

“Food’s fuel,” she said. “Though I like meat.” But that wasn’t all, after a moment, she nodded at me. “Down a little south, though spent most of my life north.” She frowned, “Maine, and then coming on down here, bit by bit.”

Ah, that fit what I’d read, at least, though I didn’t detect anything more ‘southerly’ about her accent. Of course, people were bad at accents in general, but my guess is that she just wasn’t in a situation where learning about local cuisine mattered.

“Moved a lot,” she admitted with a shrug. “Did shit.”

I frowned at her, and said, “Sorry, I’ve been a Brockton Bay girl all my life. So I don’t really know about moving. What I know more about is staying in a place and watching it change. Maybe a better word is watching it rot. Go a little downhill,” I said, trying to look at her and get a feel for what it must have been like. “I’d like to say I’m fighting for the city or something, but I’m not.”

“It’s okay. You fight for you,” she said, with a shrug, “it’s better than some place.”

“Is it?” I asked, rhetorically.

“Yes. You’re better than this shithole,” she said, at the exact moment that Shawnee was passing by, which got her a glare that she ignored as if all of the barbs and arrows of the world couldn’t, in that moment, hurt her. I knew she wasn’t always like that, considering how Regent had gotten under her skin, but it still felt kinda impressive.

“I… thanks.”

“Way better,” she said, firmly.

At that moment, I felt this overpowering urge to kiss her. My throat actually felt dry as I stood up and said, “T-thanks.” I was blushing. I was blushing so hard that steam was probably coming out of my ears.

I went to the bathroom and threw water on my face and tried to calm down. Then I went back, sat down and said, “Also, can we swing by the library, briefly? I want to check the news, but I didn’t bring the newspaper.”

She frowned, thinking for a moment, no doubt considering her dogs. “Okay.”

“I promise I’ll be fast.”
I was as fast as I could be, going to the news website and looking things up. The attack got a somewhat small story, which noted that noted E88 members Menja (oh, I got it wrong), Stormtiger, Cricket, Othala, Crusader, Krieg, and someone who was apparently a new member and hadn’t received a name, had all been captured, along with ‘sizeable quantities’ of drugs, and many of the mid-level non-powered leaders.

If my math was right, that left Kaiser, Hookwolf, and Rune left out and about, which was pretty close to nobody at all. It’d have been better if Hookwolf was gone, since he was a beast to fight, but three people wasn’t nearly enough to hold on.

Kaiser would have to do something tricky.

It wasn’t the main story, actually. The main story was about the Mayor’s niece, who had apparently been kidnapped last night. Everyone was waiting to hear the ransom demands, and the story was apparently updating every hour to basically say that nothing needed to be updated, the sure sign that this was catching a lot of attention.

I couldn’t exactly feel annoyed that it rated higher than my bust, but I did shake my head at the fact that I wasn’t even mentioned. I was, ‘With help from local independent heroes.’

Which was true, yes, but still.

Hogging the credit kind of annoyed me, and I checked online about it. Maybe I should make an account to post about… something? Or at least introduce myself? I could do it, maybe. I looked up a few heroes, just did some general searching while Rachel was sitting and watching me, but there was nothing obvious that stood out that would tell me the details behind Rachel’s story, except that it happened in Maine.

If she wasn’t there, maybe I could look it up in more detail, but maybe not?

So I gave a mental shrug, still worrying about it, but not sure what to do, and decided just to enjoy my day with Rachel.

That evening, once I was back home, I wound up having two different conversations in the span of an hour. I was tired, sweaty, and smelled of dog, but the day had gone pretty well.

It had also been an exercise in frustration, because now I was just thinking about Rachel constantly, and her being right there meant that it was hard not to…

Well. I knew what people said about the kind of person that just did that kind of thing, just…

The words clung to me like barbs, and I couldn’t tear them off.

So I didn’t know what I was going to do. So I texted Lisa.

‘Hey, can I talk to you?’ I asked.

‘Sr. Wht about :)’

My eyelid twitched. I hated text talk, and yet here I was, texting her. But I wasn’t sure if I was up for a phone conversation with her. She was a very persuasive person, from what I could tell, and text
was a less dangerous medium.

‘Rachel. I’ve heard that she’s murdered people before.’

‘Taylor. I Hv advce.’

‘Yes?’


I sighed, and took time to text it. ‘It isn’t that easy. Especially with everything else going on.’

‘Everything else? Your attraction?’

‘Yes. Yes, I am attracted to her. Don’t ask why, but, I mean, I can’t do something like that.’

‘I h8 to ask y, but?’

‘Not that kind of person,’ I typed, and hit send, and then sent another message quickly, ‘Casual hookups.’

‘Really?’ she texted back.

I was glad it was text, and not the phone. Because she might have been able to charm more out of me that I didn’t want to talk about. Or think about.

‘Yes.’

‘Just tlk 2 her. She lkes u.’

‘Please stop the text talk’ I typed, flushing.

‘And yes, I know. She already said she wants to have sex with me, what more could she say?’

‘You forgot a period. ;)’

A pause, and then she sent. ‘Plus, she likes hanging out with you. I’m not trying to tell you how to live your life, but…’

‘But what? You’re going to try to tell me how to live my life?’

‘Maybe. You like her. You are attracted to her.’

‘Yes.’

‘She likes you. She is attracted to you.’

I typed in ‘Yes.’

‘So, do something. I’m the worst person to give this sorta advice, because I don’t really care about dating.’

A moment’s pause, and then another text. ‘But I’d go for it if I were you.’

‘It’s not that simple.’ It wasn’t, it really wasn’t. It shouldn’t be, it couldn’t be.

‘Maybe. Talk to her. I certainly can’t.’
Well, now wasn’t that reassuring? I was getting ready to text her back with another message, probably something sarcastic, when I got a call.

I checked the caller ID and flopped back further on my bed, sprawling myself out as I took Greg’s call.

“Hey, Greg, how’s it going?” I asked, trying to sound breezy.

“Fine. Hey, there was a big card game tournament tomorrow. Divine: The Questing, and I was wondering if you could come for moral support I would really appreciate it I have a new deck and I’m not sure how well it’ll do and if I win I could go to a city-wide tourney because they’ve set it up so that everyone who wins a local can--”

He talked fast. Very fast. He had already begun explaining his deck, which involved something called Power Token Rush or something, and which focused on small monsters or…

I wasn’t a fan of card games, but I’d been around him enough to pick up a few terms here and there.

“Greg!”

“Oh. Yes?” he asked, sounding out of breath.

“I… what time?”

“Oh, it’s from ten to maybe three if I win, and that’d be really cool, though I’m not sure if I am up for it. I’m lacking a few of the Heroic Counters I need to make a dedicated Fire Blast deck mulligan away their burns.”

“Well, that’s bad,” I said, trying to sound like I had any idea what he was talking about.

“So, can you come?”

I wanted to say no. He sometimes asked me to go along with him for moral support, whether to that fighting game tournament last year, or to various card game things. I usually said no, for all sorts of reasons, though last time he’d asked I had actually showed up for a little while after he lost to cheer him up.

But I thought about what my alternatives were, tomorrow. I could spend a lot of time with Rachel, which sounded good, really good. It also sounded like an exercise in frustration and staring and all sorts of other things.

So. “Sure? I’ll need to talk to a few people first, but I should be able to do that.”

Hopefully Rachel wouldn’t mind too much.

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“Yeah. Really?” she asked.

“Yep, he asked me, and I felt like I had to go. He’s a friend, and I need to have his back, even if it’s just some card game.” I tried to make my voice sound casual, though even talking to her over the phone felt too intimate, too close. I was afraid of my own feelings, but I had the right to be.

“I guess.”

“I can see you in the morning, so I’ll help you deal with the dogs, and then I can see you after that for an hour or two, if you want. I need to do some homework, but I could also read a little, and if you
needed any help…"

“Makes sense,” she said. I had a feeling she was a little put out, but at least she wasn’t angry or anything. Though why would she? Just because she was attracted to me didn’t mean she was making a big deal about any of this. In fact, she seemed remarkably casual. She’d offered, and for all I knew, the offer had been taken off the table while I’d been hemming and hawing.

Not that that was a bad thing, since I wasn’t going to accept anyways. But it was a thing. It could be a thing, if that’s what had happened.

“So, see you in the morning.”

“Yes,” she said, as if it were obvious.

********

The game store was actually packed with people. This was a bigger deal than I thought it’d be, and I hung back a little, looking at dozens and dozens of people, to the point where they were spilling out into the food court, where at least some of the games would take place.

Yes, we were back at the mall, and I’d come not knowing what to expect. Most of the players were guys, though there were a few girls here and there, and the youngest were kids, while the oldest looked like they were in their forties.

Most were in their teens or twenties, from what I could tell, and they came in all shapes and sizes. Stereotype only described some of them, and I waited to see if Greg noticed me. He was standing in a corner, flipping through his deck, which were all in black sleeves to preserve them, or something like that.

When he looked up and noticed me, he hurried over. “Heya!”

“Hey, Greg. You feeling ready to kick some butt?” I asked.

“Uh, maybe. I mean, a lot of these guys are really good. What if I just choke or whatever?” he asked, talking quickly, “what would I do then? I mean, I already spent all of my allowance on these things, so I’m not sure what else I could do to make the deck better.”

“Just play well,” I said, “with whatever deck you have. I mean, have you been planning and practicing hard?”

“Uh, yes…”

“Then you’ll do fine,” I said. “I’ll be rooting for you. Though probably not cheering. I doubt they appreciate a yelling section.”

Plus the idea of yelling cheers made me imagine crawling somewhere and hiding.

“You’re right, but still. Just being there would be great! Thanks!” He hugged me, and I flushed, embarrassed, and gave him a pat on the back before pulling away as soon as he could.

I wondered about his motivations. Did he want me here because he was trying to… flirt with me or something? Still, either way, I watched his first match, which he won, and his second, which was a draw, trying to understand the rules of the game.

But I couldn’t make heads or tails of some of it, and it was frustrating in a way that made me wonder
about Rachel and reading and… a lot of other things. I knew I had it bad when watching someone else play a game could lead to me bringing it back around to Rachel, but I didn’t know how I was supposed to stop myself from doing it.

It just happened.

Whore.

He won the third game, which put him up one rank. It was best out of three, after all, which meant I’d be here for a while.

Still, I gave him a thumbs up each time he won, and the blond boy seemed to really appreciate it, playing with more fervor each time he saw me there. Which didn’t mean playing better, I suppose, since there was no time limit on moves as long as you weren’t silly and didn’t spend five minutes choosing which cards to play.

Things were going well, though, and the second win put him into into the final eight, which meant in theory as many as nine more games if he went all the way and yet always won in three. In other words, I could be here a while. Though they were going to have a break in a little bit for lunch.

*******

He bought lunch, and then sat close to me, smiling as he ate his sandwich, being very careful to chew with his mouth closed, more careful than he usually was, and despite my expectations, he didn’t monologue about the card games he’d won and lost.

Instead, Greg asked, “So, I was just wondering, how are things going with that friend of yours?”

He said friend very carefully, and I knew exactly what he thought, and so I understood why there was a little edge to his voice. If he did have a crush on me, then wasn’t I--

I tried to shake off that feeling, that talking about this with him was a bad idea, and that I should just find a way to ask him if he had a crush, or even ask him on a date just because we were friends so maybe it’d work who knew?

It certainly felt like a more proper sort of thought than a crush on someone I’d known less than a month, and who wanted to have sex with me.

Or had wanted, I reminded myself.

“Well, I want to talk to her about something, but I don’t know. It’s something I heard about her,” I said, “so I don’t…”

“Know,” Greg repeated. “I totally get that. What is it?”

“Just… a rumor. You know how those are? They get blown out of proportion, but I’m not sure. A friend just told me to take the plunge and ask her about it, but what if that ruins our friendship?”

Greg was looking rather uncomfortable, sweating in the kind of way I associated with nervousness, “Oh? Well, uh. I mean, um, you should totally just man up and say it to her! I mean, woman up, I mean--”

“I understand what you mean,” I said, with a faint, toothless smile, “so your advice is the same as Lisa’s?”
“Who is Lisa?”

“Friend of a friend,” I said, trying to sound dismissive. The last thing I needed was someone digging into things and figuring something out. I mean, if he typed her name in and looked at the right places, he could probably figure out that she was Bitch. Though Rachel was a very common name. “So, it’s just--”

“Listen, whatever you’re doing, go for it. Full power, 100%, hot blooded,” he said, his voice rising a little too high, “you should! I mean.” He paused, “Maybe you’re not brave enough for that, I get it, but it’s the right advice. It’s what Hero Law would do,” he said, with a cheeky grin.

I didn’t even ask who Hero Law was, because I probably would just get trapped in the thickets of pop culture.

“You want me to talk to her about this matter?”

“I don’t even know what ‘this matter’ even is,” Greg said, “but if you want to ask her about it, you should!”

He gave me a thumbs up, and a broad, goofy grin.

*******

In the end, he lost in the final round, two wins to one, which was a lot farther than I’d expected he’d get, and meant he got a bunch of card packs and some money as a prize. And an invitation to the City-wide. The top four all got in, and there were a few other games going on in other parts of town. There’d probably be sixteen in all? Or something like that. He explained the structure, and it was more than just a bracketed tournament.

It’d been kinda boring, but I’d been there for him, and I’d heard his advice. Maybe it wasn’t even bad advice.

Maybe I should follow it.

******

*Just ask her. Just ASK her.*

How was it that impossible? Just being around her felt fraught with too many things at once.

If you want a good time, go and call her, she’s desperate enough that she’d probably sleep with anyone who smiled at her.”

I didn’t ask her on Monday.

*******

On Tuesday, I stayed home sick, not even sure why, just not wanting to go, stomach turning around and around.

Stress, I had to guess. Part of me wanted to just go and ask her about it anyways. I was looking up things about what people had done before, what murder meant, all on my slow computer, sitting there not sure what I was even doing with my life.

Murderers had been inducted into the Protectorate before, and some pretty brutal people sometimes wound up there. Shadow Stalker had a reputation online as a hard, vicious vigilante, and yet she was
a hero now, helping people and all of that.

I was trying to convince myself that it’d be okay.

Finally, at around noon, I decided I was just going to woman up or whatever and be like Hero Law or whoever it was.

I got dressed and ran.

I just ran through the streets, my bugs stretching out like spider webs across farther than I’d ever been able to feel them, clustered up and strung out like trip-wires. They buzzed and moved, they reflected my emotional state and seemed to bleed me of my worry.

I ran until my legs ached until my heart was beating as hard as it did just the day before when Rachel had just leaned into me and I’d tried to read poetry.

She’d yawned, of course, poetry wasn’t her thing, but I had thought it could be, because she was brief, and poetry at its best was far less verbose than novels. So maybe I hadn’t found the right poems. And that thought, that maybe I just needed to find the right words, had seemed so hopeful and so hopeless, and I’d wanted so badly to be the sort of person who could do something.

Who could do anything at all. But I was so afraid it hurt, because it was one thing to have a crush, or even say ‘I’m bisexual’ but it was another to…

I didn’t know. I felt weak, and that feeling wasn’t all wrong, which made me wonder why she had even bothered?

I was sweating and tired when I reached her door, and so I took a moment to take a breath, pull a towel I’d stuffed into my backpack out and wipe myself down. I felt self-conscious about everything.

Not just the little things.

The dogs had started barking, and so when I knocked, Rachel was already moving that way. I kept one of my flies on her shoulder, and she seemed to recognize that the fly was mine.

She opened the door.

“Hey,” she said, leaning a little against the doorway, surprisingly casual. She didn’t care that I was home sick from school.

“Hey. Can I come in?” I asked.

“Sure.” She shrugged, her broad shoulders going up and down, and then she turned.

I watched her walk away for a moment, and then followed her. Inside, the dogs were happy to greet me, but today I just did the minimum, rubbing their heads as I walked over to the pallet.

She stood, seeming to sense the tension, this time. Her stance was like someone ready for a fight, but she wasn’t baring her teeth, so I had to think that I had a chance here.

“Rachel. The other day, Armスマスター said you were a murderer. I… are you?”

“I guess,” she said, with another shrug, her face knit up in confusion and annoyance. “Whatever.”

“Whatever? Can you please tell me more about it?”
She looked at me, and I could see it, the plain refusal to deal with this. She was stubborn. But then she saw something, and I could see the shift in her eyes. “Foster mother was a shit.”

“Go… on,” I said, nervously, afraid.

She bit her lip, and said, “I’m not a fucking storyteller.”

“I don’t need you to be;” I said.

“Fine. She was a shit. Some sort of fundie and she beat me and shit. I found this dog, Rollo, and I was keeping him. Taking care of him,” she said, glaring at me as if I were going to judge her for this. “Foster mom had two others. Treated all of them like shit. Stole food from us if we talked while we were eating.”

I listened, though already it felt like if Rachel had killed her, then that was bad but… I just couldn’t imagine it. Or maybe I could and that was worse.

“And you had Rollo?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, fiercely. “I was a stupid kid, and I fucked up a lot in taking care of him, but I hid him, and that’s what mattered. Cause when that bitch noticed him…”

She stopped, her fists clenching and unclenching, and I stood up, defying all reason to get closer to her. I could see her muscles spasming with this fury.

“What happened?”

“I took him off his leash, he was in the back yard, to go for a walk. He ran into the pool, and he couldn’t swim. Then when I tried to get him, she just closed the pool cover. She stood there, watching me. I lashed out, I did something. He grew big, but he was scared and angry.” Her eyes looked almost wet, and she stepped closer to me. “Killed the bitch. And her other children. They didn’t deserve it,” Rachel admitted, with a shrug as if it didn’t matter. “They were alright, and she did the same bullshit to them that she did to me, I guess. I never really thought about them. I just ran.”

I stared at her. That wasn’t murder at all. I had no idea what the legal term for it was, but--

Had the police just not known? Or was the Protectorate lying to me to try to drive me apart. “It’s okay, I’m sorry I made you tell all that. Uh… I have chocolate in my backpack somewhere.”

I’d grabbed it the other day from a vending machine, stuck it in, and forgotten it.

“Fine.”

She began rooting around in my backpack as I stepped away. The dogs could feel how frustrated she was.

“I’m sorry for asking you,” I said. “I’m sorry that--”

“Sorries don’t change nothing,” Rachel spat.

“It’s not your fault, and I know you know it’s not your fault,” I said. “Fuck,” I said. “Fuck, this is so hard.”

“What?” she asked, confused, as she munched on the chocolate bar, even though her mouth was full.

Stealing food from a child.
I wanted to make it better, with kisses or otherwise. But I knew that’s not how it worked.

“I want…” I trailed off.

*Dyke whore.*

******

Sometimes when you’re trapped and surrounded by filth, the answer isn’t to scream, and it isn’t to curl up in a ball.

It’s dark, and you’re not sure what’s on the other side, or perhaps you are too sure.

I don’t know. I was clearly not good at learning from my mistakes.

I wasn’t anyone worth liking, let alone… anything else.

Who--

So what? Why not?

I kicked the locker door down.

******

“Yes,” I said.

“What?” she asked, tilting her head in confusion, quickly finishing the chocolate bar.

I stepped forward. “If the offer is still on the table?”

“What?”

I stepped forward, and then said, low, as if someone would hear me and call me out on it, “Fuck.”

Then I leaned in and tried kissing her on the lips. It felt warm and tasted like chocolate, and she didn’t kiss me back at first.

My heart stopped. I felt warm and tingly all over, but what if she--

She reached out and grabbed my shoulder. “Yes.”

“It is?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“When?” I asked, every word feeling like it was being written in stone.

“Now?”

She had just been crying, or at least tearing up, a minute before. Now she looked triumphant, she was looking at me in a way I couldn’t have ever imagined being looked at. She wanted me.

And the truth was, I wanted to be wanted.

“...Yes.”
She pulled on me, and for a moment I was confused, and then I realized.

The dogs. They were huddling around, confused. And this wasn’t the best place. Oh.

I was made of nerves now, and I didn’t know what she knew.

I could have backed out at the last moment, but I didn’t. “Okay,” I said.

I followed her to the door, and she opened it, into the back room, where she kept the pillows and blankets.

I took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

She closed the door behind her.

Chapter End Notes

There will be no sex scenes, just to tell you. Whether as a warning or just, you know, so you know?

But, yes. Here it goes.
I laid in the tangle of covers and pillows, breathing in and out. My body felt warm, and my thoughts were slow and a little self-satisfied, like a cat curling up against warmth. I felt more exhausted than I’d felt when I’d run a mile as fast as I could, and yet it was a good sort of exhaustion.

It had been awkward. It had been strange. I hadn’t known what I was doing, and I was pretty sure that I could do better next time--

Next time? Would there be a next time?

I stretched and shifted, blinking when I didn’t feel Rachel next to me.

She’d gotten up, naked as the day she was born, but she was quickly pulling on a pair of shorts and a bra, out of some half-forgotten modesty. “Where are you going?” I asked, and I was startled at how my voice sounded.

I was whining.

“Dogs are worrying,” Rachel said, and then she turned back towards me and walked over, getting so close that I could feel her skin against mine. And she gave me a rough, quick kiss, as if reminding me that she was there.

Reminding me of what we’d done. I blushed, looking away for a moment, but too tired to get up and follow her. She walked off, and I watched her the whole way. The fire and the burning passion had simmered down a little, but now it was replaced with awareness.

Awareness of what her body felt like and awareness of her that I’d never really had of someone else before.

It’d felt close, and that I think, as much as the sensations, was why I wanted to do it again.

Plus there was this feeling, a sort of floating, happy feeling, that if I’d ‘sinned’ once then there was no crime in sinning again.

If I was what Emma would call a whore, than so what? Only one of us was paid money to show herself off in front of cameras, anyways.

Which was the kind of retort that would be shot down immediately, but it made me feel better.

I wanted to do this again. But more than that, I liked Rachel.

Liked liked her.

Oh, love was, who knows? Probably not yet if it meant anything. But I wanted to date her. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to see what it could be, even though I knew that’s not what she was looking for, not what she was doing. She’d seen someone she was attracted to, and who she liked, and she’d gone after her.

And in the end, I’d gone right back after her, and we’d met in the middle.
At some point I had to get up and get dressed and go on with my day. But I didn’t feel like it right now. I stretched out a hand, sweeping aside a dusty brown pillow, gripping onto the sheets and bringing up the other hand. My body felt different, or perhaps it was just the way I saw it. I looked at my hand, and saw something different than I had before.

Something desirable, or at least something that could be desired. Something passionate, or at least something that could inspire passion. Something powerful, or at least it felt like power in the throes of passion.

So, now I had to decide what to do next. I had no idea how to win someone’s heart, especially since all of the usual ways to go about it were not really applicable. I had no idea how you ‘get to know’ someone when we’ve both learned a lot more about each other than we’d normally share with anyone else. We wouldn’t wear matching rings, and there’s no wearing lettermen jackets and going steady or whatever other traditional ways to indicate that there’s something going on.

Though I wasn’t sure I cared that much about tradition, if tradition said I should just dance around this kind of thing, what I’d done, for weeks, months, or even longer.

I breathed in and out, slowly, and then reached out. The first thing I dug up was the T-shirt she’d been wearing. It didn’t really fit me well, as tall as I was, and as thin as I was, but I found myself grinning, and then stopped, covering my mouth but unable to keep from smiling.

Not exactly a boyfriend shirt, but.

I pulled it on, and then grabbed the jeans I’d discarded and pulled those on as well. I didn’t need anything else, at least if I was just walking back into the room with all of the dogs.

Hell, I could be naked if I wanted to, it’s not as if the dogs were going to judge. I stretched as I got up, body still tingling, and considered going into the bathroom. My hair was an absolute mess.

Rachel had ran her hands through my hair again and again. I had a feeling she must like it, either that or she liked getting it all tangled up.

So I should really care about getting it nice and neat again, but it really didn’t feel like a priority as I walked over to the door and opened it.

Some of the dogs came over. Milk and Boney and Brutus, and I knelt down a little, watching Rachel as she interacted with the dogs, rubbing them and talking to them with care and focus.

“Hey, boy,” I said, scratching under Boney’s chin, “who’s a good dog? Were you getting curious? Well… it’s not your business, is it.” I said that, but I said it in the right kind of tone that the dog wouldn’t react.

After all, he was a dog. Dogs were a lot cooler than I’d given them credit for, but that didn’t mean they were people. Finally, once their curiosity was sated, I stood up and said, uncertainly, “We made a lot of noise.”

She frowned, “Yeah.”

“No wonder they were barking,” I said, shaking my head and stepping forward towards her. She was watching me, and I no longer quite wondered what she was thinking. At least, I wasn’t wondering right now, in this very moment. I felt like I knew.

I gave her a hug, and she nuzzled me back, her fingers brushing against my cheek. She was very physical. She didn’t say a lot, but she demonstrated a lot, as it were. I liked it, I liked the feeling of
her fingers on my cheek, I liked my cheek when her fingers were brushing against it. I wanted to kiss her again, though I knew that the truth was I was too exhausted to do anything else.

It wasn’t even two in the afternoon yet, and it felt like so much had happened. But I’d need to be home before Dad showed up, or call him with an excuse that wasn’t, “I was at Rachel’s.”

I didn’t think he’d accept that kind of excuse. Her lips met this place at the base of my neck, and she sort of pressed herself into it, as if she was trying to catch my scent. I hugged her back, and took a breath, in and out. I closed my eyes, and just let the moment stand, until she finally began to pull away.

“I want to do it again,” I said, deciding that I needed to be honest with her.

Rachel frowned, a ghost of old suspicion rising up, the suspicion that people were making fun of her, I understood. That people were judging her.

She didn’t respond, and so I pressed, “Do you? I really… liked it.”

“I did too,” she admitted. “I want to do it again. Not now.”

“I’m too tired for that too,” I said, laughing a little, but making sure not to show my teeth. “So…”

And here was the question. “Is this a physical thing?”

“Yes?” she asked, as if I was being dumb. Yes, of course it was physical.

I didn’t slump or give up or worry, I just thought that that meant I had to try harder, figure out ways to get closer to her, and make her see me in even more different lights. It felt a lot more possible now than it would have felt a week ago.

What’s just physical can be made more than that, I thought, stepping back a little bit. “I still have that poetry book, if you wanted I could read some to you. There’s also the games. I need to get going in maybe an hour, but there’s still time. Also, my hair is in tangles.”

“I like it,” Rachel said, bluntly.

“Even like this?”

She ran fingers through it. Rough fingers. “Yes.”

Well, at least I’d know when she turned against me, because she’d probably just say it. “So, poems or games?”

“Poems,” she said.

“Why?”

“I like your voice,” she said.

My blush, which had started to work itself up into a majestic crimson, was probably darkening even further at those words. “Well, thanks. I made it myself,” I said, a little drily, going over to where the backpack had been discarded.

It looked like the dogs had rummaged around my backpack to see if there were any treats, but they hadn’t found anything, apparently, and none of them had been ill-behaved enough to go chewing on my books, luckily.
I pulled out the large volume of poetry. It was one of those omnibuses, which meant that if you liked a poet or poem style, while too bad because they have the next in the list, after only one example.

Perhaps I should skip towards the end, towards the more lyrical poems? Or something. I flipped through and stopped on two poems by this guy called e.e cummings. All lowercase. I’d heard of him, but in the same way the average person has heard of Dickens.

I glanced at the first poem. Huh. Then the second--

‘I like my body when it is with your body. It is so quite a new thing. Muscles better and nerves more. I like your body- I like what it does,’

I was blushing like mad, and there was more to the poem, but I didn’t want to read something like that aloud to Rachel, even if it felt oddly fitting that I’d stumbled across it.

“What is it?” Rachel asked.

“Nothing, just looking at a poem.” I flipped the page, and there was ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.’

I glanced through it, and nothing about it seemed quite as revealing as the cummings poem.

“Okay, here’s one. I’m not sure if you’ll like it, but there are parts of it that are amusing,” I said, hoping she hadn’t seen that other poem. It felt too personal, as if a long dead poet had reached out across the better part of a century and given me a high-five. Or perhaps a slap. It was hard to tell. I could tell from the later lines that this was a woman he was with, but still.

Far safer was a poem by T.S Eliot. “Let us go then, you and I/When the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table;...

“Ether?” she asked, sounding a little baffled.

“Anaesthesia, like before a surgery,” I said.

“Huh,” she said, her frown oddly thoughtful, as if she almost saw that there was something oddly (bizarre was a word for such poetry) beautiful about those lines.

I continued, “Let us go through certain half-deserted streets/ The muttering retreats/ Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels/ And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells.”

“You ever been to a cheap hotel?” she asked.

“Once, actually. I went with my Mom to a conference,” I said. I was startled. She usually only interrupted for questions about words, or the meaning of something. “We went all the way up to New York, but we stopped on the way in New Jersey. In New Jersey, everything is legal, including horribly overpriced motel rooms with bathrooms that stopped working in the middle of the night.”

Rachel chuckled.

“After the fact, yeah, it was a little amusing, seeing my Mom lay into them. She could guilt trip like nobody’s business,” I said, shaking my head, leaning into Rachel a little more. I imagined sitting in her lap.
Rachel looked troubled, but I didn’t want to press too much. But I did look at her, and after a little while she said, “My mom did drugs and had parties and shit. I don’t think she knew what guilt was.”

“Ah,” I said. “And then there’s the foster parents.”

“It fucked me up,” Rachel said, with more bitterness than I’d ever heard from her. And more self-awareness, for that matter. I knew she was aware she wasn’t like other people, or at least not like some ‘average’ person.

“I like you,” I said, as if that was some answer to it. I didn’t want her to change, but I’d begun to think about how she could not-change, or at least not really change, and still become a hero. I didn’t want to be on the other side from her. I wanted to be by her side, and for her to be by my side.

I wasn’t going to go villain for her, because I had moral reasons not too, but as far as I could tell, she was just a villain because she’d fallen into it. There was no deep motive, and if she was vicious, well. Maybe I could find a way to channel that the right way? Make it merely a little too far rather than just more ‘proof’ that she’s a monster.

I knew that if I hadn’t known her those past weeks, if I hadn’t done what I had, then if introduced to her case I might be far harsher than I was. There was bias going on, sure, but I didn’t really care all that much. People were going to be biased about the people they cared for: news at eleven.

“Oh,” Rachel said, and then she nodded. “Thanks.”

“I need to go soon,” I said. “We could play some video games, I suppose. Or I could try to explain to you that one card game and you could be twice as confused as I am.”

“No thanks,” she said, but I could hear the amusement in her voice. She was in a good mood.

“To both?” I asked, and glanced over at the dogs. They certainly seemed as if they’d been neglected.

“Sure.” Then she leaned in, hugging me tight, and I realized that there were other things we could do. Like kiss and cuddle. She wasn’t shy about it, not reticent at all to just jump straight into it, and I was sort of impressed by the whole attitude.

She leaned in and her lips met mine, their taste familiar now, her arm wrapping around my back, our chests and bodies pressing together as she kissed me, stopping for air and then kissing again and again.

It was like my world narrowed and then narrowed some more. My bugs all found a wall, got out of the way and hugged it, the easier to focus on the now, on the moments that were happening, on the way her dark eyes stared into mine and I saw the subtle shifts of emotion that I imagined were going on there.

Of course, it didn’t take a genius at socializing to guess at the kinds of things Rachel was thinking when she kissed me like that.

And it didn’t take a genius to know that a time like that’s not really the moment to do any thinking at all. Just feeling.

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It was later than I’d expected when I finally managed to pull myself away. We’d kept on doubling back and back around, and she hadn’t seemed to get sick of it at all. Neither had I.
Honestly, I couldn’t imagine getting sick of it, but then, it happened all the time. Finally, though, I pulled myself away, the taste of her on my lips. I felt giddy and capable of leaping tall buildings in a single bounds, and I barely paid attention to my bugs as I left the building and went down one street and then another, winding my way through a city that seemed at least a little brighter than it had been earlier.

I was a hero, right? I’d definitely done heroic things last weekend, and if I kept it up, I’d prove myself in that way. And if I could figure out what I was doing with Rachel… it seemed like that was the start of a life that wasn’t messed up and broken.

Sort of. At the very least, it would be proof that I was beyond them, that I was growing past the trio’s nonsense. It was hard to be optimistic sometimes, but it was also hard to be pessimistic at the moment.

I’d taken the E88 down a dozen pegs, and I wasn’t sure how they’d recover from this, especially if the Protectorate managed to keep all of them locked up for as long as possible. I had to trust them to do their jobs well, and hope that everything else worked out. I needed to get more involved online, too.

Not because I wanted credit, but…

Actually, I had to admit that was part of it. Honesty was the best policy here, clearly. But I also just wanted to know what the situation was in Brockton Bay, and that involved talking to people online. It also involved getting to know people in real life, but I wasn’t sure about that: talking to Lisa would just get me moved around to attack only their enemies. Once was fine, I hoped, because there was more at stake, and taking out Nazis wasn’t bad, but beyond that?

Well, in theory I had a partner for major attacks, if I could convince Rachel to go along with me. I didn’t want to say that I had my ways, but she seemed like a loyal sort of person, and her help had made the difference between me dying and not.

Now there was a thought that made my stomach twist and turn, and even protest. I was trying to ignore how badly things could have gone last week, because when I thought of it, it made me want to back down.

And if I’d learned anything from knowing Rachel, it was that backing down was never, ever a good idea. I needed to stand up to myself and be direct, and that included not giving up or letting a little risk rattle me. After all, she’d taken the same risks, and she didn’t seem nearly as freaked out as I was.

This was normal for her, and considering I wanted to be a hero and fight super powered villains, that meant it’d have to be normal for me.

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I found a computer and began trying to do way too many things at once. First, I was trying to get a verified cape account. Second, I was trying to look up news. Third, I was trying to look up other cases of heroes who did pretty nasty things and yet were forgiven. Fourth, I needed to look up more about what Rachel’s actions would even be legally.

Fifth, there was homework to do.

In other words, I didn’t come even close to getting all of it done, and it might have been better to just pick one action. I had the account set up, but not verified. That’d take a picture of me in costume.
I learned that the E88 had been pressed back and were apparently lying low, and that Lung was on a rampage across their former territory while the Merchants, far more quietly, were snapping up prime real estate. They didn’t seem to be acting the way they usually did.

Skidmark--yes, that was his name--was a boastful idiot, clever at running a gang or he’d be dead by now, but in a very obvious kind of way. But now his men were being careful, sneaking out deals from right under the E88’s noses, and the most I could tell was that they had suddenly started to get better product.

A lot better.

I knew a lot more about drugs than a girl should, thanks to going to a series of schools where more people knew all about cocaine than about the many uses of coke. Where Special K referred to the drug first, and the breakfast cereal never. Emma and I had been a little insulated from that kind of thing, but only a little.

If you don’t shut your ears, you pick these things up. I had to think that it was the tinker, since it was the only lead I had.

It seemed to me as if the Merchants might be a larger threat than I thought.

Next, there was the heroes front. And I sort of ran out of time between quickly answering math problems and trying to look up legalities.

It was just something I’d have to do tomorrow, or over the next few days.

Because right now, with my homework done and the time to get home and start cooking passing, I had to get out of here. I wondered what Dad would say, and so I called him. He might be home already.

He didn’t answer.

I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. Things were not going as wrong as I thought.

So I got up and then began to hurry home. I needed to get there before Dad, or at least not long after him.

I was sick, as far as he knew. But I could excuse it if I had the math done, including the stuff I knew that the teacher was going to assign today if I had showed up.

When did I start thinking of Dad as someone I had to outwit? The question had come up before, and it was going to keep on coming up until I came to a solution. Should I just be honest and tell him the truth? But what truth was that?

That I was having sex with a known villain, but I swear she wasn’t that bad?

That I was an independent hero called Arachne?

There were a lot of things to keep secret, and the weight of them on my nerves was definitely the worst part about this new double, or maybe even triple, life I was living.

I hurried home, and almost beat Dad there. He was just stepping out of my car when I jogged up, panting. I’d felt that I’d lost the race, had sent a fly to buzz against him, and I’d still run as hard as I could. Maybe I thought that it meant something, and maybe I was just being stubborn.
“Taylor, I thought you were sick today?” He got out. He was sweating a little, clearly tired from a long day.

“I… was,” I panted. “But I felt better a little after noon, so I went to the library to look a few things up and do my homework somewhere else.”

“Really? You could have done it here. All of that running can’t be good for you.”

“A little exercise is a good thing,” I said, trying not to blush and think of other forms of exercise I’d gone through recently.

“Sure, but Taylor,” Dad began, and then he sighed. As if I was too much trouble.

I grit my teeth, baring them at him, frustrated by that sigh just like I’d been about his involvement. “I’m fine, Dad. Better than I was this morning, definitely.”

“I suppose so. It’s not like you to get sick, though I suppose you always were the sort to run around even when you should be in bed. We had to keep you distracted and stay home,” Dad said. I’d heard the story before, but it still had its own sort of power, and I tried to concentrate on the facts.

Dad was smiling, not baring his teeth or whatever it’d be if he were Rachel. I smiled back, trying to ease into it. “Oh?”

“I know I’ve told you this story a thousand times,” Dad said.

“Well, then a thousand and one times wouldn’t hurt.”

It felt more like a truce than anything else, and I had a feeling that things with Dad were going to get worse before they got better, but I’d take the moment of peace.

Chapter End Notes

Thus does Bark Arc end. Sorry for the delay.
Today was turning out to be a perfectly average day. That is to say that they had thought of seven ways to kill Accord, though Dorothy had to admit that they were mostly the same ways that she had thought of before.

Creativity was all well and good, but classic methods were best. She’d gotten dressed, including the heels that reminded her of her monster--which of course reminded her of way #4 from last week: chop off his leg and arm and watch him bleed out, the asymmetrical moron.

She held the coffee pot and reminded herself of the next words. She knew them so well that she shouldn’t have to remind herself, but things had been very stressful ever since they’d slowly tortured to death that one nosy hero.

It had started slow, with some burning up and down his back, but she had gotten a little out of hand. She had read that people did it all the time, going a little farther than they expected, and thus if it actually mattered, it really wasn’t that unusual.

Plus, Dorothy knew that despite their games, she had begun to drift from her husband. This too was normal. She had read it in a book. She spent far too long studying to be normal, and she should just be herself: so she’d lashed out at some teenage vigilante, and Geoff had joined in.

They’d had fun, but then came the police and the PRT, looking for piddling clues on yet another vigilante disappearing. They were dime a dozen, and to the extent that anyone’s lives mattered, theirs certainly didn’t.

Dorothy had killed people like that before, and she’d do it again.

There were limits again. When she had thought about murdering Purity, the thought of it had twisted in her head, turning around and around and some part of her she hadn’t known existed had rebelled.

It was likely a failing in her training, and one that was no doubt a problem. After all, the master race could not triumph over the Jews if she did not give her all in total obedience to the cause, obedience that did not have any room for moral compunctions.

Yet:

“You can do it, can you not?” Kaiser asked. He was sitting there, as casual as can be. “I am not asking because I want it done now, but because I want to know it can be done. She’ll no doubt come back within a month or so.”

Kayden was a good houseguest. She kept to the rules Dorothy set down, the rules of how to be a normal person in a normal household, and her presence meant that Dorothy had ‘a friend’ which was important.

She wasn’t sure why, but something felt wrong about this request.

Plus, it was just not right: a husband and wife were supposed to be loving and ask each other about coffee and read the newspaper.
They weren’t supposed to divorce, yes, and they weren’t supposed to plot the murder of each other.

“I… can do it,” Dorothy said honestly.

“Will you do it?” Kaiser asked, his eyes dark. He didn’t like it when people left without his permission. And he was willing to do a lot just to keep up the impression that it was his choice, including sending off people who were about to leave.

“I will if you order me to,” Dorothy said.

And resolved to leave.

Because that was the truth: if she was ordered, she would do it. She might not even regret it for that long, but she’d be down a friend. Or someone who was friend-shaped.

Now she was in Boston.

Way to Kill Accord #35: Slowly drown him in water. Ask him questions. Each time he answers correctly, dunk him under. Teach him not to be such an arrogant asshole. She had never met him, but Fog told her that that was how he acted, and there had been enough other capes that said the same that she believed it to be true.

“Would you like cream with your coffee, Geoff?”

“No thank you, dear,” he said, and it wasn’t her imagination. He was saying it with less enthusiasm. It made her so mad for a moment that she almost didn’t get the next line right.

Dump the coffee in his face and then eat him. Eat him and he’ll never leave you.

Her monster form did not expel anything. Ever. It devoured and took away to nowhere.

She liked that feature.

“I have… finished the bacon.” No, it was completed!

There was a beautiful spread on the table. She had seen a spread like that in a magazine once. It had called it, “The Perfect Breakfast.” She had recreated it exactly in varying quantities since then, and Geoff never failed to complement it.

It was in the script.

“Finish?” he asked, suddenly distracted.

“Put. The paper. Away. It’s time to eat.” She held the coffee, and imagined his death. It made it easier. She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek.

He needed to shave. But this was a normal thought, that couples had.

Heterosexual couples, at least. And the Gesselchaft had taught her that those were the only ones that counted. They’d said all sorts of things, and yet she’d been forced to compromise while in Boston.

It helped that she both cared and didn’t care at the same time.

She cared for the triumph of the race, but in her experience, Jews and Gentiles alike died equally satisfying deaths, when it came down to it.
“Yes dear. Mmm, smells delicious,” he said, with a smile that almost fooled her for a moment.

She smiled wider as if to praise this, and then looked down at all the food. A healthy appetite was important. Of course, they usually threw away half of what they made, but conspicuous consumption was not bad.

She moved to sit down, and she tucked a napkin under her chin and looked at the food. She had an order to eat. Eggs, bacon, fruit salad, more bacon, eggs, strawberries, toast with butter and blackberry jam, take one more strip of bacon, and then french toast.

They divided it all down the middle, and left what they couldn’t eat of each course on the plate.

It was economical like that.

It was easy to eat breakfast, though she really didn’t understand the point of food. To her, it all tasted just about the same, and yet she knew that people set great store by women who could cook, and properly judged as defective women who could not cook: she had read it somewhere, or perhaps she had been told this.

The two were not all that different to Night, and Dorothy was a simple woman, who had simple tastes, and knew that these tastes would only be allowed so long as she fought for the right cause.

And that meant that she kept to the rituals, because they kept her within the right mindset. Those whose mindsets were discordant would be killed. She had seen it happen, when a cape triggered that the Gesellschaft decided couldn’t be controlled, or was too broken to operate. She’d killed one on orders, as a final test to prove that she knew for whom she killed.

It had been her first kill, and she still remembered the way he kicked and struggled, his power useless because it was a long-term power, that showed him the paths that people could take. Had he known that she would kill him? She liked to think so, because she had been told that it was irony when a person who could see into futures was surprised, and she did not like irony.

It seemed like a game that people played to get around the rules and obscure things. She kept to a schedule. Sex exactly once a month, because regular copulation was what couples did. She never enjoyed it, and she wasn’t sure if Geoff did either. She did know that he enjoyed the more spontaneous actions when they both were able to hurt someone else.

She had a perfect life: if she looked it up, she would find that this was objectively true. The kind of life that all other women were supposed to have.

She didn’t feel happy with it, but then again, she rarely felt happy anymore.

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Boston was a city. That much could be said for it. It was the start of America, to whatever extent it mattered, or so Fog told her. He also told her that half of the population of the city was sub-human, which she could believe.

That meant it was the kind of city where if you launched a nuke at it, you’d do more good for the world than bad. You did that math when it was time to start a race war, because those that lived in the city were probably race traitors anyways.

It was math that she liked, because it was simple math, without having to divide people up into categories. Less guilty, more guilty?
But she was sometimes vaguely aware that it was math that set her up against the world. It didn’t matter with her powers, and she loved every moment she wasn’t seen, the way that her form was so unrestrained, so bizarre. She’d mauled her handler, and yet killed her way into being a perfect weapon.

Her muscles were better like that, her nerves stronger, those moments when she was a monster were the moments when she felt as if she were alive, as if she were something more than human, and if there was some way to make it so that her power never stopped, she would pay any price for it.

As it was, she was as much a threat as anything else.

“Now, put ze money in ze bag.” Fog said, putting on a thick german accent as he looked over the drug dealers. “Or ve kill you.”

He hated the stupid accent, but he also claimed that it helped make people underestimate him. He was dressed in his usual costume, which she ironed herself. Grey and a mask. It was simple, but it was a good costume. She had been told so by Fog. He would know.

The mongoloid trembled where he stood, and said, “Fuck, man. You know you never go this far north usually. You’re right next to Accord’s territory.”

“Ve have an.... understanding with him,” Fog said, trying to throw drama into his voice. He just sounded bored, though Night was frowning a little. She hadn’t known they had. In fact, she’d been angry at Accord and the way he kept them from robbing too much from the dealers and others that he oversaw.

He was an odd sort of criminal boss, who killed dealers who cut their drugs with bad shit because it was not proper, and seemed to hate the trade with a passion. That she could understand, since she’d never taken drugs in her life, at least not since her real life had begun.

If you didn’t count any drugs used in torture, that is.

“Oh. Shit.”

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They let him go and took the money.

“An understanding?”

“We do have an understanding. He is sending someone to meet with us this afternoon,” Fog said. He was talking normally now, and Night liked it better than the accent.

She wasn’t sure why, just that she did.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. But he said it had to do with the E88.”

“Why?”

“We shall ask him. Or her.”

*****

It was a woman, an ugly, short woman with greying hair, who strode forward carefully, dressed in
jeans and a T-shirt. Their hideout looked just about her speed, an abandoned part of a strip mall that they’d been using in the time since Purity had left and they had left after her.

“Good afternoon, Night, Fog.”

“Yes, ve have ven expecting--”

“Must you,” the woman said. “You may call me Needle, I suppose, if we are going to work with that sort of cape name business.”

“What do you want?” Night asked, striding forward, her heels clicking. She liked heels.

“Me? Not all that much. A sandwich would be nice,” Needle said, with a shrug. “I’m an intermediary, from Accord, and I want to tell you something important: Purity is going back.”


“How would I know? But Kaiser will come to you in a few days, asking for you to come back.”

“Good,” Night said, unable to keep from feeling a thrill of excitement. Boston was boring compared to Brockton.

“But I’d like to propose something else. Or rather, there are people who would ask you about something. What if we said we had evidence that Kaiser intended to kill Purity if she tried to leave again, or that he was lying to her. You wouldn’t care, I’m sure. But what about evidence of a different sort: that he was acting against the interests of the race.”

“The race?”

Needle smiled. “Do you think I’m not a part of it?” Certainly, her skin was pale. “If you had evidence of that, what would you do?”

“Not join him,” Fog said.

“What if you joined him… and waited for the opportune time to act against him? Think on this: you have reasons to dislike Kaiser, and I’m going to give you a few more. His big picture is broken and fractured.” Needle shrugged. “It’s just a suggestion, and if you take it, it could be an opportunity to do great things. I know it costs money to live the proper married life, money that Kaiser is stingy with, and if you agree to the deal, all you have to do is listen, and then watch, and when the time comes, perhaps you can kill him.”

That convinced her. She had 129 ways listed in her mind, over the years, on how to kill Kaiser. Even more than killing Accord, she would enjoy this.

One involved gutting him and then cutting off his hand. Another involved slowly burning every part of his body. Many of them were similar methods, but with minor twists to make it interesting.

Still, there were one-hundred and twenty nine of them. Almost too many. Like eating at a buffet.

“So, we’d just… work for Kaiser until we don’t?”

“Yes. Purity might well be a better choice, and we can pay you handsomely.”

She couldn’t tell him what to do, because they were a couple, and the one of the couple who was a woman needed to be submissive and make his life a living hell if he ever decided to do anything other than what she wanted him to do.
She had seen it in highly successful life simulation television shows.

Fortunately for him, he made the right choice.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it still might be a better love-story than Twilight.
There were words for what Rachel had done, but as far as I could tell, not a single one of them was murder. Manslaughter was a word, and depending on what the judges said, even involuntary manslaughter or some even lesser offense. Because the question was, that a judge and possibly jury would have to decide, is whether Rachel should have known that her power bulked him up, and that this would be dangerous and would lead to her pet killing three people.

Since capes didn’t trigger with a total understanding of their power, or any understanding at all, necessarily, besides instinct, it was something that could be argued.

The only real problem was that juries were biased.

There were more than a few protests at the recent arrest, trial, and Birdcaging of this independent rogue called Canary. For a crime far less than one act of murder, one that even at its worst was aggravated assault (ten years in prison for a regular person), she was going to spend the rest of her life in a prison for supervillains that nobody else can hold.

Cape groups were up in arms, and yet the kicker that made me doubt whether I should trust the PRT to be fair to her?

There were no easy appeals, and almost never a way out--in theory one could open it up, in practice nobody ever did. There wasn’t serving your time, because even if you got out, it’d still stick with you. They punished sometimes at random, without any logic. It felt like my time at school, a feeling that made me sick to my stomach. Just reading online was eroding my trust in the PRT and the legal system, in the same way that if you start reading about some of the politicians and their picadillos, you stepped away a few hours later having lost some of your faith in politics.

Still, at least in theory Rachel had a good chance of getting off, because I was also sure that they had forgiven far worse. The real problem was that, as I searched and started imagining defenses in my head, they forgave people by press-ganging them into the Wards.

Rachel wouldn’t do well there, and I wanted her with me, and I admit that stories like Canary made me not want to get within even a hundred feet of the PRT or Wards or any of that. It was a common reaction despite attempts at spinning it positively, which made me wonder what the prosecutors or anyone else were thinking.

What new Parahuman would want to turn themselves in for some comparatively minor offense if they might get hauled off to the Birdcage to spend the rest of their life in prison with no chance to appeal their case or get parole.

I bookmarked a few sites that were following the protests blowing up, and filed it away.

It was really that simple, sometimes. The way a symbol could matter to people. I was a hero, and that meant I was a symbol, and what symbols do represents the whole. Every cop who went too far and killed an unarmed person sent waves of doubt and distrust for police running through a community, and it was the same with capes. And the same was true with the justice system.

When a mass-murderer got sent to the Birdcage, everyone, including me, nodded because that’s what he deserved. When someone innocent did, then people asked questions. It was just human nature, and apparently there had been a lot of lawyers just looking for a good, sympathetic case to try to run things up to the Supreme Court, which had declined time and again to address the Birdcage.
...all of this was interesting, but what really mattered is that if Bitch went hero, people could probably buy it, especially if there was a counter to any claim that she was a murderer. It wasn’t as if she didn’t already have fans. In fact, her fanbase seemed to be growing.

They paid a lot of attention, and it felt bizarre and almost wrong to go looking online for threads about how cool Bitch was, and how she wasn’t afraid of anyone, or something about some meme or another, and know that there was an actual woman behind it.

It was especially awkward as I couldn’t really be myself on any of these weird sites, and I definitely couldn’t hint at the fact that I’d had intercourse with her.

But she had people who would stick with her, at least as a villain. So I set out bait, a question: is she really a villain?

See what they said. I wanted people to buy it if I could convince her to ‘sell’ it.

I wondered if I was putting the cart before the horse, because there was a chance that she wouldn’t care enough to even think about going hero, or that she’d get offended at the idea that, just because we had sex, I had any special claim on her.

The last thing I wanted to do was lose her by making silly assumptions, and I had the time I needed to step carefully. And plan even more carefully.

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It felt bizarre, and I almost wanted to stop myself. It felt too tea cozy, too much like I was going to cook a meal for her wearing an apron. Making a costume for Rachel felt like it was something oddly intimate in a way I wouldn’t have thought of before I’d seen the body that was going to fit into the costume.

I still needed her measurements, because I hadn’t exactly been looking for the purposes of tailoring, but if I could make my own costume with spider silk and clever bugs, then I could do the same for Rachel. It’d protect her, and keep her safe, and the idea of her wearing something that I’d made…

There was a warm, uncomfortable, and yet welcome feeling in my stomach, thinking about it like that. It was something possessive and a little primal, like a way of marking my territory.

I even knew it, and yet I couldn’t help but want to do it anyways. It was selfish, but then why pretend I wasn’t being selfish?

The mask couldn’t be improved upon, by which I meant that a mask made with silk wouldn’t make sense, because of course, Bitch’s mask was cheap as heck. But at the same time, there was no simple replacement. A more full mask could make sense, made of metal or otherwise protective, but if some brute slammed their fist into her head, metal could warp and break, and a shard of metal or flexiglass or the like going into her could be fatal in the way a glancing blow by a Brute might not be.

I could, of course, provide silk linings for it, though, or perhaps think about a simple mask that was a little more realistic. I wasn’t quite sure there, but I made silk anyways.

There were all sorts of things that could be made with silk, and some of them made me blush more or less. For instance, spider silk underwear was apparently pretty useful. Not merely for being silk, but it didn’t melt in extreme heat in the same way other underwear might, and wounds would be clean because of how fine and delicate the spider silk was, if someone needed to do field surgery or the like.
It was a last resort, yes, and the thought of making underwear for her had me drifting off into silly fantasies, mixed with drifting off into seeing how she’d react and being afraid that she’d get angry at it.

Other things were simpler, like a spider silk undershirt, or layers to it. And I had a few other ideas, all of which meant I was gathering an absurdly large number of spiders together and googling sewing and other techniques as often as I could.

It was fine control that I was used to, but this time I tried to see through the bug’s eyes in a way I could use, rather than a confused mess. It was a work in progress, especially compared to the way that I was beginning to be able to drag together sound.

I couldn’t quite translate it into something distinguishable, but I was starting to be able to tell words apart. It was pretty simple. Just the ability to tell sounds that were words apart from, say, coughs or incoherent yells, and the knowledge that where there was a slight pause, that was where a word was. A very, very slight pause, in many cases.

It wasn’t all that important yet, but when I managed to listen in on conversations, then my other work would be even more effective.

For I was hunting the Merchants now, while paying attention to the news. I just needed a photo and one part of it was done, and then I had to talk to Rachel, see what the Undersiders were going to do.

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The hunt took many forms. I tried to bug any of the students at school who I knew were supposed to be running with the Merchants. And since I was there to monitor myself (I’d joined every single gang, sometimes a dozen times, often with what they call a ‘fuck in’ if one believes the rumors) I thought I had it covered. I wasn’t going to be able to listen in on them, but I could get occasional flashes of things while I sat doing work in class that seemed encouraging.

Sure, that white powder in locker #342 might just be someone’s baking soda volcano experiment in the making, but let me say that I was skeptical.

As well, there was a sense of smell to deal with. I needed more experience, but I bet given time I could figure out just what pot smells like. Not that it was that big of a deal, but I knew a number of Merchants smoked marijuana, and certainly if you wanted to be caught with something at school, a cigarette was better than a dime bag.

And then each night out I could, I just tracked some of them, and began to build up a map. I knew I was using the same technique, but really the Merchants weren’t all that different than the E88 in some ways.

Both of them sold drugs and killed people, and the E88 was worse only because it was ideological.

One advantage with the Merchants was that, even more than the E88, they were the kind of people who hang around buildings with bugs in them. It was impossible for them to be secure. I could imagine the E88 being able to have a few ‘clean meeting’ places where they could hide out if they were terrified of me, and where even a single bug meant I was watching them.

The Merchants? They just accepted bugs as a feature of any room they hid out in, and that meant that there was basically nothing I couldn’t hear, if only I figured out just how to hear everything.

It was certainly the aspect of my power that was getting the most use, and compared to the fruitless patrols that I was increasingly sure were pointless, it was certainly progress, even if it meant not
being seen. I was afraid that people would forget me, or assume that if I wasn’t seen, I was planning a bank heist.

From what I could tell, it was the villains who got to pick and choose their battles, until or unless the heroes could find their hideouts. So you heard a lot more about this or that villain raiding each other or robbing a store then you did about heroes acting that way, who you mostly saw pictures of patrolling.

But by Friday, after three days of patrolling up and down when I wasn’t tracking down leads, I was starting to get the feeling that this was some kind of trick. Some time wasting scheme so that heroes couldn’t do anything useful.

Sure, PR existed and whatever, but there had to be a better way than this. But I kept at least a little of it up in case it was important, but mostly I focused on the Merchants.

This map looked a little like a web made by a spider that had been fed drugs. Clumps here and there, and long trails of crackhouses and safehouses that they’d clearly mostly forgotten about, stretching farther and wider than the E88, but existing in the margins.

And it was clear to me now that they had some sort of Tinker messing with their product, making it stronger, more powerful. I’d felt said person, and I’d felt that Lisa had gone down and talked to him. That was enough evidence that I should confront her, though I wasn’t sure if I could stand the kinds of lies and manipulations she’d probably pull out.

I liked her, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t someone a little like Emma, someone who was very handy with making other people do things.

Still, I should at least confront her… but not yet. I wanted to enjoy things.

Even school was going alright. The trio hadn’t suddenly grown a conscience, they weren’t actually non-horrible people now, but I could cope with it a little better. Their words still hurt, though, and yet when they spread a rumor that was true, I could almost scoff at it. Almost.

I wasn’t exactly regretting my choices yet, and things with Rachel seemed both normal and not, now. Now when I saw her look at me, I imagined I saw the interest she’d had in me. And when she looked, I felt like there might be actually something that she was looking at. Something worth looking at.

It was an addictive sort of feeling, in a way.

*******

I stood against the wall of the alley, holding out the cell-phone. It was a very cruddy camera, in a model that was barely new enough for it, but it’d do. I stood back a little, holding it out, and then snapped a photo of my visage. My mask didn’t show anything of my face, but it showed my costume, and that was pretty hard to fake, at least for no reason at all. Once I posted this, that was proof that I was a real, registered cape.

That I was who I said I was, and that I was a hero.

So, that was one thing out of the way.

*******

Friday evening:
“Hey, Rachel,” I said, as she was looking over a book I’d gotten her. It was part of the idea to help her read a little better, though she was reluctant to admit mistakes. I’d noticed that, or at least, she didn’t like admitting how many words tripped her up.

“Yes?”

“If I made clothes for you, would you wear them?” I asked, trying to phrase it innocently.

“What?” she asked, sounding confused.

“I made my own costume, did you know that?”

“No,” Rachel admitted.

“With spider silk. It’s actually pretty strong. It’s supposed to be able to at least make bullets hurt less,” I said. “I could make you a jacket like that, or under-armor. Or perhaps padding to keep from chafing while you’re riding Brutus or one of the other dogs.”

“Oh?” she asked, and I took the neutral tone as an encouragement to go on.

“I’m not exactly a fashionista, but I could also… make other garments.”

“Other garments? Do you want me in some kinda dress or something?” she asked, eyes narrowed, as if she had figured out my grand and evil plot.

Or as if she was going to try to find a way to avoid ever wearing a dress.

To be fair, I couldn’t imagine Rachel in a dress. It just didn’t fit. It didn’t compute, and if I thought about it too long, my brain would probably shut down. Besides, she looked just fine the way she dressed now. More than fine, actually.

“N-no. I meant, well. You know they’re talking about using them for soldiers, so it’s not weird.”

“Using what?”

“Um. Spider silk underwear.”

Rachel let out a laugh, and then looked at me for a moment, her hand reaching out to brush against my shoulder. “Why?”

“Well, it’s harder to tear, and stronger and more durable. Plus, it doesn’t melt as easily, and if there’s a wound there, the silk threads don’t get caught in the wound,” I said.

Rachel was just staring at me. Then she nodded, “Sure.”

“Really?”

“Why not?” she asked, rather firmly. “If they’re not frilly and shit.”

“They won’t be. I’m not even sure how I could do frills, and you don’t seem like the kind of person that likes frills. On you, or anyone else.”

“Yeah,” Rachel said, and she leaned in and looked like she was about to kiss me.

“I’m still learning these things,” I admitted. “About what you like and don’t like.”
She shrugged. “Bodies,” she said, as if it were that simple. But then again, she’d been the one to make the first move, and without her words, I wouldn’t have realized things quite so quickly, so maybe it was that simple. It wasn’t as if I was attached to the deep aesthetic meaning of clothes, so if she saw them just as something to cover the body, that made sense.

“So, I’d need to measure you,” I admitted. “So I knew how to fit it. But…”

I didn’t know how to say that I didn’t know how I’d stand seeing her in clothes that I made, and that this was a good thing, the inability to stand the image. I definitely didn’t know how to explain it without coming off as creepy and weird.

“I get it.” Rachel frowned, looking at me, “I think?”

“So, I brought a tape measure if you wanted to--”

She leaned in, and I saw the kiss coming, and kissed her back.

******

We had sex for a second time. I enjoyed it.

We didn’t actually wind up measuring her on Friday, actually.

I didn’t really mind.

A part of me whispered that this wasn’t right, that this was too hasty and, just as importantly, that I shouldn’t already be ready for more. That it wasn’t normal to feel desire this strong and this soon after ‘fulfilling’ it. But I ignored it, and was glad of it.

Another part of me, far more persuasive, thought something as I lay, my body entwined in hers, my head on her shoulder. I couldn’t stay for long, perhaps thirty or forty minutes at most like this, and even then I’m sure that Dad would freak out.

I thought that I’d love to sleep with her. Warmth against warmth, just laying there, exhausted and tuckered out.

Heck, sex wasn’t even needed. Just imagining… but it wasn’t something that could be done, not really. Not when I had to be home at some point in time. But when I stared up at the makeshift roof, I thought that this was a bad thing.

I wanted to change it.

I knew I would do this again, and again and again. I wanted to date her, to be her girlfriend, which of course also meant that she was my girlfriend too.

I just needed to figure out how to do it.

That was all.

******

On Saturday, I got a call from Lisa, early in the morning as I was headed for Rachel’s.

I wasn’t sure about answering it, but I decided on it after a long moment of hesitation. So I slowed down, my heart racing from the jogging I’d done, and answered. “Hello?”
“Hey, Taylor, how’s it going?”

“Fine. What is it you want?” I asked.

“Well, I want to hang out with you sometime, maybe go shopping.”

“Clothes are just things you wear,” I said, “but sure.”

“Ah,” Lisa said, and I had no idea what the ‘ah’ was for, and it annoyed me a little. I wanted to be at Rachel’s right now. “So, it went well?”

“Oh. You can tell that over the phone?”

“A little, yeah,” Lisa said. “Anyways, what I had to give you was pretty simple. Taking down those E88 people is a big deal, and I thought I’d buy you a smart phone, just a cheap one, so that you could do some of the tracking in the field if you decided to go after anyone else.”

I frowned. I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to feel about it. Anything she bought was to some extent blood money, but then, so was what Rachel got, even if it was just food. So maybe I could take it without it being tainted?

But I wanted to press something else while I was here, and maybe it’d make her think twice about thinking she could buy me. I let out a breath, and said, “Go after anyone else? Except the Merchants, right?”

“What?”

“I saw you moving down to talk to someone that was probably a Merchant, back during our first fight together. Don’t deny it. I bet it’s the new chemical or drug Tinker that’s putting out that new product,” I said. My voice was a little bit of a growl, but now that I was actually thinking about it, I was even more frustrated than I thought I’d be.

“Oh. Ah, yes, bugs. I was warning them to get away. You can go after the Merchants if you want, I was just providing a warning…”

“And they didn’t attack you?” I asked, narrowing my eyes even though she couldn’t see it. “I’m not sure if that actually makes sense. Merchants are violent, and you just showed up out of nowhere.”

“I don’t suppose you’d believe me if I said I was going through a tunnel and was breaking up,” Lisa said, as if she was trying to sound more lighthearted than she was.

“No. I wouldn’t,” I said.

“Okay, well, I have a contact in the Merchants. Someone who knows the Tinker. I used that to contact him, make sure he was on the same page. He’s also someone I could use against them later on. You have to do that: have contacts, have allies and people you can rely on.”

I found myself smiling in the sort of way Rachel might smile. “Ah. So, you’re an evil mastermind in the making? That’s supposed to make me trust you?”

“People have to survive.”

“That’s what you’re doing it for? To survive?” I asked. “Rachel, she does shit for survival. I can tell it. You? You seem to enjoy it.”

“You have to eat to live, but you can enjoy food,” Lisa said, her words a little quieter, as if she were
withdraw ing away from the conversation.

I wanted to press on further, because if the past few weeks had taught me anything, it was that you couldn’t let an enemy get up, and if Lisa was perhaps a friend, she was also a potential enemy.

Maybe even more than potential.

So. “That’s not the same at all. Everyone needs food, but you’re…”

“What? We’ve done a few robberies, but not recently. Recently we’ve been just fighting Nazis.”

“How? How are you getting money, if not through robbery,” I said.

“The E88 has enemies, and we have been taking a little of what the E88 drops.”

“Drugs?”

“No. Arachne, it’s just money. Rachel’s taking her cut too. We do jobs, we get money, and we don’t have to be your enemy. I know that some of us aren’t, and even Regent isn’t as bad as he came off…”

“If you say so,” I said, “…then I’ll hear.”

Lisa didn’t ask the obvious question, of whether or not I’d listen, and she sighed. “Do you still want the phone? And we should hang out. Because I want to…”

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. I just don’t want to see you going it alone without any advice. I know a lot that could be helpful if you were going to be an independent hero.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Want to go shopping with me on Sunday? We can go somewhere other than the mall. Like the boardwalk.”

“You know what, yes. And then I can ask you more about this… or what you’re willing to share,” I said.

“Ah. Well, fair enough,” Lisa said, and I could imagine her shrugging. She clearly thought it was worth it, or perhaps that I’d not follow up.

But I definitely intended to.

********

Sometimes I didn’t know what to expect when I went to Rachel’s. I’d thought that today would involve video games, and it did. And I was working with Rachel on the reading, and I finally found a few poems she liked, if only because they were short.

And there were other interests I could inculcate in her, given time. Movies and music and the like. If I had a smart-phone, I could even just show some off to her without having to buy anything, though I had no idea what her tastes were in that respect. I also didn’t know how to learn all of that kind of thing about her without just asking.

...so maybe I should just ask.
But two things distracted me from this, at least for a little while.

First was a show of trust that I found a little shocking. After we’d been messing around for a while, and of course after I’d helped her with the dogs, she said, “Hey, Taylor.”

Honestly by this point helping out with the dogs felt less like a task and more something that was part of the routine. I enjoyed it, and I felt an odd sense of ownership over them. I knew their names, I knew what they acted like when they were angry and happy and sick. I certainly didn’t know them as well as Rachel did, but that was a minor detail compared to how I was used to the smell of dogs, how I knew their behavior, and how I had favorites. Milk and Bullet, for instance.

“What?” I asked, kneeling next to Milk, whose belly I was rubbing.

“Gotta show you something.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Jus’ follow me.”

I did, not sure what I was seeing. In the back room, there was all of the normal stuff, though I saw that she had two or three dummies now. Were they for training?

But Rachel kept on walking and moved towards a tile in the corner, and then knelt down and pulled it up.

I blinked, surprised, but scooted closer, and then saw a box, amid the dirt. Actually, there were bugs down here, and I’d felt them, but I hadn’t put two and two together, hadn’t controlled the worms to crawl over this large, orange tackle-box.

She unlatched it and opened it up.

Inside there was money. A lot of money, by my standards. It was all in cash, except for a few coins, here and there. Twenties, tens, and hundreds all mixed together in a slurry. “What?” I asked.

“Casino job. And other shit,” Rachel said.

“How much is in there?” I asked, staring at it, shocked.

“Last time I counted, about… six thousand or something?” Rachel frowned, looking at me, but I didn’t see that same suspicion before. “I might have counted some of it twice.”

Before, she’d been afraid I’d make fun of her for that, and of course, before she didn’t trust me enough to show me where she kept her stash.

“Oh, well, I could help you count it, if you wanted.”

“Thanks,” Rachel said.

“Though, why did you show me this?”

“In case you ever need money,” Rachel said.

I blushed. It was just something about how simply she said it.

“Just write the amount on a little piece of paper and leave it, and shit. Just so that I know,” Rachel said with a shrug.
Oh, so she wasn’t that crazy. She was still going to keep track of it, but the offer was both generous and also one I wasn’t sure I could take her up on. Besides it feeling weird, the idea of relying on her for money, even though I was just about broke by this point, there was the fact that it was all dirty money.

Even if the Casino was a front, it was still all illegal. But that was a lot of money down there.

“Got a whole bunch more coming. Don’t spend it on nothing, so if you need a little…”

“A bunch more coming?”

“Lisa said,” Rachel said, but in a way that told me that if Lisa said the sky was blue, Rachel would go out and check.

“Well, I can ask her about it, maybe,” I said, with a shrug. “Thanks, though! I mean, the trust and all…”

“There’s something else.”

“Oh?”

*******

I stared at the dummy, and then at Brutus.

“You gotta tell them,” Rachel said. “Give them an order like you mean it. Then you praise them when they do what you want.”

“I…” I glanced between the dummy and Brutus, who was currently almost up to my shoulder.

“Brutus! Hurt!”

The dog sprung forward and batted the dummy with his shoulder, almost delicately. It half flew across the room, and he pounced. I noticed that he wasn’t biting, just pawing hard and pushing.

“Brutus!” I said, “Hurt super!”

It was a command she had, for when she wanted to hurt someone who didn’t have to be gone easy on, the way Brutus was now when he was that big.

Brutus bit down and started to shake his head back and forth. Of course, sometimes he ‘hurt super’ even when he wasn’t ordered to, but still.

I stared as stuffing flew out.

“Now do it,” Rachel said, crossing her arms.

“I…”

She was looking at me with an intense look that made my knees weak. I was sweating. I shouldn’t care, but--

But I shouldn’t care. I did worse with my bugs, and the time might come when I had to do it.

And she wanted me to be able to do this. She was trusting me with being able to give her own dogs orders and rewards. I knew that this was a big thing for her.
So I said, loud and clear, “Brutus, kill.”

There was almost nothing left of the dummy once Brutus was done with it, though I can’t imagine it tasted good. But he was an obedient dog, no traitor at all, and so he did what he was told, and then returned to me to lick me with his huge, monster-dog tongue and wag his shiny, horrible looking tail.

It made it hard not to smile when I saw all of that, even though I was training myself to express myself in other ways around her.

“Hey, Rachel. Could I grab a twenty and go get us some lunch?” I asked.

“Sure. Why you asking?”

“Well, just wanted to talk to you, get to know you a little more. And I figured we could have lunch. Maybe in for now, but out eventually.”

There was a word for going to lunch with someone you were having sex with. A date. I wasn’t going to say it outright, since I knew she didn’t like me like that, not really. If she did, she’d be blunt. “Wanna date” seemed something she’d say, or at least I couldn’t see why she wouldn’t say that.

But if I eased her into it…

It was an idea. I could be underhanded if I wanted to. And if it didn’t work out, I wouldn’t be putting myself at any risk. Because I didn’t actively state anything, she wouldn’t be able to actively shoot me down.

We could continue to have sex.

It was probably a sign that something was wrong with me, but if that’s all it was, even if there was no hope of it being more… I’d take it.

“Why not,” Rachel said.

*****

We ate sandwiches from a shop a little down the way, still hot. She seemed to be more careful with her food now than before, but when she did get something on her lips, it made me want to wipe it off.

I kept on watching her the whole time. I knew that this had to die down, eventually, the awareness of one another in this kind of way. Or else how did couples do anything? If they saw someone’s lips and their mind dragged them back to the things those lips had done, the kisses and the nibbles.

Was licking someone’s face something that only happened in movies? Would she think it was gross? Why was I thinking about it so much.

“So, what do you wanna know?”

“What movies do you like? Music?”

“Uh,” Rachel said, leaning back. “Like Rock, I guess? Or…”

She frowned a little. “Quiet shit. Relaxing.”

“Ah,” I said. “Well, I’m more of a pop sort of person. I could find some music on my phone, see what we like, on top of the reading. I have a few ideas about the kinds of things you’d like. And
movies?”

“Action movies, maybe?” she asked, a little skeptically.

If she thought this was a little shallow, it was, but better to be slightly shallow than to not know as much about her as I could. That was how you forged relationships, or at least how I saw them forged.

“So, I like green and I jog, I’m a big fan of science fiction and fantasy, and video games as you know, but my Mom got me into foreign films and books that are a little different from that,” I said. “If you ever wanted to watch a movie or something, we could. Together, I mean. Nobody’s going to check or notice that you’re Bitch.”

“Maybe,” she said, and then after a moment her lips pursed slightly, as if now she was actually considering it. “Why not?”

“Good, good,” I said. “So, I know you like Greek, and a lot of meat, but what about other things? Anything else you wanna share?”

“Well, uh, I do the weightlifting,” Rachel said, sounding like she was flailing to find something to say.

Which was a new thing, or rather, it was a new thing that I could see it. From the look on her face, she did want to engage with me in this, but she didn’t really know how.

“Oh? Is that just to get enough strength to handle the dogs?”

Rachel hesitated, and then with what I understood was a mental shrug, she said, “Uh… not just.”

“Not just?” I asked.

Oh. My. God. (Yes, I knew it made me sound like a valley girl.)

Rachel was blushing a bit. “Also, just. Like how…”

She gestured vaguely.

For the first time I’d seen, she was actually hesitating.

“How it looks? Well so do I,” I admitted, reaching a hand out to feel her muscles. I liked that, I liked the hardness of them, I just… well. It wasn’t something I would have expected, considering the few past crushes I could point to as far as other women went, but there it was.

Rachel looked both pleased and like she might just sink into the floor, while I thought about that. So, she lifted weights because she liked how it looked? Or maybe because she thought others would like how it looked? She really didn’t need it, and at most it probably just slightly increased her definition or whatnot, since hauling around those dogs would probably have done, and probably had done, most of the work.

It was something personal, in a way. I wondered, she said she was gay, had she been… I don’t know.

I did remember that she hadn’t had weights here, and then she’d brought them in from her apartment? So, what? Had she wanted them close at hand?

Right after she met me.
“Oh,” Rachel said.

“Yeah. I mean, you’re not…” I trailed off, since I realized that what I was saying was a little too close. I was going to say she wasn’t the sort to have doubts. “Anyways, so, movies, music, there’s plenty we could do together.”

Rachel nodded. “What else you wanna know?”

“Oh! Your measurements. I’ll need them for the clothes I’m making. It’ll be a few days, or more, until they’re done, though,” I said.

“Dunno,” Rachel said.

“Huh?”

“Don’t know them. I’m not exactly stepping on a scale every day or any of that shit,” Rachel said, and that was the aggression and don’t-care attitude I’d expected. It was odd, to see her at once so cavalier about how she looked, and yet apparently uncertain enough that she lifted weights for no real reason at all. Or at least, it didn’t help her any, if her goal was just to be strong enough to handle her dogs.

It was an odd contrast, a little like how she didn’t care about clothes, yet she’d been careful with them before. Sort of.

I wondered what she liked about me. I no longer doubted that she was attracted to me, but there was the question of details, of specifics, of all sorts of other things.

“Well, then I’ll just have to measure you,” I said, with a shrug. “Shouldn’t take too long.”

I had looked up how to do so, in case she didn’t know, though now it felt a little weird.

Still, I got out my measuring tape and got to work. A few more days and the clothes would be done.

*******

Later that day, I returned home, having taken a bit longer than expected to get back. Probably something to do with the makeout session we’d had. I’d never really gotten how other girls were quite so boy crazy, or person crazy in general, but I got it now.

I opened the door and glanced at the table in the living room. Dad was sitting and watching television, but what I noticed most of all was that, unlike normally, there were two empty beer cars sitting on the table.

“Taylor,” Dad said, his voice firm, as if he were working his way up to saying something.

“Yes?” I asked, not asking how he knew I was there. The TV was blaring, but he must have been listening for me.

“...Nothing, nevermind.”

“Okay then,” I said, and I realized it for what it was, realized it for the same thing that had held me back.

Perhaps I’d been my father’s daughter when I’d held back out of fear, out of cowardice, out of worry about what a single wrong word could do to something I valued so much, her friendship.
“I’ll be upstairs in my room,” I said.

Maybe I didn’t want to have this conversation either.
“So how does this look?” she asked, holding up a long, flowing skirt. It was dark brown, the kind of thing you wore to an interview for an important internship, and I tried to be objective and thoughtful about it, looking from the blonde to the skirt, and then back again.

“Maybe too plain, I guess? But really, I’m not the person to judge this kind of thing,” I said, looking at Lisa. She was really getting into this, while I really… wasn’t. It was a nice shop, though. It sold gently used, as the euphemism went, clothing. She’d chosen it, I bet, because she knew that I might feel uncomfortable watching her buy expensive clothing with stolen money.

But really, back when I was friends with Emma, I would have been all over a place like this. It was a way to stretch what little money I had while being as fashionable as Emma. Now, well. Rachel was right. Clothes really mattered for their function. That meant that I could probably use some more sports bras, since I’d not wanted to spend on them for my jogging before. But with all of the hero business I was doing, all the running around and danger, well it made sense.

On the other hand, it was thrift store. But, with a shrug, I decided I’d get the ones that looked like they really were ‘gently used.’

“No, you aren’t,” Lisa said. “But it’s fine. Not everyone’s into fashion. I’d been thinking that maybe you’d want to dress up a little, since you and Rachel…”

I flushed, and said, “Um, she doesn’t care that much about clothes.”

“Does she?” Lisa asked. “After all, all sorts of guys say they don’t care about clothes, and then they do. It’s sorta the way of the world.”

“I think I know Rachel a little better than you,” I pointed out.

“Well, maybe. Still, for me at least, dressing up nice is important. So I spend a little extra on it.”

“I’ve seen how you dress, it’s very formal.”

“No, it’s very normal. Normal and yet professional when I need to be,” Lisa said. “I’m not dressing for a runway or a prom.”

“Neither am I. Who would even ask me?” I said.

Lisa turned, and I saw that I’d said something wrong. “Don’t talk about yourself like that. Especially since you have a lot fewer reasons to be so down on yourself. Rachel probably would.”

“We’re friends with benefits,” I pointed out. “Maybe best friends with benefits.” I blinked, and focused on a more important problem, “Plus, she’s not even in my school, and there’s the whole wanted fugitive thing.”

“Ah, have you looked into that?”

“I’m working on it,” I said. There wasn’t any really simple answer, but I figured if I could convince her to start acting like a hero, which was to say fighting villains and then turning them into the
Protectorate or something like that, they’d be forced to change how they treat her. And as long as I was there, then we’d be a package deal.

And I’d done enough that I thought I deserved some credit. Two E88 busts was a lot more than I’d heard the Brockton Bay Protectorate do in the last while.

“There’s no easy solution. Especially depending on what you want,” Lisa said, quietly. “What do you want?”

“I want what’s best for Rachel,” I said, hoping it wasn’t a lie. Perhaps I was just being selfish and wanted this to continue without the guilt of… of. The guilt of having sex with someone who was a villain. I hesitated. “I guess I also just want to keep what I have, too.”

“I’m not the sort of person who can understand that all that well,” Lisa said, turning her head a little. “My power gives me too many details at once. If I tried to kiss someone It’d tell me when they last brushed their teeth, what they thought about me, whether they had any cavities…”

She trailed off, and I nodded. “Wow,” I said. That really did sound like it sucked.

“Wasn’t much interested in it before I had my powers, but that’s why I’m not exactly up on the details. Just that if you’re enjoying it and she’s enjoying it, then that’s what matters. As long as you’re happy.”

“I am. I’m also not sure why you wanted to go shopping. Bonding?”


“Disguises?”

“If you go after the ABB, Merchants, E88… anyone, then you need to be able to blend into the area. Wearing the wrong thing could get you spotted, and if you’re out of costume, that’s a bad idea.”

“Ah, right. But I’m not exactly… I mean.” What I meant was that a lot of the things that people wore in areas with heavy gang presence were pretty embarrassing. Especially if you were a woman, for that matter.

“Just go with the androgynous look. Or get used to showing a little skin. It’s not as if their eyes mean anything,” Lisa said. “Oh, and here you go.” She tossed me a smartphone, a rather old looking one at that. “I made sure it was as old and worn down as possible, to minimize the guilt of taking it.”

“Gee. Thanks.” I almost stuck my tongue out at her. Something about her definitely brought out the playful side I’d had when I was around Emma. Or at least, there were flashes of it. If only I liked being reminded of Emma, and if only she didn’t smile so much. It seemed that that’s what she did when she didn’t know what to do. The same way a person might tug their hair if they were thinking, or might say, “Um” while they were searching for the next word.

Lisa smiled.

They were very nice smiles, and maybe I was spending too much time with Rachel, but it was a little harder to just ‘switch off’ the social cues, at least compared to earlier.

I mostly didn’t notice it, since it wasn’t as if I was all that happy outside of the time I spent with Rachel, so there weren’t all that many smiles to hide anyways.

“So, my idea is simple… just follow me. I can pay for it, and none of it will be expensive, but a good
disguise is worth every penny no matter how much it costs.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. It felt a little wrong, really, being out of costume. It wasn’t the way the game was supposed to be played, and while Lisa hadn’t yet told me all of the rules, I knew that there had to be a reason people didn’t go around out of costume all the time using their powers.

Yet here I was, picking disguises. Of course, we did run into problems.

“I’m not wearing that,” I said, pointing to a crop-top shirt and a pair of jean shorts that looked like they’d probably look good on someone who wasn’t nearly as bony and flat as me.

“Well, think about it. You’d look good in them, but more importantly, you wouldn’t look like you,” Lisa said. “I have all sorts of outfits for when there’s trouble that share nothing with how I normally dress or my costume either, for that matter. Some of them are sorta like that, some of them are rags. You can go for different looks.”

“And what happens when my Dad sees this?”

“Just keep it at Rachel’s. She’s not going to mind, I’m sure,” Lisa said, pointing over to a skirt. “That’d be good if you wanted to blend in at a nice store, or walk around an upper-class neighborhood and look only a little out of place. The key is, beyond looking somewhat nice, the average rich person mostly dresses like anyone else, but in brands if they care. So if you find something that looks nice, or maybe has the right brand on it even if it’s an old fashion, nobody will care on that front. It’s really harder to disguise yourself as someone poor, I think,” Lisa said.

All of this talk was just a little uncomfortable considering that my own, real clothes were often worn out and worn down. Dad wasn’t poor, he was even middle-class, but basically everything was sunk into the home. We’d gotten one of those long mortgages or something like it, where you pay it off forever at a little bit at a time. But when Mom had died, we’d lost her source of income, and there had been huge medical bills to pay, even if insurance (thanks, college!) covered most of them. So suddenly the payments which had been a tiny part of their spending blew up.

Big time. So suddenly a large part of Dad’s paycheck went to pay off the house, which was starting to get old and creaky anyways.

As far as it goes, there had been a before and after, as far as my life went, even without Emma turning on me. My clothes, what we ate, how much money we had? Everything went from solidly middle class to, effectively, something like lower middle-class.

“Sure,” I said.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Money,” I said.

I wasn’t a greedy person. I didn’t believe that money solved all of the world’s problems, but I did think that having a little more wouldn’t hurt us. But I was going to be an independent hero. I’d just have to deal with it. Protectorate heroes made a very, very good wage, though of course there were huge risks, and villains could be rich, if they did well.

But independent heroes basically just had to suck eggs.

“I know you won’t accept charity, except maybe me buying you some of these clothes,” Lisa said. “But just think about what you want.”
I frowned. “I guess I don’t have a lot of complicated wants right now. I want to be a hero, I want to be with Rachel. Everything else is just too distant to care about. It’s going to be years until I go to college, and it feels even more distant now.”

“Independent heroes can take from the criminals, if it’s a small amount. Or at least, nobody cares about it, as long as they aren’t stealing drugs and evidence,” Lisa said. “But that’s not really a solution, and I bet you wouldn’t do it anyways.”

“I wouldn’t,” I said, glancing over at a ratty pair of jeans that, if Lisa’s coaching was any hint, would be good for pretending to be a hip young teen. If they were the right sort of ratty. It all seemed a little like hanging clothes on a stick, admittedly. “So, I was going to ask you…”

“Ah, and here I was hoping you’d forget.”

“Yes. About the Merchants.”

“We have… well, we have a mission of sorts,” Lisa said. “Can you promise not to tell the Protectorate? For one, they can’t do anything and we aren’t that important, and for two, it’d put your girlfriend in danger.”

“…Okay,” I said, taking a breath, aware that she was dragging me in deeper to this, and also aware that there was nothing I could do about it.

“Well, we have an employer. He or she pays us for each job we do, and gives us suggestions on what to do. I have to assume they have some larger plan, but so far it seems mostly like they just want us to be there. All they give is the occasional bit of help—”

“Or,” I said, piecing things together, “a few people to help Rachel move the dogs?”

“Yes, that too. When I looked into their backgrounds, I couldn’t find much that stood out, and a lot of the names were fake.” Lisa shrugged. “I really do want to learn more about him or her, but…”

“I get it,” I said, though it felt like she was holding a little back. “So, what else?”

“Well, I think you have enough clothes to last forever, you have the smartphone, and you have a plan. And more information to chew on. We could go out for smoothies, but I’m sure you have other things to do,” Lisa said. “This was fun, and we should do it again. Please allow me to pay for it.”

“Well, if you say so…”

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“That’ll be $98.75, sir,” the cashier said a few hours later. I glanced at the shopping cart, loaded down with groceries. I’d gone to the store with Dad to help him get food for the week, which meant entering a grocery store. Which was weird and awkward because there were plenty of bugs, but not nearly enough, and if I brought in bugs people would notice them.

There were tons of bugs in the back, especially near the trash compactor, but the size of the store meant that I couldn’t monitor even half of the people there without running into problems. It was also just so wide-open and huge that I couldn’t monitor everything. I’d been getting used to following everything everywhere, so thoroughly that I didn’t notice it.

For instance, during that talk with Lisa, there had been twelve other people in the store, counting the two clerks. One of them was a woman who, from what I could tell, was looking for sexy lingerie. Another was a mom and her daughter, and there was also a man who seemed to be looking for
whatever was cheapest.

I’d even picked up their tone of voices through the bugs, despite the fact that they weren’t so far away that I couldn’t hear them with my own ears.

All of it had just been without thinking. I hadn’t concentrated on it, it’d just been done. Instincts existed for a reason, and Rachel sure knew how to listen to them, so maybe I should as well.

It was training of a sort. I was getting better, but I had no idea when I’d cross the line where I could listen in on conversations. I did know that a bug’s sense of smell was a pretty good thing too, as far as using senses to know things.

Long story short, though, a place like this didn’t feel safe because I couldn’t put a bug on everyone without someone noticing or swatting it. Rachel didn’t swat bugs - in my presence, at least - because she knew that I was using them to see, or notice things.

Not everyone would know that, and plenty of people wouldn’t want me spying on them. It was still something of an overload if you got too many bugs and I was trying to do too many things, but I guess I was just good at multi-tasking, because I seemed to be getting the hang of it pretty quickly.

None of this was the only reason I was worried, though.

In the cart were two cases of beer. Dad had gotten both, saying, “I ran out on Friday.”

Because now, where he would have drank two beers, he drank three. Or four.

Maybe I was worrying too much, but then he was also not talking about work much anymore, and I didn’t know what was up with that, but I didn’t trust it.

“Thank you,” he said, adjusting his glasses slightly as he pushed the cart forward.

I followed close behind him, following him out into the parking lot, thinking about everything that could be better about our relationship.

But what was I supposed to do? Having Rachel come over could work, but what if he said something? What if he found out I was sleeping with… no, fucking her. That I was having sex with her, or that she was a villain, or even that I was an independent hero, since apparently the chance that I’d be dead in a year was startlingly high.

Independent heroes didn’t last long, all things considered. Not normally, at least. It was enough to make any father worry.

“Dad?” I asked.

“Yes?”

“... what are we having for dinner?”

“I dunno. I thought you were going to make dinner,” Dad said.

Well. I could do that. But usually on the weekends he was more willing to take that duty over. But perhaps he was too busy, or perhaps he was too tired. I could help out there, but it made me wonder about a lot of things.

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On Monday, school started to kick into overdrive. It was inevitable, because now that it was getting well into May, there was only about a month or less until we got out of school. That meant final exams, that meant standardized testing, and it also meant students who were sick and tired of school and just wanted to get it all over with.

People paid less attention in class if they didn’t care, or struggled to pay even more if they wanted to do well on the tests that the state set. And that meant I was torn, somewhere in the middle, honestly.

I wanted to do well on the tests, but I had so much more to do with my life now. It didn’t seem to matter as much now that I was a parahuman with someone I wanted to woo. So I paid enough attention not to be called out, and tried to deal with the other problem.

They kept on trying to trip me, and the rumors just got worse and worse. Emma smiled smugly at me whenever I saw her, and Sophia looked like she’d like nothing more than to hit me. Madison seemed to act like normal, but she’d always been the one to get the least into any of these games, relatively speaking.

All of this felt like it was building up, and even if I could use my bugs to avoid some of the traps, I couldn’t avoid other problems. I knew that if they had even the slightest idea of what I was doing when I wasn’t at school…

They’d make it sound horrible. I’d be a villain, or worse, before I knew it.

The day was only looking worse and worse, and if this was representative of what would wind up going down, then there was no way I’d last the week.

I wanted to just trip them back, but then what would that do? I remembered what I’d told Rachel: I also remembered what Rachel would have done. I wasn’t sure whether my own choice to be ‘above it’ wasn’t just letting myself be trapped.

I had to think that I knew what I was doing. But Winslow was the kind of environment that brought out the worst in me, which made it odd that my range always felt best there. The only place I could remember where my range felt longer was when I was institutionalized. Then it’d felt like I could feel every bug in the city, though some of that was just my inexperience and confusion.

If I’d been in there longer, perhaps I would have learned to despise routine even more than I did. As it was, some routines could be good, and I was looking forward to seeing Rachel again.

In fact, I was barely thinking about lunch as I ate.

“Whoa, Taylor, slow down,” Greg said, which was pretty hypocritical of him, all things considered.

“Sorry, distracted.”

“How did it go with her?”

“How did it go?” I asked, playing dumb.

“Yeah. Did you level up the relationship?”

“Did I what?” I asked, genuinely baffled and amused at the same time.

“Or do you still need to give her a few more items to raise the relationship values,” Greg said.

I knew for a fact that as socially awkward as Greg was, he didn’t actually think that romance worked
like it did in western RPGs. Which meant he was making a joke. And that should be encouraged.
“Well, I’m not sure what I’d give her. A collar? She already has some for all of her dogs,” I said, “and dog food? She has that too.”

I shrugged, “Who knows?”

“Is that a yes?”

I nodded, “But don’t go spreading it around, you know what those bitches would say.”

“Whoa. Man, you’re really getting into this whole… thing.”

“What thing?” I asked, and now I was really getting confused.

“I mean. You’ve been changing, Taylor. It’s not always bad, though some of it is sorta weird, but if you’re happier, that’s the important thing.”

“I am.”

“Good,” Greg said, sounding a little nervous, as if it was in doubt that I was happy. “So, uh, um. Can I meet her sometime?”

This time I actually kept my mouth shut and thought about whether it’d be a good idea or not first, because you could make the same mistake time and again, yes, but eventually you had to learn from your mistakes or you were a fool.

“I… maybe. We’d have to find time, and I’m not sure how she’d react to that.” I also didn’t know how he’d react to Rachel. And what if he recognized her or looked her up a little more? I wasn’t sure whether things would get out of hand.

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust him, but this was, honestly, something I didn’t want to mess up, and I knew I’d messed up relationships before. Friendly and otherwise.

“Oh. Well, okay,” Greg said, sounding a little put out. “So have you been able to play any Gotcha Racers?”

“Well, a little, but I’ve been very busy lately.”

Every night, out and hunting down Merchant locations. It was a wonder I hadn’t witnessed a murder yet.

“Uh, well, feel free to call me.”

“I’ll try--”

If I had time.

“Sure,” Greg said, awkwardly.

“Don’t worry, if you go to the big tourney city-wide, I’ll be there to back you up.”

“Really?” Greg asked, and he was back to excitable puppy. And trust me, I knew enough about puppies now to know that even among puppies, there were ones that were even more enthusiastic.

The dogs were easy to deal with, though I was busy thinking a lot more about the person who came with them. They liked me, I liked them, and I fed them and cared for them and, if need be, cleaned
That many dogs meant that it was all a lot of work, but I got used to it, and I dealt with it. It really was that simple.

“Yes. Of course,” I said. “Why would I lie to you?”

“Right, right,” Greg said, biting his lip. “I do wanna meet her, though. I mean, we’re friends and all, and… stuff.” He waved his arms vaguely.

“I’ll think about it. I’d have to ask her, of course. And she’s very busy with her job.”

“Her job?”

Oh. Uh. Crud. “Taking care of the dogs is basically a full-time job when you have as many dogs as she does,” I said.

“That many?” he asked, sounding almost suspicious.

“Dogs are cool.”

Greg did something halfway between a giggle and a snort. “Of course you’d… sorry. Anyways, so, we should talk more about games. I never taught you that game you watched, did I. I could do that this weekend?”

“Sure. We could talk via the phone.”

“I could come over.”

I frowned, then shrugged. “Why not? But be careful. Dad’s sorta… suspicious lately. For whatever reason.”

“Does he know?”

“No,” I said.

He mimed zipping his lips and throwing away the key, and then started miming other actions that were rather more extreme, all of them, I assumed, to hide the secret.

“Well, I’m going to trust you.”

“Aye aye,” he said, with a salute, “I won’t let you down.”

If he was trying to improve my mood… than it worked. If he was trying for any dignity at all, not so much.

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That night, I witnessed what might be a murder. By witness, I meant I was three or so blocks away, maybe a little more, and the person wasn’t moving, but I couldn’t feel or smell as much blood as I thought there’d be.

And that wasn’t all. Half a block from me, before I realized and hurriedly evacuated my bugs, some prostitute was having sex in exchange for a needle. My bugs could feel her shudder when she plunged it in, could see the needle.
I could see, in some vague way, through the eyes of my bugs now, but hear?

‘Oh… God?’

Is that what she said? Then I realized it had to be, when those words were repeated again and again, and then I got my bugs out of there, and fast, because I didn’t want to see any of this. Hear any of this.

The Merchants were disgusting, though also smart at times. They moved their stash houses, I thought, as I went from one fast food joint to the next, dressed in baggy jeans and a crop-top shirt that made me feel as if I were on display. But nobody gave me a second look, which was about what I was expecting.

Smart at times meant that they moved their stash houses every day, and they didn’t take about business where everyone could hear it. Of course, everyone didn’t include bugs, and I was getting closer and closer to cracking how to interpret sound into words, at least some of the time.

The way I saw it, despite the headaches it gave me, the more practice I got with it, all the time, everywhere, the more likely I’d figure it out. That meant that I was doing it 24/7, more or less, and making sure to track absolutely everyone and listen to all of them, too.

Add enough data up and you ended up with facts, if your brain could interpret them. And for whatever reason, mine could, even though the mix of information, all at once, should have been as overwhelming as it’d been months and months ago when I’d triggered and wound up in a psych ward because of it.

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An ordinary enough Tuesday, almost better than Monday even, found me getting home a little later than usual by five or so minutes, only to find that Dad’s car was already in the driveway. Huh, he was home early.

When I opened the door, I noticed a can on the kitchen counter, and my Dad already in front of the television. It was the beer he’d bought, and he was already one can in, and he was drinking his way through a second. Normally he waited until dinner to start drinking, and I hefted my backpack and said, “I’ll start dinner soon. How does steak and potatoes sound? Plenty of meat.”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Dad said.

I hesitated, and almost just went up to my room, as I had before. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Dad grunted, again.

“So, will you need any help this year?”

“For what?” he asked. His voice wasn’t slurred, at least, but it sounded a little thick and heavy.

“The proposal? You do it every year.”

“Yes. I did,” Dad said. “Every. Year.”

It was hopeless, the ferry, but that was Dad. Mom had confided once that that’s one of the things she loved about him, his willingness to stand up for a cause even if it was hopeless.

“I’m sure that we can do better this year. Did you hear, there’s an upswing on shipping,” I said,
firmly. “At least a little of it has to go our way, and Brockton Bay needs a kick in the rear. The mayor also has to run for re-election, and that means your vote matters.”

“Not enough.” Dad got up, having finished a second beer. He set the can down on the counter, and then got another. He drank it rather quickly as I tossed my backpack aside. I wanted to kick up my feet, but I had cooking to do. “You know it, Taylor.”

“Maybe I like being hopeful,” I said, my words coming out rather sharper than I thought they would.

“About what?”

About the girl I want to be girlfriends with? About my hero career?

“About friendship and life and all this other shit,” I said.

“Taylor. Don’t curse.”

“Really?” I asked, glancing over at the beers. I knew that there wasn’t a lot of alcohol in them, so that slight heaviness could just be exhaustion, but when he finished a third, that meant that he was at least getting a bit tipsy, and he grabbed a fourth while heading for the television.

It was blaring news about some disaster or another in some whole other country. An earthquake, and now a bunch of villains were stealing from disaster victims. The news was because they were foreign villains, and despite it being an isolated incident, they were calling it “Disaster Villain Tourism”, like there were villains from the U.S. just jaunting around the world committing villainy.

Jack Slash notwithstanding, that is.

“Yes. This is my house,” Dad said. He was well on his way to a fourth beer, in what seemed to be under an hour, and I knew it wasn’t a good idea at all. I had no idea what had set him off, but I’d never seen him like this. There was anger, yes, in his voice, but the exhaustion didn’t fit well with it.

“Oh? I didn’t notice,” I said, before I realized just how much I’d regret it.

Dad just hunched his shoulders and sat back down. I could see the way his features were trying to compose themselves. I had to guess that he was holding himself back from saying something very unwise.

“I’m going to make dinner now,” I added, and slipped into the kitchen.

I began getting things out and ready, looking forward already to leaving home and visiting Rachel. I knew that Dad was great, considering how much of a wreck I’d been after Mom died, but he’d been drifting at times, and he seemed to be getting worse recently.

When I was sure he wasn’t watching, I grabbed one of the beers he’d set on the counter and sniffed at it, and then looked inside. There was a little left, and I tipped it up to give me a sip. There was a little left, and I wasn’t going to actually get drunk.

I tasted it, and almost immediately spit it out in the sink.

How did he drink this? How the heck could this be enjoyable, let alone four cans of it? I wiped my tongue, but that couldn’t get rid of the taste, and it was in my mouth the whole time I was cooking dinner for the two of us.

The steak was good, though. I couldn’t use the grill, but I made a pretty good attempt despite that
limitation, and potatoes and the vegetables weren’t hard. I probably should eventually try to learn a little more than just literal meat and potatoes, but it fit what Dad was hungry for, and if I ever needed to cook for Rachel, it’d probably fit her tastes as well.

Though the thought of cooking for her was weird. A little too domestic, in a way. Better to just order food out. Felt more like a date anyways. Upstairs, I had clothes that were almost, but not quite, done. I couldn’t give them to her tonight when I saw her, but just a few more nights, and I’d have at least a decent part of a costume, and some underwear for her as well. I just dyed them black, because it was cheapest and because it made sense as a plain, ordinary color that didn’t stand out.

I had all of the clothes at least in their finishing stages, and I knew that if I kept this up, I was going to actually start to learn how to make even more complicated clothes than my costume. I didn’t know how to feel about that, considering it wasn’t really a sideline I’d ever thought of.

I didn’t picture myself as some sort of weird clothes making rogue, even though there was a cape called Parian who did exactly that.

This was just a side-project compared to what I was really going to be doing.

I glanced over at the beer several times as I was cooking, almost wanting to find a way to steal it as ‘evidence’ or to ask if Rachel drank. She could if she wanted to, but I’d feel a little disappointed if she drank all the time. Though, if she did, I would have seen it, right?

Maybe I was just being paranoid. Actually, there was no maybe to the situation at all. I was worrying over almost nothing, and as soon as I’d washed the dishes, I headed out of there, trying to avoid talking to Dad as much as possible. He seemed to be doing the same with me, having concentrated on his food, and his drinking, and the television.

It was a miserable night out, almost drizzling a little, but I hurried there, and arrived panting probably a little bit before yet another thunder shower. May, what could you do?

Rachel was already there by the time I knocked, having heard the dogs go crazy.

“Man, you know, one day they’ll get used to it,” I said.

“They won’t,” Rachel said. She wasn’t frowning, though, and she sounded amused by my optimism.

I didn’t need amusement right now. I hurried forward, closing the door, and she finally realized something was wrong. “Taylor, you okay?”

I sighed. “Not really.” She looked at me for a moment, as if she wanted to hear more, but she didn’t ask. We went to the door and opened it, and then dealt with the barrage of dogs.

I let myself be pulled down to their level and scratch ears and rub bellies for a while. It was relaxing, if the reason why our house’s water bill was just going up and up. I didn’t want anyone at school to notice me smelling like dog, even though I was sure that Rachel didn’t mind, considering that she constantly smelled that way. At least a little, no matter what.

She was watching me, a concerned expression a face that couldn’t objectively be called attractive, but which felt familiar and comfortable.

“Do you drink?” I asked.

She shrugged, clearly not sure what I was getting on about. Her arms were crossed, and they seemed damp. Had she been working out before I got there? If so, despite my poor mood, a part of me
wished I’d gotten there earlier. But probably it was just that she’d been out during some sort of brief shower.

Rachel shrugged. “Done it a few times. It’s alright. Nothing special. Do you want a drink or something?” She didn’t seem troubled by the idea that I would, despite the fact that I was fifteen, though I wasn’t naive. I knew that tons of teens did it.

“No. Dad was drinking today.” I saw a look of anger flash across her face, and wondered, as I rubbed one dog’s head, just what she expected. “Oh, he didn’t do anything. He was just… defeated. Hopeless. Exhausted. And frustrated with me in general. It just got me thinking. I don’t like it, the way he was, but it’s not like I’m not my father’s daughter. I could give up that easily, or something. I dunno.” I tried for a shrug, but Rachel was moving forward.

She wrapped her strong arms around me into a hug that was almost crushing, but not quite. I breathed in, and out, and smelled soap. She must have washed just before I got here. Washed the sweat of a day off because she knew I was coming here, and however much my brain might throw up attractive images of her lifting weights or running, that didn’t mean I liked sweat or anything.

I wasn’t crying, not even close, but I did sort of feel in the kind of place where I could have. I hugged her back, not in the mood for anything more than that.

“Didn’t know my father,” Rachel admitted, frowning.

“And I guess you never really fear that you’re going to become your stepmother, do you?” I asked. “Fuck, I mean. If you’d told me a few years ago that I was my father’s daughter, I would have liked it. Or my mother’s daughter. Now, I don’t know. He doesn’t approve of you, and he hasn’t even met you.”

Rachel was frowning, when I looked in her face, and I could tell she was holding back something just like Dad was.

“What is it?”

“Fuck him,” Rachel said. “You’re fifteen, not five.”

“Well, yeah, but…” I shrugged. “I’m doing a lot that I’m not used to. I mean, I’m not trying to babble but all of this is new and I’m not experienced like you might be and yes, yes I was bisexual, but all I’ve had so far before you were a bunch of crushes on celebrities or that kind of random thing. It’s never been flesh and blood, and I’m not even sure what I’m supposed to do with that.”

I took a breath, a deep one, but the words still wanted to spill out.

“What celebrities?” Rachel asked.

I blinked, surprised by the odd question, or rather, the completely normal question. “You see, there was this fantasy movie that had this warrior queen hero, played by Lucy Holden. I kept on sharing articles with Emma about how awesome she was, and this thing, and that thing, and then eventually she accused me of having a crush on her, and I thought about it and I kinda did. But Emma was okay with it, not like later when she used it as a weapon against me. And there’s always been a few others like that. Female celebrities that draw my attention, I crush on them for a while, and then it goes away. Never any chance for it to be real, so when I had a crush on you, I guess I just sorta treated it the same way I would have anything else?”

“Okay,” she said, blandly. “Got that.”
“What about you?”

“Was, what, seven? I dunno. Had a crush on this girl with really nice pigtails or something. I can’t even remember her name, cause it wasn’t important. Wound up saying something, and the foster dad at the time wasn’t a complete bastard, or if so he was weird. He said he was fine with it, and said that I’d have to be strong to be like that, or something, and then he kept on trying to make me watch sports with him. Bonding or something.”

“And you didn’t want to?” I asked.

Rachel snorted, “Fuck no. Sports are boring. Just a bunch of pointless running around.” She pulled away from me a little bit, and the dogs were of course sniffing around us, trying to get in on this cuddling though.

“Nice pigtails?” I asked, touching my hair.

Not because I was going to wear pigtails, because that was silly, but because I wondered if that’s what had attracted her first, my hair.

Rachel reached a hand out and touched my hair. “I like it,” she said. “Just like this.”

I flushed. I still wasn’t in the mood at all, I was still not interested, but she knew just what to say. “Oh, well. Thanks. I know I’m maybe, I mean. We don’t really talk about the… the.”

“Fucking?” she asked. She didn’t even sound amused at how I could have sex with her multiple times and yet hesitate to say it outright. Instead she sounded like she was just helpfully filling in the blanks.

“I know I’m not really experienced, and if there’s anything…”

“Only had sex once before anyways,” Rachel said.

I looked up, not sure whether I was more surprised that she wasn’t a virgin, or that she had only had sex once.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nothin’ to talk about. Some weird homeless lady, year ago or so. Said she liked my muscles, asked if I wanted to fuck. I did,” she said, as if it didn’t mean anything, “and we did. Then she kept on coming around, and I think she was part of some gang or shit, but I just scared her off. Plus, there’s been a few people I run across, they’re straight and all. So I made sure before asking you.”

I blushed. “I was that obvious?”

“Yeah,” Rachel said bluntly. “Staring at my arms. So I started working out more and shit, cause then you’d stare more and maybe say yes faster.”

“Faster? You always knew I’d–”

“Figured you would,” Rachel said.

I took a breath, and nuzzled my nose against the nape of her neck. “You were right. So, I mean, is there anything…?”

“I’d tell you if you were screwing up,” Rachel pointed out.
“We could try new things,” I said. “I could look up stuff.”

“If you want,” Rachel said, sounding neither for nor against the idea. “I like what we do.”

In the last week, then, she’d had more sex with me than she’d ever had in her life, I thought, feeling oddly accomplished, even though that tiny voice in my head kept on whispering that it wasn’t, that only a slut would care about that.

But whatever. Blast it. I felt proud in some strange, hard to define way. And I wanted to keep on making her feel good, especially since she was pretty good at returning the favor.

Though honestly, as red as my face was, it was a wonder I didn’t combust. “Thanks,” I said. “Sorry that I’m coming here and bringing all my trouble.”

“It’s fine. I could meet your Dad or whatever if that helped.”

“Maybe. As far as it goes, well, Rachel, what do you know about dockworkers?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay, just tell me if I’m boring you. Ever since Leviathan started doing his thing, combined with the general trends in general, it’s been going downhill. Brockton Bay too, I think, though there are the new biomed corporations and all of that. But my Dad works on the dock. Loads and unloads ships. He thinks that if we had a ferry between parts of the city that it’d help, and that there were a bunch of other things we could do,” I explained, hugging her tight.

She was warm, and the dogs made it even better. Just laying there.

She didn’t complain that I was heavy, even though I was kinda sprawled out on top of her.

“And every year, he keeps on proposing it to this mayor, or that mayor. He does work, sometimes even spend a little of the dockworker’s funds on surveys and studies and the like. Not full ones, because he can’t afford it, but enough to show it’s popular, or that estimates are that it wouldn’t be too expensive. Or whatnot. And every year it fails. And a person can get tired of failing again and again, but I just… I don’t know. I get tired too, sometimes.”

“Lisa once told me I don’t give in,” Rachel said.

“As a good thing?”

“She said I was stubborn,” Rachel said. “It was back when I first met her and she was baring her teeth at me all the time and hanging around. I made her shovel shit, and she didn’t even push back like you did.”

“Ah,” I said, wondering about that. Or rather, wondering about Lisa and Rachel. “She just doesn’t know how to talk to you. She’s not a bad person, even if it’s fine that you don’t like her. Maybe I’m already used to people like her?”

“Maybe,” Rachel said. “She said I’d just keep on getting up and trying the same thing again.”

I frowned. “You mean, strategy wise?”

“Sure.”

“Well, you know. I think I appreciate that. Or I could, right now. Better than giving up,” I said.
“Course,” Rachel said.

We stayed like that for a few dozen more minutes, and then pulled apart and talked about books and video games, or rather she listened to me ramble and, I assume, appreciated it at least enough to nod along.

I didn’t feel great, but I did feel better.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't read my own work (well, this chapter) in a while, and I was oddly kinda touched with the past-crush confession scene in a way I wasn't when I was writing it? It was an important moment? At the time I liked it, but in retrospect I get way too sentimental about the parts of my work I like.

Hope you enjoyed.
My backpack was a little fuller that evening, because I was taking Rachel’s stuff to her. Wednesday at school had come and gone, and now I had the clothes done for Rachel. I just needed to get to her, and then I’d see whether she liked them.

It was a nice evening out, the sun starting to dip, but the sky still bright, and people enjoying weather somewhere between Spring and Summer. It was just-right weather, honestly, and I was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of shorts as I jogged along.

Halfway to Rachel’s, I was stopped by a shout, and a crash. It couldn’t have come from within the last few blocks, so what was it? And that’s when one of my bugs alighted on someone’s back, and another flew up into the corner of the alley. From it, I could vaguely piece together a few simple facts.

A group of people in costumes were heading through the allies, fleeing rather quickly.

I recognized one of them. Victor.

That told me all I needed to know, when combined with my vague understanding of exactly where I was. When I glanced around at the street signs, that told me that this had to be a breakout from the PRT building. A breakout which had apparently succeeded.

“Damn it,” I muttered to myself, and tried to find an alley to change into. I couldn’t put on my full costume, not and have enough time to do anything about them, but if I pulled on my mask and tried to work from afar, maybe I could manage something?

After all, with my bugs and my range of a few blocks, I could in theory take someone down from a long way away. Still, I wished I’d gathered more dangerous bugs than I had, because other than a handful of bees, I really didn’t have anything that could, for sure, take someone down. The spiders were headed that way, but--

But I did have a weapon of sorts. Or at least, there was something I could do. I found the alley and made sure nobody was looking and then unzipped my backpack. I’d put my costume in, because I’d been thinking about asking Rachel to keep it in case Dad hunted in my room and found it.

Yes, the trust and love really were there 200%.

So I pulled out my new smart-phone, and the mask, and as I put it on I dialed the PRT’s number and pulled on the mask, while I kept watch over them.

It felt like it was something large. I couldn’t see much through my bugs, but I could get the general shape of the group.

Victor, Othala, Krieg, a female cape of some kind, with--

It looked almost like a cage, if I had to try to read what a bug could see of her? But I couldn’t be sure.

And then behind them, like a stalking horse, two other capes.
One of whom was clearly some kind of monster.

It had to be some new E88 cape that I didn’t know about, though not the other new one that had been promptly captured before anyone could pay too much mind to him.

I took in the details of the two stalking horse capes, who might have been a guard in the back, or might have been there in case the Protectorate cut them off and they needed reinforcements.

The monsters form was horrific, clearly some sort of shape-shifting thing, while the other was wearing some sort of costume. I could vaguely, through my bugs, see a mask and they could smell details that I had to guess were maybe… male? I’d need a lot more bugs on him than I had to tell more than that, and most of them were focusing on surrounding the moving force of four nazis.

I had to hit them hard and fast, and I needed to take them out before they could even guess how close, or in this case how far, they were.

They were moving a little closer to me, I thought, but not directly as if they were running at me, and they couldn’t possibly know my range, considering that even I didn’t know it. That meant I had an advantage, and at the moment, hiding and just taking them out from afar seemed like a very good idea.

How the heck had they managed to lose all of these prisoners?

I hit an answering machine.

“If you have something related to a crime in progress, press 4, if you are a cape, press 5…”

Five. I slammed down on the button, and waited for a response. They were continuing to move, and if I didn’t attack them soon, I wouldn’t have a chance of catching them all. I didn’t know if I had a chance anyways, because I was just one cape, and where was everyone else?

Actually, if it was a breakout, then it might be a full breakout, in which case it could be that everyone else was trying to keep in the main body. Fenja, Menja, maybe Hookwolf and Kaiser if they were coming to rescue their subordinates. If that was so, then this was a side-mission of sorts. That meant I might be on my own, but I shouldn’t assume.

The spiders were almost in place, sort of. They were pretty slow moving down the streets, but they were getting close enough that I could guess that they’d manage to make it, though I had no idea how much they’d really get done.

“Hello?” a woman’s voice said.

“Hello, this is Arachne. I’m tracking some escaping villains that I’m assuming you’re looking for?” I asked.

“Yes. There was an E88 breakout. The Protectorate is currently engaged with Purity, Kaiser, Hookwolf and others. Who is it that you’re noticing, ma’am?”

The woman sounded professional and a little crisp, as if she were dealing with too much at once.

“Moving between Warren and West 18th are… Victor, Othala, Krieg, and a cape with a cage mask? And then behind them a way is some sort of male in a mask, and a cape that’s some kind of shape shifting monster?”

“Victor, Othala, Krieg and Cricket?” the woman asked. “They must have sent them off in order to
fight the Protectorate. The other two… they fit the descriptions of Night and Fog, but they were supposed to be in Boston.”

“And Purity is supposed to be some sort of independent hero,” I said, the frustration showing. We’d done so much to chop them down, to the point where they’d lost huge chunks of territory, and now apparently all of them were getting away.

“Ma’am, are you currently tracking them?”

“Yes. Victor has…” a pause to let my bugs carefully fly around, seeing the vague images and shapes that I had to interpret, “a rifle or something. They’re moving west, from alley to alley. If you get someone to cut them off, they can’t do much about it except go back. What are the powers of Night and Fog?”

“Fog has the ability to transform into a gaseous form, in whole or part. Inhaling it is not advised, as it can do horrific, long term damage. When he’s a gas, though, he is very slow, and if you don’t breathe in, the damage is supposed to be…” she paused, and I heard typing, “only somewhat severe.”

I could deal with that, I thought, as I got all of the bugs in position. I’d need to rush him, and sting him again and again before he took the form of, well, fog. And if he did, then if he was slow enough, then he’d be a non-factor. “And Night?”

“If nobody sees her, she seems to be able to turn into some strong, fast, and tough monster when nobody sees her. This seems to include cameras if someone is looking at them, but--”

My bugs were all over her. “But not my bug-senses.”

“Bug senses?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “How else would I be telling you exactly where they are?”

It seemed an obvious application of my power, to me. One that anyone would have thought of, honestly, if we got down to it.

“Understood. We will try to see if we can get anyone to come and help. Most of our forces are occupied with the rest of the E88.”

“What about New Wave?”

“They’ve joined in, they’re currently fighting Purity.”

I looked in the sky, but could see no hint that Purity was making a light show in the sky.

“Well, if they can spare anyone, that’d be nice,” I grumbled. “I’d like to not lose all of the people I worked so hard to get imprisoned.”

The bugs were almost in place.

“Keep in contact with us and report what they are doing,” she ordered.

“I can do that,” I said.

Then I focused. The spiders came around the corner just as the bees started buzzing from behind them, so they turned as one, and that’s when I had the swarm of flies strike. I was aiming for Krieg, because the jerk had nearly killed me, and I wanted him out of the way. A fly buried itself in his eye
as he screamed, and flailed. I then made sure to send as many bees as I had on Othala, as she began to shout.

Then I lost coherence in my picture for a moment. My bugs had heard something, and I wasn’t sure what it did, except that it seemed to be a noise, and my bugs were flailing. It had to be coming from Cricket, whose powers I didn’t really know about. They were confused, so I just ordered them to go forward and sting everything. Anything more complicated than these vague instructions seemed like it’d be a problem.

Damn. Her power was a counter to mine, at least a little, though I was gratified that it felt like Othala was down on the ground. It was too bad I didn’t have even more poisonous bugs. Or Japanese Hornets. I’d read about them and been fascinated by just how dangerous they could be.

Bitch had a kill command, and I could have giant hornets, but I hadn’t really had time, and now I was going to pay for it.

As long as they were locked down trying to deal with the bugs, that was good, though. It meant they weren’t escaping. And I was hidden away, out of the way, and--

Victor went down with Othala and touched her. I had to assume he was invincible, and so I threw a regular hornet at his eye, only for it to bounce off. He said something angry sounding, and I couldn’t make out more than that. My bugs were dazed and confused, but it seemed like everyone was getting stung, at least. Meanwhile, Night and Fog were getting closer, slowly but surely, as if they didn’t know about the attack yet.

“Cricket seems to be able to confuse my bugs,” I said. “But I’ve downed Othala, though she’s still moving and able to give powers. I’m stinging them as much as I can, but it’s just going to slow them down. Night and Fog are getting closer and… oh. Victor seems to be going forward.”

He was moving forward, in my general direction, at high speed. He was basically running, in fact, and I saw him pull out a phone. Shoot. Was he hunting for me? I looked around, nervous, sweating now, and pulled back a little further into the alley. There was a dumpster at one end, filled with buzzing flies, and if I got behind it, maybe I could remain hidden. I knew the invulnerability only lasted so long, and so I kept as many dangerous bugs as I could on him, directing them to constantly buzz around him, trying to bite at him.

The moment he could be hurt, I was going to hurt him, and damn the consequences.

“Victor currently headed my way, doesn’t know exactly where I am,” I said. “Are there any capes coming?”

“Velocity has rerouted. Please tell me their exactly location.”

“In the alleyway near the Pizza Pit, between it and the auto shop.” Both of them had about the same amount of grease, so it made sense to me.

“Understood. We will try to get other heroes to that location as soon as possible.”

“They’re still moving, but they’ve slowed down. They’re waiting for Night and Fog,” I said, my voice in a hurry as I felt him getting closer. Across the street, he popped out of an alley, now perhaps a few dozen feet from me.

Shit. Shit. “Victor is nearly on me,” I said. “Can’t look to see what he has exactly, but it’s some sort of rifle.” My heart was beating triple-time, because if he actually got up on me, I wasn’t wearing my costume, and even that might not save me. I pulled out part of it, wishing I’d had time to zip into it.
For the moment, all I could do was sort of wrap part of it around my torso, like it was a jacket and I was trying to not have to carry it. It still left most of my body exposed, and while the mask part was armored with spider silk too, that wouldn’t help a point blank headshot.

I tried to be as quiet as I could when I spoke.

“You should retreat,” the woman said. “There’s no use in holding a position like that if you’re going to…”

“It’s fine,” I hissed, quietly. “He only has a little longer before he’s no longer invulnerable.”

I brought some more bees in the direction of Cricket and company. They couldn’t see well, and I was sure they were missing as often as not, with her powers going, but Othala and Krieg were both downed, though Night and Fog were almost to them. But neither of them were capable of healing, and once I took out Cricket.

A stumbling wasp stung Cricket in the eye, and she screamed. She was bleeding, I thought, and I could hear it all through my bugs better now that she was down. I was pretty sure that stinging someone in the eye so hard they started bleeding was either a really bad, or a really good, idea. Depending on your metric.

I could hear someone entering the area, though they were moving too fast for me to see, and I had to assume that this was Velocity, though if so, he was too late, because Night and Fog entered the right alley just as he got within a few blocks of them. Of course, as fast as he was, he’d catch up soon.

“Night and Fog found them,” I began. “All four are down. Trying to kill them.”

Fog couldn’t choose who was affected by his power. If so, he could just kill the bugs and leave his teammates alive, but unless he just decided to murder four people just to kill a few bugs I was controlling, he’d have a problem.

Just like I had a problem, because Victor was now standing in the mouth of the alley.

“Come out, come out, bug bitch,” Victor called.

I didn’t correct him, because it didn’t matter. Plus, he was getting closer and closer. He was walking slowly though, the idiot. He--

One of my bugs went to his waist, as he pulled out something they hadn’t seen or felt. It was round, and from the way he was looking like he was about to throw it, I had an idea of what it could be. As I tried to get my bug’s eyes in on it, he tossed it, and I half-sprung out of cover before I realized it was just a rock.

Victor shot from the hip. It slammed into my shoulder, covered by the costume, and glanced off as I fell.

Glanced off makes it sound as if I were not in incredible, agony. My shoulder felt like a massive bruise, and my focus on the fight scene, where Velocity was zooming around and trying to juke Night as Fog tried to drag the collected villains away.

“Arachne, are you alright?” the PRT agent asked.

“No, she isn’t,” Victor said, even though it wasn’t on speaker and so she couldn’t hear him. He as stepping forward, aiming to where he knew I’d fallen when he’d taken the shot. He was just going to shoot me again, and then I’d probably die.
“Going to… kill a defenseless woman?” I asked, panting, mostly trying to distract him, since I had no doubt that if he was really going to murder me, little details wouldn’t matter. Plus, I wasn’t defenseless.

“You’re a fucking murderous bitch,” Victor said. “Coming after people with a bunch of bugs. Die like the race traitor that you are.” He stepped around the corner, and that’s when as one I had all of the bugs swarm in front of his face and began to roll.

A gunshot was incredibly loud close up, but I didn’t feel as if I were bleeding, and then his protection wore off.

He went down as the bugs went straight for the eyes, and stung and bit everywhere they could. They shoved themselves down his throat and up his nose, though in the latter case just to make him panic for a moment. He didn’t deserve any less, I thought, panting as I stood up, picking up the phone and walking towards him. “I have Victor, can you make sure they don’t get Othala? I’m going to make sure that anyone that gets away is going to have plenty of bee stings to justify.”

“You have him? In what way?”

“He’s covered in bugs and currently blinded,” I said. “I’m forcing some down his throat, they’ll crawl out once he passes out from lack of air.”

“Oh,” the woman said.

“He tried to shoot me,” I said. “I’m not bullet-proof. He’ll recover. Velocity, on the other hand, needs help.”

He was having to run from Night, because of how fast she was moving, and how a single slash of hers was tearing up the walls. It wasn’t the kind of fight a single person could win, and yet if Night and Fog could get Krieg, Othala, and Cricket out of there, then they’d heal up the wounds, and now that they knew that Cricket was able to disrupt my bugs somewhat, they had a counter. A decent counter to what I could do.

I knew that they’d figure out a way around my powers sooner or later, but if it wasn’t for Cricket, I would have already disabled all of them early on. Instead, I was still working on Fog, who was moving Krieg. It seemed that the third-in-command was a bigger target than the others, though as soon as he’d dragged Krieg a little way’s away, he moved back to get Othala.

The truth was that all of them mattered as far as the E88 went, though I could understand why Cricket, whose powers were supposedly somewhat lacking, was the last choice.

But Fog couldn’t carry any of them on his own, he needed Night for that, and if anyone saw her moving while carrying them, then they fell over.

The way I saw it, they needed a Rachel badly. Instead, they were going to have to keep on retreating while saving who they could. Night was headed for Othala, while Fog was trying to carry Krieg all on his own.

But if the heroes were coming out in force, there was no way they could get away, right?

Victor finally stopped moving, and I wished I had handcuffs. “Victor fully down at…” I quickly checked the street sign and gave them the location. “Please pick up before someone comes to rescue him.”

“A van is on the way,” the woman said.
“Alright, good,” I said. The pain was annoying, to say the least. I’d gotten over the pain of the last
time I’d been roughed up pretty well, but this was just another annoyance. I could see what looked
like a van driving up near the location of Night and Fog, and out came several people, one of whom
was familiar. Kid Win?

Huh, they must not have the Protectorate to spare, dealing with all of this.

That was a good feeling, I supposed, compared to the pain in my shoulder as I made my way
forward, keeping low. There Victor was. A villain who was part of the most powerful gang in the
city, a gang that undermined the rule of law and beat up minorities. At the moment, it looked like him
and Cricket were going to be the only ones not rescued, but at least it was something.

If a van came. I watched from afar, unable to do all that much. My bugs were nibbling at Fog now,
trying to get through his clothing and leave him with welts to spare, but of Othala got away, it was all
pointless.

That’s how much she mattered, because she could turn an injurious, brutal fight into a costless
victory. People pushed harder, they pushed faster, and combined with the fact that they already
outnumbered the Protectorate even without the healing, it was no wonder that they were so
dominant.

It was depressing to think about, and even more depressing when there was little I could do. Night
wasn’t going to be hurt by a bunch of bugs, and Fog would take time to down, because that mask of
his was actually pretty tightly sealed. If he stuck around for another minute or three, maybe I could
down him.

Maybe.

As it was, it looked as if they were retreating, and being pushed hard at that. Velocity, Kid Win,
what felt like she might be…

Yes. Shadow Stalker.

And Vista. Huh, interesting composition. Vista was using her power or something, because my bugs
were moving all over the place, in ways that didn’t make any sense. I was trying to see out of them to
see what I could find, but it was just too chaotic at the moment.

They would have to drop someone if they were going to retreat, and it was going to have to be
Othala, I thought. And--

I blinked as I heard the sound of a car, and then a PRT van barrelled into my range, going so fast I
could barely get buts on it.

Before I knew it, it had parked right up in front of the alley.

PRT vans are heavy looking things, grey and black (except for the purple stripes and the logos) with
reinforcement on all of the windows, and tinting as well. And PRT troopers? They were pretty
impressive. One stepped out in a kevlar vest and helmet, holding a rifle that was pointed away from
me, carefully, and then he stepped towards Victor.

“Is there anything we should know?” he asked, carefully. “About what you did?”

“No. I tried to use no poisonous insects. I didn’t have enough of them close by,” I admitted. “Even if
I’d wanted to use them on him. Just treat him for bug bites and bee and wasp stings, and he should
be alright.”
“Very well,” he said, and gestured as two other PRT officers stepped out to cover him as he moved forward, taking a pair of handcuffs off his belt, and cuffing Victor before flipping him over, and grabbing a pair of leg cuffs when offered by the second officer.

He was moving quickly, because at any moment Victor might get up. Containment foam might have also been an option, but it wasn’t needed right now.

Everyone had heard of it before, it was one of the more practical things that villains feared that the PRT could bring, and it was probably part of the reason the E88 hadn’t pushed the PRT even further into a corner, if online was to be believed.

The most powerful E88 capes wouldn’t be affected, but with the rank and file locked down by foam and people like Cricket out of the way, it’d be a far more even fight.

Meanwhile… oh.

I blinked, confused, but the PRT officer didn’t seem to notice as he was loaded up.

They’d dropped Krieg, and now Night was carrying Othala away, and with her running interference as they slipped around corners (and any blind corner would be a chance for her power to kill someone), I doubted that the Wards could catch them. Sure, I could run in the general heading of Night and Fog, to keep my eyes on them a little longer, but my shoulder hurt.

My shoulder hurt and I was exhausted and standing in a dirty alley, my pants scuffed up, having been planning on something far different than what I got.

I wasn’t going to be able to see Rachel now, not with the way my shoulder was aching, and not with how much time had passed. Though when I checked the clock on the smart-phone, it had only been a few minutes. But they were minutes long enough that I just didn’t want to push it. “Alright, so, Night, Fog, and Othala are getting away,” I said. “But the others should be caught.”

“Thank you for your help, Arachne,” the woman on the other line said.

It was remarkable how a single thanks could lighten my mood, which was growing darker with each second spent thinking about how much work had been just turned around.

I wouldn’t even know what the bill was until the news reported it.

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In the end, the E88 had gotten away pretty clean, but with some notable exceptions. Many of them had been injured and pushed hard at the main site, but only Hookwolf and Rune had been captured, and all of the others, including the new cape whose name was apparently Blitz, had escaped.

Meanwhile, thanks mostly to my work, Krieg, Cricket, and Victor were caught. I didn’t get any credit in the official report, but I made sure that people knew that I was behind it online.

I also maybe said a few less than complimentary things about the Protectorate.

‘How did they let all of them escape? It took weeks of planning and work for them to be caught, in part because of my help. And then in just one day? It’s very frustrating!’

That was a little milder than the fury I actually felt when I thought about it, especially since I was still a little confused as to why they’d left Krieg behind. With Krieg out of the way, along with Hookwolf, that meant that Purity was again the #2 Nazi.
Which had to be odd for the organization, I supposed.

In total, they now had eleven capes, which was a distressing fact, considering that they’d had five of them caught.

Purity had shown her true colors, and those were white, not that I was at all surprised.

I went to bed in a worse mood than I’d been in a long time, and woke up with my shoulder still aching so hard that I almost didn’t want to go to school.

But Dad was paying too much attention for me to skip, not now at least, and that meant I’d need to just continue on with what I was doing. I shot a text or two to Greg, and sent an apology to Rachel.

‘Its fn,’ she texted back. ‘Meting.’

It’s fine, she had a meeting? What kind of meeting?

That was yet another question for another time, I thought, and tried to focus on my new goal, even as the bullying just kept on getting worse. The week was almost over, and at this point they were resorting to gossiping to my face just to get a rise out of me.

But I was thinking about something that certainly helped me put the Trio in perspective.

I was thinking about murder. If I could only get Japanese Hornets shipped to America somehow, that’d help. And perhaps I could find some way to milk the venom from spiders to use as some sort of separate attack? Like, a spider-venom dart? I wasn’t sure of the specifics, but I needed to gather as many dangerous insects around me as I could.

Just like Bitch had a kill command, I needed to have a combination of bugs I could use if I needed to hurt someone a lot worse than I could right now.

I wasn’t going to become a murderer, I thought to myself, but I needed to have options in case I was forced to take them. And there were plenty of potential enemies where if I wasn’t using tactics that would murder a normal person, they wouldn’t even be hurt.

So, I needed tons of wasps and bees, that was the first step. I needed, maybe, a terrarium or something to keep all of them.

I needed more spiders than I already had, and then, what about bugs that were sick?

That was to say, bugs that could spread diseases onto my enemies. The Black Death had killed millions, after all, and it was spread not by rats, but by the bugs on the rats. Of course, I didn’t want anything too infectious, but perhaps there was something milder? Or some way to make a wound infected.

If they went to the hospital, they’d have to explain why they were bit by so many bugs, and I’d love to see them forced to explain that.

Lyme disease took too long to work, but it seemed a good start. Or at least, a decent idea if I could separate out the diseased bugs from the regular ones.

Just needed to find the right bugs, and hope that I somehow was randomly gifted a bunch of Japanese bugs.

There were other options, of course. Killer bees, army ants, just overloading on wasps and regular
bees, but all of them required some work to have a steady supply of them on hand.

Maybe I should take some of Rachel’s money and just buy a terrarium. But then where would I keep it? Maybe at her place?

Yeah, I thought to myself as my long, horrible day finally ended, maybe at her place.

*******

She opened the door, frowning as she did. “What happened?”

“Got in a fight last night,” I said, wondering if she’d read that. “Couldn’t come. What’s this about a meeting?”

“Employer and shit,” Rachel said. “Come in. You wanted to do stuff with the books and writing?”

I had, actually. I thought that maybe now that things were settled down, I could help Rachel learn how to spell, but now that I had the E88 on the rise, well.

It made me wonder whether my actions in preparing to go after the Merchants were wise. Still, I was pretty far into that, I thought, glancing over at Rachel as she sat down and I slid in right next to her.

Part of me wanted to just sit in her lap, but it was too forward, and I wanted to see her face.

A team meeting was very interesting, and I wondered if she’d reveal more about what was going on with the Undersiders. There had been no big busts lately.

“Yes, I did,” I said. “But what’s this about employer?”

Rachel didn’t even hesitate. “The person we got money from. That gave us jobs. It was this guy called Coil or whatever—”

Coil was a somewhat minor villain of some kind. Nobody knew what his powers were, but he had territory and well-trained mercs to protect it, and he ran it all so tightly and carefully that nobody paid him as much attention as they should.

If he was funding the Undersiders, that could explain it. Just have them do the dangerous work without being connected to him, and then he could blame them if something went down. “And what happened?”

“He offered to rule the city with us or some shit. But he also didn’t let me take my dogs in. Not even one of them,” Rachel said, and I knew which of the two things got more ire from her.

I stared at her, trying to hide my horror.

“What did he offer?”

“He said some shit about taking over the Docks and pushing Lung out, and then he said he’d give me money to open a fucking shelter. A real one, with assistants and all the dogs I could take in, and he said some other shit.” Rachel’s look was odd now, as if she was trying to impress something on me. “A foster care system for dogs, so that none of them get passed from owner to owner or put down, and fuck, he even talked about a system to make it so that there wasn’t abuse, though who knows how the hell he’d do that.”

She snorted, but I could see that the truth was, she wanted to believe. She wanted to help the dogs of the city, and she wanted that money, and there was nothing I could do or say that would make her
not want it. But this was a mistake.

“Can you trust him?”

“Eh, I dunno. He brought out this weird girl and shit to run some numbers for him, and Tattletale wanted me to tell you that for some reason.”

“What did she look like?” I asked, not sure why she’d want to tell me something like that.

“She was his ‘secret weapon’ or some shit. This twelve year old girl, maybe? Brown hair, kinda weird. She didn’t look at anyone, and Lisa said the clothes she was dressed in weren’t hers,” Rachel said.

I paused, thinking, and I could hear the buzzing of my insects as I began to come to a conclusion, and began to get angry.

Angry, and yet also determined. “Thank you for telling me Rachel.”

Could it be? Had Coil kidnapped Dinah Alcott, the Mayor’s niece? But why? Run some numbers, what did that mean?

I had a lot of questions, but I also had a young, kidnapped girl, and Rachel was just one step from joining in on the whole bonanza.

“You didn’t say yes?” I asked.

“Fuck. We just were going to think it over and shit. I dunno.” Rachel shrugged, looking put out, and I thought about all of the things I could do.

Then I imagined if she was my enemy, working with some psycho trying to take over the city or something? Or create some giant gang, which was about the same in some ways. I could tell the Protectorate, but not only might they not believe me, but what had they done lately?

They’d failed to even hold the E88. I was just one girl, but they were just…

I didn’t trust them, and it was as simple as that. Or at least, I thought that they might mess this up.

A lot of ideas occurred to me, right at that moment, some of them devious and rather shitty, including the idea that she might agree to work for Coil, but then spy on him for me.

No, that was wrong. It was a stupid idea that would only end badly, and I needed to rescue Dinah Alcott and stop the villain.

Far easier said than done.

“Are you okay?” Rachel asked. Then she frowned, “I didn’t say yes. Gotta talk to the rest of the team or whatever, anyways.”

“But you want to?”

“A little,” she admitted.

I had no right to tell her what to do, really. We were just friends. Who had sex with each other.

But maybe I could convince her otherwise. I wasn’t sure what instinct led me to shift over into her lap, and I had a feeling it was both selfish and manipulative, but I did know that when I kissed her, it
was because I wanted to.

Startled, she leaned back for a moment. “Oh,” Rachel said.

“Well, I can make the first move too, can’t I?” I asked.

Rachel looked at me for a moment, trying to read whatever was on my face. I made sure not to smile. Then, she nodded. “Of course.”

And then she kissed me back.

Chapter End Notes

Dinah just can't catch a break, can she?
I wound up staying out later than I thought. One thing had led to another, and then to another, and I’d texted Dad that I’d be slightly late, but that he shouldn’t worry about me. (After all, it wasn’t as if I was going to get pregnant or ruin my life, right?)

There was still a little voice that kept on whispering the same slurs, the same nonsense, over and over again, but I kept on telling myself, well. That it was nonsense. And that even if it wasn’t, I was rather too far gone to care about that any more.

The thing that annoyed me was that my clothes had gotten really, really rumpled. Things had just happened, and so I hadn’t been able to take off my clothes and set them out of the way, or otherwise prepare in some same, rational way.

As if the strange fire and heat that just took me over had anything to do with logical thinking. It was as if my brain just shut down when it came to her. I wasn’t doing anything except whatever I felt like doing at the moment. There was no in-depth research or planning or scheming going on.

Yet somehow it worked well enough for the both of us or something. I blushed, thinking about it even some time later, jogging through the dark streets.

I reached home and tried to straighten my clothes. Dad might well be asleep, or too drunk to do more than say hi to me as I hurried up to my room, but how was I to know? The lights were all on, at least.

And Dad was inside, leaning against a counter. I knew that before I saw it, and yet I faked a little surprise to go with the very real sinking feeling. He looked straight at the door as I opened it, and while the bugs weren’t good at a lot of the small sight details yet, or I wasn’t good at interpreting them since bugs weren’t made for that like humans were, I could guess he was frowning pretty easily by his posture.

I stepped forward.

“What took you so long?”

“I got distracted talking with Rae, that’s all,” I said, firmly. “It happens.”

“Uh-huh,” Dad said, looking down a little bit.

Actually, his gaze was really focused, as if he was staring at something in particular, and I shifted a little uneasily, not sure what it could be. “How was your evening, Dad?”

“Fine. Talking, you say?”

“Yes. Talking. Friends do that, sometimes,” I said, firmly.

Dad stepped forward. His glasses softened his look a little, but only a very little, and he really did look intimidating, surprisingly.

“Friends do that? I admit, I’m not hip on the latest ways for friends to express…” Dad began, pointing at my neck.
Oh. I only slowly came to realize that perhaps losing oneself in passion had negative side-effects. I looked down to see an almost purple welt where she’d nibbled and kissed at my neck, again and again and again. In fact, it was rather distinct, now that I looked.

It was just as obvious as if she’d worn really goopy lipstick and kissed the area without me wiping it off, and it had hurt a little, but in a… good way? Because at the time, I’d moaned and sighed and tried to return the favor, and at no point had I even begun to think about how I would hide it.

Normally, I could hide it, considering how heavily I usually dressed, and I could have easily worn a hoodie and justified it to my Dad. But I hadn’t even thought about it. Now he was staring at it, and I was going so red that I probably could have blended in with a brick wall.

“Uh…” I said.

“How about this weekend? Or next. For meeting her.”

“Meeting her?”

“I’m… “ I trailed off, and looked anywhere but at him. “Maybe in a relationship.”

“You?” Dad asked. His voice wasn’t slurred, but it was a little too loud, now, as if he were slightly tipsy and very frustrated and angry. “Do you have something to tell me?”

“How about this weekend? Or next. For meeting her.”

“Meeting her?”

“I’m… “ I trailed off, and looked anywhere but at him. “Maybe in a relationship.”

“Maybe?”

“Facebook status: it’s complicated,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. He wasn’t smiling, though, and so the brief attempt died just as fast. “So, whatever you thought I was just doing, you might be right? But that’s all it is, a relationship.”

“That’s it?” Dad asked, eyes narrowed. “Your door was locked when I checked it.”

He could have busted it down, of course, but I’d taken to locking it whenever possible. And I’m sure that there was no good reason for that, considering what he’d just tried.

I still needed to show off the clothes to Rachel that I’d made for her, and I still needed to move my costume. All of my plans had been thrown aside, but I still wanted to see Rachel dressed in things I’d made.

But what if Dad didn’t let me go?

“I value my privacy,” I said. “That’s all. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Uh-huh.” Dad looked at me. “Nothing else? This morning, there was a bruise on your shoulder.”

I opened my mouth to say I fell, before realizing how badly that could be misinterpreted when he was looking for an excuse. It was clear he wasn’t thinking straight at all, and I balled my fist and bared my teeth and said. “It happens.”

“Did this have to do with… Rae?” he asked.

I knew Dad enough to know that he wasn’t a bigot. It wasn’t that Rachel was a girl that was tripping him up, though it did seem to be confusing him, because if Rachel was a guy he could say something about using protection, or birth control, or the dangers of so on and so forth, though I was pretty sure that Dad wasn’t that much of a prude.

But most of his lines of attack were harmed by it. Sure, it could be possible that Rachel was a ‘bad
girl’ or whatever, but it didn’t have the same emotional impact as his other fears.

Had he thought that Rae was actually, I dunno, Ray Charles?

I had no idea.

“No. It didn’t have anything to do with her. I just got knocked over at school,” I said.

“So it has to do with the bullying you mentioned?” Dad asked.

“Yes. It’s been getting worse, but it’s fine. If you go up there and rage and make demands, you know what will happen?” I began, and then the words caught up to my ears.

“What?” Dad asked, and there was something exhausted in his voice now.

I didn’t answer, but he knew what I had thought. What I was going to say.

Nothing.

Just like if he raged at the government for not bringing back the docks, for letting it all rot. But that was the kind of thing that could break him.

My stomach sank, and it hurt. Just an hour ago, I’d been… I guess happy was the word for it. I’d set down my worries about Dinah and Coil and the Undersiders, and now I was picking up my Dad’s worries and swallowing all of them, red-faced.

The worst part was, I almost felt like I knew what it was like. I’d captured all of those E88 members, at great cost, and then most of them had gotten away. Just like Dad had always put in so much effort and gotten nothing out of it.

It was far, far easier to blame the world than it was to blame my own father. But had he really done all he could? Was he giving up too easily?

I wasn’t sure. “I… if you want, I could ask her to come over for dinner a week from Friday?”

“How about this weekend?” Dad asked.

“That’s a little short notice,” I said. The truth was that I hoped to be ready to strike the Merchants by then, which meant that I didn’t want to also have to juggle making sure that they actually got along.

“Very well. Next Friday,” Dad said, as if this was a compromise that he was just barely going to accept. He turned, going back to the fridge to grab another beer, and I considered all the things I could have told him, or talked about.

I thought too about how he might have had advice, whether it was good or not, about romancing her or how to deal with problems in relationships, but…

But that very hostility meant that it wasn’t going to happen. It meant that it was pointless.

I was missing out on something, and I didn’t know how to get it back.

Something had gone and left, just like the ships at the docks, just like this city’s prosperity in some respects.

Still, there was a way I could bring it back. If I managed to really hurt the Merchants, then did the same to the E88, maybe someone else could take out Lung. I thought that because there was no way
a bunch of bugs were going to take him down.

Though maybe I could find a way to attack all of his gang at once? And then he’d be forced to only
go rage-dragon on one target, and he’d lose everything else? That was his weakness, everyone
online said. He could only be at one place at a time, which was why Oni Lee was so important,
because he had mobility and could hold down the fort or something while Lung went apeshit on
people.

I wasn’t sure how right the random people online were, but I was at least making mental notes. And
physical ones, since by now there was a huge web of information I had about the Merchants.

Just needed to gather a little more intel, and I could do that tomorrow night, I thought, headed for a
shower.

It was a good thing that humans didn’t have that good of a sense of smell. No doubt to a dog, I
reeked of sex and sweat. Though if any of the dogs noticed it, they were polite enough not to talk
about it.

I started laughing uncontrollably in the shower when I thought that. Because who was to say they
even knew what sex smelled like, and they were dogs! Dogs were great and all, but they weren’t
‘being polite’ and the fact that I even thought they were was probably a sign that I was being around
Rachel too much.

Though honestly, she had a very straightforward and accurate understanding of dogs, when it came
down to it. She didn’t anthropomorphize them because she didn’t need to do that for her to
sympathize with them more than she did most humans.

I kinda did, though, for pretty obvious reasons, so yeah.

I went to bed, and told myself that there was only one day left before I got to the weekend.

********

I kept on telling it to myself through school.

“Hey, are you deaf as well as stupid?” Sophia asked, as she leaned over where I was sitting, trying to
eat lunch. There were supposed to be teachers watching the general area, taking in whether anything
bad was happening, but there weren’t.

She wasn’t going to knock my food away, at least not until she was sure the teachers were helpfully
looking the other way, but the athletic sadist just bared her teeth at me, her fingers tapping right next
to the food.

I didn’t blame Greg for not being here, not when Emma and Madison were keeping watch, and I
knew that it was just--

Sophia swiped her hand, and the tray went flying, splattering onto the ground. I gripped the fork
tighter.

“Aw, you made a mess. Can you feed yourself?” Sophia asked, and I could see her rolling her eyes.

I bared my teeth at her. There were bugs on her and her friends, and there were bugs overhead,
giving me information about everything that was going on. It was a little confusing and hard to track
while paying attention, but I knew that none of the teachers were looking this way, and it made it
hard to keep from using the fork.
It was just plastic, but I knew it’d hurt if I stabbed it in the right place.

“Can you fuck off?” I asked.

“What did you say to me?” Sophia asked, her voice a warning and a threat.

“Now who’s the deaf one?” I asked, standing up slowly.

I knew her leg was coming, but I still couldn’t really dodge, I wasn’t trained in it. I did get a little out of the way, and so instead of falling flat on my face, I stumbled as I moved forward, and then my hand slammed onto the table for support. A few kids looked up, but then looked back down, clearly not going to bother to try to protect someone like me.

“Man, even your boyfriend is hiding,” Emma sneered, from behind me. “I mean, I know he’s just with you because you put out on the cheap, but you’d think he’d be more loyal than that.”

My ‘smile’ grew wider and wider as I slowly turned, keeping track of where they were. Something felt like it was about to snap.

And when I moved and shifted, the thicker shirt I was wearing to hide the hickey slipped a little.

Emma’s eyes went wide, and then brightened with malice and triumph. “It must really sting, to have done all of that with him… and he’s not even here.”

I tried not to react, but I was breathing a little harder, my vision starting to tunnel. I’d poked out people’s eyes with wasps before. I’d covered a man in bees. I could hurt them, and for a moment I had to ask myself why I wasn’t.

They didn’t even seem to notice it, notice the way I was about to attack them.

Each breath hurt, and each moment I wasn’t teaching them a lesson, fighting back, felt like a betrayal, even though I’d told myself, time and again, why this was a bad idea.

It didn’t matter in that moment.

I needed to leave. I pushed against them, stepping past, and then when Sophia went to grab me I slammed down my foot loud enough that people nearby turned to see what the heck was going on. Including a teacher. Sophia stepped back with a smile that told me that she wasn’t done, but as long as the teacher was watching, she couldn’t be too obvious, and so I was able to escape, going up for the steps in the lunchroom, where some kids ate when they wanted to look cool.

Greg was at the top, looking at me nervously, but they didn’t follow.

“You okay?”


“Sorry I--”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, aware that he was looking at my neck just like they did. His eyes were so wide that he looked vaguely comical, and I tried not to laugh because I knew how people felt when they thought they were the butt of a joke.


“Remember,” I said. “Don’t tell anyone.”
His eyes went wider, as if I were a mind-reader just because I could see the direction he was looking.

“C-can do. So, what about that game? I rec’ed it to you, the one with…”

I thought about whether I could actually afford to do something like that. Then I realized I had Rachel’s money. Maybe I’d ask permission to use a little to buy a game. She could play it too, after all, and she had sort of trusted me. I just didn’t want to abuse that trust, because it really did matter.

“I’ll get it this weekend,” I said, softly. “I’ll tell you what I think on Monday.”

I wouldn’t have much time, but I could squeeze in an hour with it or so, and that’d be enough that he’d be fine with it, I bet.

“Great! I really think you’ll like it.”

********

Rachel was holding dog treats in one hand when she opened the door. “Here,” she said, handing one to me, as a fly buzzed right past her face. She didn’t even twitch, which was better than I’d do, if I was her.

She was already used to the idea that if bugs were around and I was around, they were mine and shouldn’t be hurt, which was nice.

“Oh? You splurged?”

“Sure. Coil apparently gave everyone another thou or two, while they’re thinking. Trying to bribe us,” Rachel said, as if it wasn’t obvious to anyone.

I nodded. “Well, don’t take this as bribery, but I got something for you. The bits of costume and, uh. The underwear.” My face was so red it was probably burning up, and Rachel looked at me. I could read it in her eyes. She was amused by the blush. I really shouldn’t be, since it wasn’t as if it was anything… I mean. I’d made clothes for her, and she’d be wearing them, but that wasn’t a big deal. I doubted, say, Parian would freak out if she made guy clothes at the idea that a guy was wearing them. Or something.

But instead, despite the bad mood I’d been left in, the idea of her trying them on left me feeling giddy. I even suspected it had nothing to do with, well. A lack of clothing. It was just the idea of possession, of…

The thought sounded bizarre in my head. Of control, I supposed? Thinking about it as possession and control and power made me seem like I was fucked up, though. That was the kind of thought process that, I dunno, jealous boyfriends went through.

Which made it doubly silly because we weren’t dating. Or together. We were just friends who were having sex, that much was pretty clear, at least from the signals I could read from her. I was trying to change that, but that’d take time.

Still.

I’d put a lot of time and effort into it. In fact, I’d designed an entire costume for her. Even though she hadn’t asked for it.

I swung my backpack around and said, “Alright, so. Dog feeding first.”
I started out with the mask. It was probably the thing I’d agonized most on. Actually, I’d spent a lot of time thinking about all of it. It’d filled in the odd hours, but I’d wanted a better mask for her. One that was a little less cheap, and just as importantly, a little more intimidating.

I’d modeled it on what she did to her dogs, and also on Brutus. I’d used chickenwire and paint and silk, and made sure that there wasn’t any chance that a blow to the face could break the mask and lead to something getting in her eyes. It was a snarling face, and I knew it wasn’t really the look a hero would have. It was the face of a werewolf halfway through their change, and I’d actually looked online for pictures to get that feel, of human becoming wolf, or wolf becoming human.

Somewhere in between? “So, I was thinking that you’d like this, really, because… I was trying to make it look like Brutus, do you get that vibe?”

“You made this?” Rachel asked, and she sounded… impressed.

There was a warmth growing in my stomach, and I felt it slipping away, my bad mood. I didn’t know anyone else who could do that. Dad had helped lighten the burden, and so had Mom, but other than that? Even Emma had mostly just lightened the load when I was in a bad mood, though I’d been more capable of just getting up and rolling with things back then. Maybe that was something that happened with age.

You got less able to recover from physical injuries when you got older, so maybe eventually your ability to bounce back wore out too. Now there was a stupid thought. But Greg could at most make me feel a little better.

Rachel? Until I started worrying about it, I had started to forget about my day.

“Yes, I did,” I said. “It should be padded. And then I have this, if you want.” I pulled out a leather collar. I’d put silvery-white fur around the edges, so that it’d stand out, and it had studs on it, big, bright, harsh looking ones. It was supposed to be a punk sort of look, because while I knew she knew nothing about fashion, it fit her.

One good thing about Rachel was that she wasn’t hard to read. I wasn’t sure if Lisa would agree, but you just had to look at the eyes, and remember that the lips weren’t saying the same things as usual, though a smirk was not the same as baring her teeth. And absolutely nothing about what I was reading from Rachel seemed anything less than… at least not disapproving.

“Huh,” she said. Then she shrugged, “Like it, I guess.”

“Well, that’s not all. Okay, well, this next part. I made it, but I had to rush a bit, but I’m…”

I trailed off, well aware of how silly I sounded.

Her costume had involved a leather jacket, and I’d wanted to really nail it. So I pulled it out. It was a leather jacket, alright, but with an attached hood I’d made using spider-silk, and fur around the edge of the hood, and just a little at the arms, all of it that right sort of silvery color I associated with moonlight and wolves.

The jacket itself was dark, but I’d known that I’d have to break it up if it was going to look good. It had patches on the shoulders, a little like armor, that were dark grey. And then on the arms, there were actually studs along them. They added some color and contour, but I could also imagine her
using them when she hit someone. It’d hurt a little more, I bet.

“Um… if you put it on. And the mask and collar?” I offered.

After a moment, she nodded. The mask seemed to fit perfectly, and the collar didn’t look weird. I’d been a little afraid that it would, as if she were trying too hard. But it just made her look fierce. And attractive. Though I think the latter part was just my imagination going into overdrive. It felt like every piece of costume that she was putting on was just making it harder and harder for me to focus.

Then she pulled the hood up. I’d designed it in my head while walking under street-lights, imagining how it’d look. I’d also peeked into alleys to get a feel for the lighting there. The dim natural light of evening was perfect for it, really. The hood was just broad enough that it cast shadows over the mask without completely obscuring it. Sure, in a truly lightless alley, you couldn’t see the mask. But this was the city, after all. And the shadows fell just right to make her look even more terrifying, to give life and motion into the mask that it didn’t have when there weren’t shadows playing across it.

I’d even thought about giving her wolf ears on the hood, but that was a little much. It’d look tacky.

She zipped up the jacket, and I was grateful that it fit. It was…

“Is it a little tight?”

“No,” she said.

Oh. Then it was just me staring. She was wearing my leather jacket. My. Leather jacket. That I’d made for her.

Steam was probably coming out of my ears, and I could barely focus. “So, the studs on the arm are for attacking, but also to break up the profile. The patches on the shoulders can be any color, as long as it’s sort of dark, and contrasts with the black leather. I mean, there’s green, red, just grey like normal, blue…”

“Blue,” Rachel said.

“Blue?” I asked, blinking.

Rachel shrugged, and then looked away, even though I couldn’t see her face to see her, say, blush. That just made me know that she’d chosen it because the patch on the back of my black costume, the one that was supposed to make me look heroic, was blue.

“Okay, so, look under your arms.”

She raised them up, and saw the dark zipper there. Dark, because I hadn’t wanted it to stand out too much. “I know it might get hot, so I put those there. You can unzip them to circulate air,” I said. “And if it gets too cold, I have some liners I made that are down in this bag, somewhere. For the winter, you know?”

“I know,” Rachel said.

“Alright, so the next step, I thought you might want something that protects you while you’re riding your dogs,” I said, digging around in there, coming across the multiple pairs of underwear and bras. I also realized that this was something she’d need to change into, because unlike the jacket, which she just put right over the T-shirt she’d been wearing, this wasn’t that sort of thing. I’d gone all out for this, and I needed it to work.
I’d thought about colors for a while, and I didn’t want it to be too black, so I’d settled for a sort of
dark grey that was hopefully not too out of place with everything else. Black, silver, grey, and blue.
It seemed like it was a color combination that could work, but with every new addition to the
costume, I kept on getting more nervous.

The nervousness seemed to match the warm, tingly feeling in my belly and in my chest, and the way
it was harder and harder to look away. I didn’t want the moment to break, for her to frown and said,
“Don’t like it.” Yet from the way that she was standing and moving, she was actually liking
everything I’d given her.

Certainly, she looked pretty intimidating, at least for someone who wasn’t… I didn’t know when I
was going to start calling it love. Hopelessly in some combination of lust and intense liking that was
frankly out of control and insane?

Most people would call that love. I wasn’t so sure, but I didn’t have anyone to compare it to, because
I was--

Taylor, who couldn’t get a date to save her life.

Emma didn’t care about accuracy, though really, if you thought about it, her narrative fit. I was a slut
who was unlovable, which wasn’t the same as being unfuckable.

At least, that’s how I imagined she’d explain it, though sometimes she just started contradictory
rumors just to see which horrible thing people would believe about me next. I had to guess that she
got some sort of sick pleasure from doing it, since she spent way more time than I was ‘worth.’

“Taylor, you okay?” she asked. I’d been spacing out, my hand in the bag.

“Just thinking about school, and the trio, and Emma, and--”

“Don’t,” she said, and her voice was soft, despite the rough quality to it, and she leaned in in that
freaky werewolf mask and reached a hand out to run it through my hair in a tender gesture that left
goose bumps down my spine was she did it.

I shuddered, and I knew if she started kissing me I wouldn’t want to stop it, and I’d wind up with a
hickey to match on the other side, and my chance at seeing her fully in the costume completely
missed. I’d probably also wind up home late, because, well. Because, that’s why.

So I pulled away from her a little. “I can’t do the shoes, I mean, your boots are just fine and it’s not
like I had any ideas, but these?” I pulled out the leggings first, before I got to the pants, which had
been a lot of work.

I was honestly out of money, and I still hadn’t quite pulled together the courage to use her money,
because I didn’t want to be that kind of course. My Dad had taught me hard work and frugality and
not taking handouts, whatever else he had also taught me.

The leggings were simple. “It should prevent chafing when you’re riding on one of your dogs, and
it’s designed to breathe pretty well, and offer decent protection,” I said, holding up the black
leggings. Then I pointed to the pants. They were dark grey. “I can change the color, but dark grey
looks good on you. It’s a good color for everything.” They were nice pants, but not too nice. Nice in
the sense that they were in good condition, but not in the sense that they were delicate. They were
rugged, but…

Okay, maybe I’d put a lot of work into making them.
Rachel paused, holding the leggings, and then shrugged. “Nothing you hadn’t seen.”

She pulled off her pants right there along with her boots, and I kept from flinching or looking away, because she was right. Rachel had slightly tanned, strong looking legs, and she didn’t shave them. She wore entirely and completely boring undergarments, not that it mattered, and it was only a few moments before she pulled on the leggings.

Not exactly a show, I thought, amused. Just a normal thing. Then she pulled up the jeans, and then it was done.

I had a costume standing in front of me. “Do you like it?” I asked. I was holding my breath, my cheeks warm.

“Yeah. I do. Thanks,” Rachel said. Then she stepped forward and gave me a hug. I reached up and pulled away her mask a little, to run my fingers through her short hair. She looked at me, I could feel it. “Why?”

“Am I not allowed to like your hair too?” I asked. I sorta did. It was short, but that made it easy to just run my fingers through again and again. I liked what it said about her too. I liked that she was practical, I liked that she was blunt and strong and gruff.

I was hopeless. Most of the time I didn’t even care, which was really interesting. It made me wonder how long before I started convincing myself about other things?

“Oh,” she said, and again there was that surprise. “So…”

“I wanted to talk to you about something. The girl… was it this one?”

I’d printed off a picture of her when I’d been at computer class today. It’d taken all of five seconds, and it was a picture of Dinah dressed for school. I’d wanted to find one that was as normal as possible. Not her dressing up, or looking rich and glamorous, just her being the same as any twelve year old girl, give or take.

Yes. I was being manipulative, but I also really didn’t care that much. Because it was for her own good, and because I was going to be up front with it.

“Yes. Who is she?” Rachel asked.

“Dinah Alcott. Age twelve. I assume she had to have triggered recently, if nobody knows that she’s a cape, and nobody does. She triggered, and somehow Coil noticed her and stole her away from her family. Now she has to work for him and do what he wants, or else… well, I assume there are consequences. I assume he punishes her, or finds a way to keep her leashed up,” I said.

Rachel winced, pulling the mask off to look at me, hard. “You don’t want me to join them?”

“I don’t.”

“Then what do you want?” she asked, her voice a little harsh.


“Dream?” she asked.

“I don’t want to be on the opposite side of you. I want to be on your side. But I can’t be a villain. She’s trapped, just like I was trapped, unable to get out, and I can’t just let that be.” My words were
heavy, but I hoped she was hearing them. Just speaking them felt as if it were letting off a little of the weight, as if they were ballast. “I can’t be on the same side as you, if you join Coil. That doesn’t mean I don’t l… like you.”

I’d almost said Love, but then, what did I know of love? I didn’t want to be one of those shallow teenagers who fell in ‘love’ at the drop of a hat. I hadn’t known her long enough that I could possibly be in love with her. But I wanted to say it. But I also didn’t want to be a liar, and I knew that she just liked me and liked having… sex with me. A lot, considering how often we were doing it.

So the words caught in my throat.

“Oh,” Rachel said.

“Oh?”

“Thinking. So what, you want me to be a hero? Join the Wards?” she asked, eyes narrowed.

“No. I’m not joining the Wards. I want you to be by my side, if we’re talking about dreams. Fighting crime together. Stopping dog fighting rings and stopping assholes who hurt other people for fun. And I know I’m not Coil, who is apparently rich or something, but we have some money, and if we took down the right people, or something, surely there’s a way we could survive. And, I mean.”

I had been thinking about other things. But the help she was giving to dogs? Surely there were people that cared about that. It was an odd sort of idea, but I knew that she had online fans just for the whole ‘dogs’ thing. She could get money to take care of them, and that’s all that mattered to her. She didn’t need a lot of money: the things she wanted in life were cheap.

Like you, Taylor, my inner-Emma said.

“What?”

“It could be fun, I guess I was thinking. Doing it together,” I said. “Partners in… not crime. I’m not sure if it’d work or not, but if I was getting everything I wanted, that’s what I’d imagine. I could get terrariums and set them up here for all of my bugs, just like you keep dogs here, and… I’m not sure.”

I hadn’t really been thinking about ‘battle tactics’ but I supposed my ability to tell what was going on around me could help to tell her where to send her dogs. I didn’t have any particularly clever ideas, but did I really need them?

I’d think of them eventually, no doubt, like some way to keep bugs on the dogs that they didn’t bite at, and then the dogs could be platforms for delivering bugs, or… something. There were ideas, if I thought about it.

“You know what?”

“What?”

“Maybe,” Rachel said. “Let’s see. Or try it or something, and if it doesn’t work then I can just take Coil’s stupid offer or some shit.”

“How about Sunday,” I said. “I mean, for going out on a patrol? Or…”

I still needed to convince the Protectorate that she wasn’t as bad as they thought. “Or attacking the Merchants.”
“Fucking scum,” Rachel said. She had more contempt for Nazis, honestly, but she didn’t like the Merchants either, and didn’t like drug dealers in general, actually.

“Yep. And I’ve almost got everything down for another assault on them,” I said. “If you’re game?”

A long pause. “Why not?”

I turned away, because even with my knowledge of her, it was hard not to grin. “Sorry, sorry, it’s just…”

“Happy?” she asked.

“Very,” I said.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to be posting art in just a sec. I'll make it a chapter of its own.

Had two pieces commissioned by different artists, now might be the time to share.
[Art!] Rachel, pre and post new costume, by lonsheep and Renu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

https://i.imgur.com/FGImCHN.jpg
Bitch at Canon Start, by lonsheep

https://i.gyazo.com/434889f755c6359464a01c89c00e7606.png
Bitch's New Costume, by Renu

Chapter End Notes

I don't know how to turn it into free-standing pictures, but tell me if one or more of the links doesn't work.
Sometimes I wished I had some sort of instinct for these things. Even looking at the map of where the Merchants came and went, I couldn’t discern some giant pattern in them just by glancing. No doubt, whatever Lisa’s power was, that could help, but as it was, I had to do it the old-fashioned way.

I’d been making notes all Friday night while I was out, about the smell of this place and that, or, now that my bugs could sometimes pick it up, snippets of conversation that might be useful. Combined with a map of where they’d be, I could be pretty sure that the Merchants were going to be spread out all weekend. They didn’t cluster and gather all that much, except for partying, and so that would be one venue.

But there weren’t any nightclubs I’d seen them go to, which meant house parties. And house parties were pretty difficult to crash, especially if they were at different houses and apartments each night. What I needed to do was find a way to track Mush or someone like that and follow him right to a party.

The Merchants consisted of the new guy, Mush, Skidmark, Squealer, and Whirlygig, though the latter was only a little less new than the new guy. It wasn’t exactly a huge roster of capes, but it was bigger than it was before, and it included two Tinkers. Everyone online said that tinkers were really hard to fight against, because you never knew what tricks they had up their sleeves.

I more or less (sometimes less since I couldn’t find much about Whirlygig) knew what the non-Tinkers had in store, but that wasn’t going to help at all when it came time for a fight.

I had Rachel to help me, but that was just two people. I didn’t want to bring in the Undersiders, and while I’d call the Protectorate, of course, I’d have to imagine the situation as it’d be without their help, because honestly I wasn’t sure if my trust of them could be hurt even more than it was without something drastic happening.

So I was just going to try to imagine a victory with just Rachel and I, together, against all of the baddies of the world. It was a little implausible, but it was a nice enough fantasy to go to sleep on, on Friday night, and I liked the feel of it.

Arachne and Bitch didn’t really have a ring to it, but we could make it work. And if we wound up partners, maybe I could finally work up the courage to ask her on an actual date. It’d be a nice change from how things were going now, and a real step.

I had the timeline in my head, and I tried to ignore the way that Rachel had pre-empted my whole world several times since I’d met her. She left Coil and the Undersiders sometime in the next few weeks, I popped the question, she maybe said no, but perhaps she said yes because ‘why not’ which was the best I could hope for, all things considered. And then we were girlfriends, and life was great, and we’d fight crime together.

End of story. Simple, right?

Simple enough that even I couldn’t mess it up, I hoped.

*****
On Saturday, I learned that the English Language is horrible and must be destroyed. Or something.

Rather, when I started to stumblingly try to teach her more about reading, I hit the problem that nothing about English Grammar was that self-evident.

Rachel insisted on taking out the book, and my current idea was to have her read through a sentence, and then I’d tell her what she pronounced wrong. Read before you write, and all.

It was an idea destined to lead to frustration, but she was trying it anyways, after we’d settled down the dogs. She kept on stepping away to look at them, watch them to make sure they didn’t fight, and just play with them, but as soon as she was done she’d come back and look at my little worksheets and read them.

Small words were fine.

“The dog was running, running as fast as he could, but he couldn’t make it…” Rachel read.
“Eh...x...ow…”

“Exhausted. It means tired,” I said.

“Then why don’t they just say tired?” Rachel asked, like a dog snapping at a stray finger.

“They think it sounds better.”

“Ex-aust-ed?”

“Exhausted,” I repeated.

“Exhausted, he slowed down, his feet burning with the salt on the roads, and…”

She flipped the page slowly, and kept on reading as I watched her. She was concentrating, I really could tell that, but concentration and trying wasn’t magic. It helped, considering how many students didn’t even bother with that part, and then complained that it was hard.

Still, at the rate it was going, it’d take a while, and I was still looking up how to do it better. Should I teach her about grammar? Spelling? What about new words? She had the foundations, but the foundations were also not all that different than the foundations of my house. Rotting at places, and not anything you’d want to build too much on.

She spelled phonetically, and getting through a single page of a few hundred words took forever, and that was with me helping her out with the hard words. And I didn’t want to go too simple for the reading, because let me tell you, the kinds of books they taught children to read with were not the kinds of things that any adult, or even any teenager, could read. Sure, Rachel was only dubiously literate, but she wasn’t stupid.

Or, I didn’t think so. Maybe I was biased, but it seemed lack of education and, in some cases, interest, more than anything else. I’m not sure why I was getting any traction at all with her, but I’d take it. It wasn’t as if I was trying to change her, not really. Literacy was just something she should pick up more fully, because it’d help her out.

I had a few strategies I’d seen online. One thing that could certainly help was turning words into sounds. Rachel could say words just fine, even if some of the more complex ones could trip her up, what she needed was a way to hear the word mentally when she saw it, and thus work things out. Break words down to their components, and it was like cutting up food for someone to eat easier.
That was the theory, but Rachel seemed to prefer things that left us snuggled close together, which was an instinct I could understand. Still, progress was being made, bit by bit. I wouldn’t teach her to read at, say, a 5th or 6th grade level in a week. Probably not even in a month, since I wasn’t actually a teacher.

Though it felt interesting, really. My Mom had been a Professor, and something told me that this was somewhat different. An English Literature professor gave opinions and analyzed things in a way that someone teaching a first grader to read couldn’t. ‘In my opinion, opinion is not spelled with two p’s, Suzy.’

It was the kind of thought that had my lips curling up, and I was glad that I could keep in that good of a mood.

Actually, I was in a good mood all day, even when Rachel got frustrated at not being able to learn as fast as she wanted.

Her pouting was cute too.

I was pretty sure something had broken in me, but I wasn’t that eager to fix it.

Rachel had her full costume done now, including the blue. I wondered what the Undersiders would think of it. When I asked, though, she snorted. “Doubt they’d notice,” Rachel said.

“Why?”

“They’re distracted and shit. Money, money, money,” Rachel said, dismissively. She wasn’t someone who valued money for itself. Then again, for all I knew none of the others did either.

“Why do they need money so badly?”

“Well, Grue has a sister or some shit that he wants to take care of,” Rachel said. “Regent just likes spending money, and Lisa…”

Rachel hunched her shoulders in. “Probably a bunch of clothes or something.”

I wasn’t sure, actually. On the one hand, she did shop a lot, on the other hand, she seemed like the kind of person who had larger ambitions than that. I didn’t know what they were, and that meant I couldn’t trust them. After all, Coil had larger ambitions.

I also just felt more comfortable with the more down-to-earth desires of Rachel. She felt like someone I could approach, someone that wouldn’t manipulate me, and that was… well, after all of the trouble I’d faced thus far, someone who was straight with me and honest seemed like a good thing now.

Even though I was lying to my Dad in more ways than one. It was probably hypocrisy, that I cared so much about being told the truth.

But on that warm May day, playing out in the yard or reading a book to her, watching her as much as I could, just considering life without acting…

I didn’t care. That was the truth. “Wanna go out for lunch somewhere?” I asked.

“Sure,” Rachel said.

I should just kick down the locker door and ask about a date using the right words for it, but… but
what? I didn’t know. It was just that it seemed such a large step, and I kept on picturing what would happen if people found out. Or what if they found out how close Arachne was to Bitch. I wondered what they thought about me, the Protectorate. I’d helped them multiple times now, and yet I was also sticking with Rachel. And that wasn’t going to change.

“So, let’s go?”

“In a sec. Come here, I think that Dodger…” she began, and I moved when she gestured. There was a bug on her shoulder, just watching her. Just like I was watching the whole approach. Nobody was going to sneak up on us.

In theory all of the watching should make me feel paranoid, but instead it made me feel intimate, and safe. Nobody was watching. Nobody cared, and the people who would care if they knew didn’t matter.

The reddish-brown dog looked fine, large and somewhat intimidating, but honestly kind of a pushover, who always loved a good belly-rub. Not the smartest dog out there, either. She grabbed his head and opened his jowls, which were big, thick ones, and showed off his teeth.

They looked fine, but.

“He’s gritting them. And he doesn’t like eating. I think he might have a toothache or something wrong with it.” Rachel grunted, clearly annoyed. “Should have bought some hygiene bones or something. It’s the treats.” She seemed definite, and I looked at the teeth, and had to guess that it was probably so.

A vet would have written it down. Rachel, I knew, would just remember it. “Sorry to hear that. I think you’re probably right. Maybe you could get him some soft food in the meantime?”

“Sure. We could go shopping together.”

“What if someone…”


“What do you mean?”

“Nobody notices me. Cause sure, I’m on the run, but I pay in cash and shit.”

I wasn’t sure how true that could possibly be. Rachel stood out. She was strong, she was commanding, she had a way about her: or maybe I was just smitten, but I remember feeling that even when I first met her, and I knew the crush wasn’t that immediate. Even without all of that, she still was certainly not like most girls.

“Well, nobody noticed all the other times. I also want to get some Terrariums or the like…”

“For what?”

“Holding bugs,” I offered. “I’m not sure, they’re supposed to have special containers or the like, but I need a way to just separate them and keep them around when I’m not controlling them.” I frowned. I still needed to figure out how to make it all work.

“Oh,” Rachel said.

“You care for your animals, I do the same for mine,” I said.
“Kay. We can get those too.” Rachel seemed to accept it. I wondered how much it’d cost her.

“Maybe tomorrow?” I offered. “Or, I mean, I’ll need time to look all of this up.”

She glanced over at Dodger. “Maybe. In the morning, then. Lunch now, and we’ll have to make sure he doesn’t eat anything bad.”

“Oh, of course,” I said. By now I knew how to take care of dogs well enough that if it wasn’t dog-overload, I almost missed not having them around at home.

Home. Well, that certainly made me think about what I was doing. I was going to be buying terrariums, and putting my costume here, and it felt like before I knew it, my center of gravity could shift even more than it was before. I already didn’t spend a lot of time at home, what with school and everything else.

Speaking of, I was making a heroic effort to save actually working on my homework to the last minute, which was probably not me being the best role-model to Rachel. That made me think that perhaps I should move up the timeline a little bit. The Merchants were dangerous, and more than that, I didn’t want it hanging above my head on Sunday when I shopped for equipment, or tried to do my homework.

So all through lunch together, as she talked about, what else, the games I’d brought and her dog’s health, I was planning.

********

It was starting to get dark out later and later, so the night was not quite as inky black as it might have been when I strolled into an alley and began to change. I had a target that I needed to go after, a reveler that I thought was related to Skidmark’s entertainment.

She was a streetwalker, and one that I’d seen in Skidmark’s presence at least once or twice since I’d started monitoring things. All of the gangs got involved in prostitution, and that included the Merchants, who ‘owned’ a lot of prostitutes, people addicted or desperate, or most likely both. She was a skinny blonde who looked like a poster-child for anorexia, so frail she could blow away, but in the ten minutes I’d been tracking her this time, she’d glared at three people.

When she wasn’t working, she was a forbidding sort of girl. Girl was the word, because if she were eighteen, I’d be shocked. Older than me, but far too young to be out there, and far too young to be this cynical. And addicted. And poor.

I couldn’t really do anything for her, but I was going to try to avoid attacking her. She wasn’t a threat, or at least not one I had to pay attention to, even if she was apparently vicious with those long, dark nails of hers.

I tried to tune out anything else she did during the nights I’d followed her, and I knew she wasn’t working tonight, because I’d overheard her saying so to another of the prostitutes out there.

So, I got dressed and followed her, my range somewhere in between. I was stressed, gathering bees and spiders and wasps, trying to get together as many dangerous bugs as I could. The larger wasps could sorta-kind of carry the spiders, but it was really difficult for them, and the larger spiders just had to go on foot. It was all kinds of awkward, and I wasn’t sure if I was going to repeat the experiment, maybe. As for the ants and the like?

Those could be carried, but again, it was awkward and weird. Either way, I was going for quantity, not quality. Just as many dangerous bugs as possible, and then I’d drop them on everyone.
So I began walking, taking a breath, hoping that I looked sufficiently intimidating. And hoping that nobody noticed me before it was time. I had Rachel’s number and the Protectorate’s number all in my phone, and as soon as I found the party I’d call both of them, set up a real strike. I didn’t need to get all of them. As long as Skidmark and, say, Mush were taken, then that was the leader and the muscle gone, and I bet it’d be harder for them.

My thoughts circled around the problem of fighting Mush, but I had to hope that Rachel’s dogs could deal with him. I bit my lip, aware that I was pretty distinctive in my dark costume. I snuck forward, taking a breath, trying to imagine how the fight would go. If I was vicious and ruthless, I could probably take down Skidmark within moments, but they were also willing to shoot.

I had no doubt about that. I could still die, and yet… if Rachel was going in, it’d feel wrong not to put myself at risk, even if in theory I could do it from a distance.

That was a thought that almost convinced me to just leave her behind. There’d be less worry for her, and…

My phone rang. I paused, frowning, and then took it out. It wasn’t Rachel’s number, which almost made me not take the call, until I saw that it was Lisa’s. I answered. “Hello?”

“Taylor, we could use your help. Lung’s here, and he’s attacking us.” There was the briefest of pauses, “And Rachel.”

As if she knew that the reason I’d care the most was if Rachel was in danger. “Oh? Where?”

“Rental Garage area off of Jamison. I… believe you aren’t too far from that?”

It was 8 or 9 blocks away, give or take. That was not a little bit, really, since I wasn’t that in shape, but I could make it. I began to jog, trying not to run because if Lung was there I’d have to fight when I got there. “Okay, okay, what can I do?”

“I don’t know. Just get here. Use your bugs. Oni Lee is here too, and a bunch of gang members that are trying to shoot us if we try to escape,” Lisa said. I could hear what sounded like an explosion in the background of the call. “Oni Lee has a shotgun. And a rather dangerous knife. I’d go for him first. Rachel’s… holding Lung off, but if he gets a solid hit on one of her dogs--”

I didn’t need her to finish, so I hung up. If he got a solid hit on one of her dogs, it’d be hurt, and she’d get angry. I could imagine that Rachel, angry, would make a mistake of some kind or another, because she cared about her dogs. They mattered to her in a way that I was sure Lung didn’t realize. But he’d take advantage of it, no doubt.

My jog turned into a slow run. Nine blocks was far enough away that I’d be at it for a while, but I moved my dangerous bugs up, taking side alleys or flying above where people were likely to look. As soon as I was within range, I’d send in the bees to get the gang members.

In the meantime…

I hesitated. Did I want to call the Protectorate? On the one hand, I didn’t trust them. On the other hand, this was Lung. He was powerful, tricky, and dangerous. He led an entire gang, and could turn into an unstoppable dragon that only got stronger the more he fought. There were rumors that he’d fought an Endbringer one-on-one, online, and while it was hard to know if they were true, if he did keep on getting stronger forever he’d eventually get too strong for Rachel’s dogs unless she made them so big they were clumsy.

Of course, Lung probably wasn’t that fast, so maybe it didn’t matter.
Panting, I dialed the number of the PRT and hoped it wouldn’t be a mistake. “PRT offices, who is this?”

“Arachne. I need to get through to the Protectorate.”

“For what reason?” the male voice asked, as if he were going down a form.

I was panting when I was talking. “Lung’s attacking the Undersiders at the storage garages off of Jamison street, if you know... I figure, Lung’s a common enemy of everyone... so.”

“Requesting assistance?” the man asked, sounding as if he were paying only a little attention.

“Yes,” I said.

“I’ll pass it along. Thank you for your information... Arachne, was it?”

“Yes, it was,” I said. I panted a little as he continued a few pleasantries until I hung up, frustrated. Fuck if I knew whether this was a good idea, but I had to ignore it for the moment.

I was still minutes away from getting there, and if Lung killed Rachel, I didn’t know what I’d do.

And Lung was a killer. A ‘whoremonger’ a monster, and a killer. Probably a racist too, though he was kind of beat out on that front by Kaiser. I had no doubt that Lung had finally found an opportunity to strike at them. A few weeks ago they’d raided the casino he ran under the table, and he must not have been able to get to them.

My lungs were burning, and I was still a minute or two from being in range as I thought about it. He found out where they were going, and then he struck. Was it luck, or planning? For that matter, why were they hanging around a bunch of storage garages?

This part of town used to be the old industrial district, and now it was the kind of place where paving everything into parking lots was a smarter use than actually having industry here.

In other words, there wasn’t a lot of traffic, and I was blithely sprinting across streets, the occasional car honking at me before realizing I was wearing a costume. I almost stumbled on gravel, but I just kept on going, and recovered as I did.

I needed to be in better shape than this, but I could just feel a few cars outside that seemed to be parked in no-parking zones, and then I could see, from my flies, what seemed like it might be three or four gang-bangers up front. As I grew a little closer, I could see the outside of the storage garage area, and that meant I could see the squat, flat buildings, row after row of them, with armed gang-members all around the edge.

They had guns, I could see, all of them men. Not noted for his egalitarianism either, that Lung.

They ignored the flies, like I suspected, because they had no experience with them. I’d teach them soon, as I gathered up bees to go after the group in front, still not seeing Lung or the Undersiders, though there were vibrations on the air that seemed as if they were shouts and yelling, just beyond range.

Bugs couldn’t hear all that well, unfortunately.

The bees fell upon the gang-bangers, who screamed and shouted, as the bees went for stings. I didn’t want to stab at any eyes, the ABB didn’t have any healers, and so I’d actually be hurting people who mattered in a real way. So instead I just held back and had them sting all over, again and again and
again, as spiders were lowered down by wasps to scuttle towards them, ready to sting them as well.

I didn’t need to down them, they just ran, and once they did, others heard and turned to approach, and that meant that they had to face the bugs.

It had to be very frustrating, fighting against insects, because there was no winning, not really. Victor had tried to solve it by going after me, but they weren’t going to think about that, and it’d been luck, or perhaps an educated guess, that had let him get that close.

So instead, they just fell or ran, and soon enough the entire cordon around the area was collapsing. It was about then that I finally got in range of the fight.

I could feel Oni Lee on the roofs, apparently taking potshots, and Lung was large, about eight or nine feet tall and already covered in scales, going up against Bitch’s dogs. They were smaller than him, but not by all that much, which meant that she’d really gotten them going.

Tattletale and Regent were on the back of one dog, Grue and Rachel on the back of another, and then the third of her dogs was on its own, doing hit and run attacks on Lung while Rachel shouted commands.

It was a real mess, and there were patches of what I assumed was Grue’s darkness, growing down the middle of the area where the fighting was fiercest.

The Undersiders were trying to use the storage units to hide and run around, playing cat and mouse, but every time they moved backwards, I noticed, panting and still running, seeing them and yet still more than a minute out… there was Oni Lee.

Oni Lee was why the Undersiders couldn’t just retreat, or at least, he was the most obvious part of it.

I still didn’t know what they were doing there. I called Lisa, and she finally picked up. “So, you’re here?” she asked.

“Almost. What do you need? Is there anyone besides Oni Lee keeping you from running?”

“No. We came here for a meeting. There were also a few supplies, but…” Lisa trailed off, and I could see that Lung was breathing fire in their general direction. My bugs had to keep out of the way of that. His flames certainly made using bugs on him harder, plus the fact that even his eyes had to be armored past a certain point. Or so I guessed. I couldn’t be sure, because I didn’t want to advertise myself too much.

“Not important. See you soon.”

“Called in the Protectorate to help,” I said.

“Wait what?!”

I hung up. Okay, so, I should have asked her, but then again, she was the one dodging fireballs, so she needed all the help she could get.

I needed to stop Oni Lee, that much was obvious. My bugs were spread out in the sky, watching as he leapt from place to place. My bugs could go with him, I felt them when he moved, briefly dislocated, and I could still sting him. Plus, if he managed to shake a few off, with a large enough cloud of bugs, he might not know where to leap in the first place, and there might be bugs wherever he went.
Still, I wasn’t looking forward to the fight.

My bugs were spread out, and the darkness meant that what I saw from each was somewhat limited, but I knew where they were, and in my head I tried to construct a map of who was where doing what. And then I tried to make it so that my bugs sight and other senses would notice anyone popping up.

It was an idea, at least. If there was a fly every foot, then one of them would be disturbed whenever he popped up, at least where Lung wasn’t burning things.

By the time I reached the area, I was panting and had to slow down to a walk, as I built up a screen of bugs to hide where I was, to make sure he didn’t get an easy shot.

Most of the gang bangers were long gone, but I’d purposefully driven a few of them forward, and they were there with Lung for a moment, telling him about the bugs. A few more were down, having fainted or collapsed.

I was pretty sure I’d know if they were faking it, I thought, stepping forward. I could see ahead of myself just as well as if there were no bugs there.

Quantity had a quality all its own, when it came to vision, and all of the bugs combined got me a decent view of what was in front of me as they crawled—in the case of the ones on the ground covering my feet—and flew.

Decent was a very, very low bar in this case, but hopefully Oni Lee would…

As I walked around a bush and stepped into the first line of garages, I felt him arrive, nearby, and sent a few more bugs at him, trying to get them into his armor and clothing to rip and tear at it. Not that they’d actually tear off his mask, but anything to distract him.

Oni Lee was shorter than I expected, in a black bodysuit. He held a shotgun, but I knew his main weapons were the knives and grenades on the bandolier he had. His power, which let him teleport but leave behind a duplicate for a few seconds, meant that suicide attacks were less than suicidal, and he was a known killer. The last thing far too many people had seen was that Japanese demon mask.

But I could track him. It took a moment, because there was confusion, and of course, all of this area looked too samey for it to be as easy as just knowing things, but I could work with this. And his duplicates were not him. I just needed to keep on stinging and biting him.

And I had an idea, albeit one that I needed to be careful about.

He had grenades on that bandolier, if I could pull the pin of one I could…

Commit murder. That’s what I’d be doing.

That was a chilling thought as he surged forward, firing at the center of the mass of bugs. But I was to the left.

The shotgun roared, and my heart raced as he hit the wall of bugs and then went through without getting even close to me. The wall spread itself thinner, as wasps began to sting at his hands when he drew his knife.

Then he appeared somewhere else, up above me and roughly behind me, and I moved my cloud to face him, backing up as he fired, almost hitting me this time. I ignored the clone, except to keep the swarm in front of him, and continued to bite and sting.
A normal person would have reacted by now, and as far as I knew, he wasn’t superhumanly tough. He was just focused, I supposed, because what other explanation was there?

I could deal with focused, though, if I just had a little time. Shove bugs down his throat until he starts choking on them, and he’d go down. Even the strongest person in the world needs oxygen, unless their power involved them not needing it. I didn’t want to choke anyone to death, that was just something I swore I’d never do, but… it was an option.

And unconsciousness wasn’t death. My bugs that were left behind as he teleported felt wrong, and that was before they exploded into smoke. I could control them, but they were oddly non-responsive, as if their senses were just being dummied out or something. He kept on moving, but he wasn’t actually shaking me, and the more bugs I got to bite him, including a few ants that I dropped on him, the less he could hide where he was as the bugs moved this way and that.

They were biting all on his skin, and stinging as hard as they could, and I had a black widow crawl down his shirt and began to bite, with methodical brutality that the real deal couldn’t have possibly done. Which was why they weren’t fatal: real spiders were not nearly so vicious as this, and I knew that meant I had to hold back at least a little, or else I’d kill him.

No matter how tough he was, his body would be itching and reacting badly, there’d be pain, and I was just getting started. I didn’t want to go down to his underpants to keep on stinging, because that’d be gross, but if Rachel’s life was on the line, I would do it.

I kept crouched, moving this way and that to throw off the attacks. Oni Lee had to know he was being tracked, and each time he jumped, I was just piling on with more and more bugs, biting and scratching.

And watching. Which is how I saw that he had reached up, pulled the pin out of a grenade, and threw it at me.

I ran backwards, hoping my bugs would shield me, as the shotgun fired again, a roar that left me almost deaf as it barely missed me, having waited to see when and how I was moving, or how my bugs were moving to shield me.

The grenade blew up rather loudly, and I turned, sending more of my swarm after him as a clone of his sliced at some of the bugs.

And then a few flies started really forcing themselves down his throat. They ran their bodies against his tongue as he flailed, gag reflexes having to start up in panic that he shouldn’t have felt.

I rose, still breathing a little hard, and advanced towards him with my screen, walking left and then right, as if I were some game piece that couldn’t just go straight at him. He kept on teleporting, but it wasn’t solving anything. There were now dozens of bite marks on his body, and stings all around it, and it wasn’t stopping.

It wasn’t really fair, honestly, but in a one-on-one he stood no chance.

I pressed for advantage, not caring about fairness, as more and more bites all added up. He had to flee, I knew that. Flee or I just choked him down with bugs. He was teleporting more often, this way and that, and the night was filled with the roar of shotgun and grenade, but he still wasn’t getting through the swarm of bugs filling every inch of the area, and he couldn’t really clear them out with grenades or his knife, nor even with the shotgun. There were just too many, and he squirmed this way and that.
Lung was still fighting, but the Undersiders were starting to withdraw now that Oni Lee wasn’t there to harass them, and I knew he had to strike.

Oni Lee fell at last, when one of my spiders crawled into his open mouth and started biting his tongue. It was a black widow, and so I wasn’t surprised when he started to spasm. There were bites everywhere, and I wondered if I’d gone too far as I had the bug scuttle around.

He could survive this all, even the internal bite, but he’d definitely need to be treated. I thought, as he finally collapsed, and my bugs kept up more benign stings all over his body. I left them to it, splitting my forces in half, I thought, finally past being winded.

The whole fight hadn’t taken much time at all, but it’d felt like a long slog, especially since halfway through the outcome wasn’t in doubt.

So I jogged towards the fight, just as…

My heart leapt into my throat. Lung roared, more flames lashing out, and then I felt my bugs shift as Rachel fell off her dog and hit the ground. I hurried, reaching the fight scene, which was a wrecked pathway. The ground was black from the fire, and Rachel was lying there, just at a corner as Lung approached, wearing my costume, though with burns here and there. Rachel groaned and tried to get up.

Lung was almost ten feet tall, a scaled monstrosity, and I just stared as I stepped forward, bugs buzzing all around me. The other dogs were turning around, trying to go to save Bitch, and Grue pulled darkness down in front of her, clearly trying to distract Lung.

Lung was huge, and he wasn’t Oni Lee. I didn’t really stand a chance.

You know what? Fuck it.

“Hey, lizard!” I yelled, and he turned. “Yes, you!” I strode forward, surrounding myself with bugs. I had to hope that they’d survive his first fireball, and that it’d thus take two to kill me, because I didn’t really have any ideas of how I was supposed to stop him.

The dogs were milling about, but without Rachel…

Without Rachel, who would they listen to. He breathed fire at me, a huge gout of it that the bugs mostly blocked, frying and dying as I leapt out of the way. “Get off the dogs!” I yelled, so loud my voice almost went hoarse.

Grue got off, and then Regent, and Lisa…

“Run!” I said.

Lung turned to attack them, but I had a secret weapon. Wasps dive-bombed his eyes as I gave a command. “Angelica!” I said, ordering the one closest to Lung. “Kill!”

Angelica leapt at him, and he didn’t expect it, since of course Rachel was the one that controlled dogs. Not me.

Angelica was huge, and she barreled him over for a moment, before he recovered and began swiping at her and spitting fire.

“Angelica! Back!” I ordered, “Brutus! Judas! Kill!”
I ran for Rachel, my remaining bugs a cloud as they kept on stinging him. His eyes were vulnerable, and I felt one dive in, strong enough that he couldn’t swipe it aside, or missed, and they just kept on going. And down his throat as well, though I knew he could just cook it.

Rachel looked amazing in her new costume, amazing and yet vulnerable. She wasn’t moving, and I could feel the Undersiders retreating without her. If Angelica could get Rachel on her back and... strapped in somehow, then I could get her out of here and face the music myself. Hopefully the Protectorate would come and save my life before he finished me off.

But how to get her on? Perhaps I should just get both of us up, I thought, coming up on her.

I saw her chest rising and falling, and knew that she was unconscious as the dogs continued to bite and tear at him. I tried lifting her, but she weighed way too much, and there was no way I was getting her out of there on my own.

I wasn’t even sure, I thought, kneeling there, exhausted and terrified, if I could lift her enough to drape her across Angelica, who was standing right there, in front of me and Rachel, serving as a sort of shield.

At this size, there was basically nothing about her that would have screamed dog. She was a monster, but I knew the her that begged for treats and liked going on walks was inside there, somewhere. It was an odd feeling, having them all obey me like that, and I knew I needed to see all of them alive through this, or Lung would have to get in line behind Rachel.

He was screaming, but as much in rage as pain, and he kept on healing. His eyes were still the most vulnerable part of him, but when it came to someone like Lung, that didn’t mean anything. My hands were shaking, but I tried to keep my voice clear as I ordered the dogs to keep on attacking. Keep him off balance. I wish she had an order that did that, exactly. Playing knock-away was important if I was going to survive this, but I kept on having to order them to attack, and then retreat.

My voice was hoarse, and the flames were getting everywhere, hotter and hotter. They didn’t even have to hit me to really hurt me, as hot as they were, and I kept on trying to bite at him with the bugs. The inside of his mouth, his eyes, anywhere that might not be as armored was a valid target, because I needed to pump him full of poison, and yet he’d heal from it, wouldn’t he?

I panted, slapping at Rachel to get her up, aware that I was just making Lung stronger and stronger, though Judas seemed to be tearing through him a little faster than he healed, which meant that when he charged straight at me, it was slightly limping.

That was why I didn’t die. Because Angelica managed to dig her claws into the ground and keep him from just knocking her into me and trampling right over me. By now he was way too big, towering over me.

“You!” he yelled, as I kept up the swarm of bugs. Rachel began to stir in my arms, and I pulled her backwards. “Angelica! Kill!”

She bit onto him, and the other two dogs came up around behind him, knocking into him and biting and clawing as he roared, fire licking over my costume.

It covered my body, or else I’d be down on the ground screaming, but as it was, I knew that any moment now he’d push through and that’d be that. I needed something far more powerful than what I had.

I needed to hit him with so many things at once that he couldn’t deal with it.
And for that, I needed Rachel, or backup.

Rachel finally stirred. “Wuh?”

“Angelica. Power her up,” I ordered her, trying to sound firm. I didn’t have time to be polite or ask questions, I needed her larger than she was. As large as she could be. And then I could hit him with her, have her get on him and hopefully overpower him all at once.

Which was when I heard the sirens, and the roar of a motorcycle. A moment later, something slammed into Lung, and having just barely gotten up, bleeding from dozens of wounds and roaring, half-blind still, he fell like a ton of bricks.

But he was already moving as I watched Armmaster roar up in his motorcycle, and then dismount in a single, impossibly graceful move, swinging his halberd around as he and Velocity began to engage with the monster.

Rachel managed to sit up, though she looked like she’d pass out at any moment, and put her arm on Angelica and grit her teeth. I knew it hurt, the more she did, but she needed to push through as much power as possible. There wasn’t a thing like too slow in this case, the other two dogs could hold him off.

“Hold him off!” I yelled. The PRT sirens were blaring nearby, as Armmaster fought Lung, moving and ducking and stabbing. And where he stabbed, it cut straight through the flesh as if it were nothing. Lung was getting taller, and I said, “But carefully! Don’t ramp him up too much. Yet!”

Lung turned to me, and then saw that Angelica was now taller than him. There were vans that were smaller than her, and she was quickly approaching the size of a short bus. The plan was simple.

Vicious and simple. But I was well past caring as Rachel shuddered against me, almost passing out from the pain of powering up one dog so much. Angelica wasn’t going to be very fast at all, but it didn’t matter. She was larger than him, because he seemed to have topped off at a little over… fourteen feet or so, large enough that he was starting to look odd. There were the nubs of wings, and his whole body was thick. The bugs could still hurt his eyes, but I wasn’t sure for how much longer, and each time he was blinded, he quickly began to regenerate it. But every second counted.

Angelica grew a little more, and Rachel passed out again, in my arms. “Brutus! Judas! Hold!”

“Armmaster! Get ready!”

Velocity was backing off as Lung spat fire at everyone and everything.

“Angelica… forward!”

The dog barked, a sound that was a deep, barely human rumble, and moved to obey, ignoring the fire as if it were nothing.

“Angelica! Bite arm!”

Angelica bit down on Lung’s arm. His inhuman, bizarre face knit itself into a look of agony.

“Angelica: tear!”

Angelica tore Lung’s arm clean off, and he screamed in agony as Armmaster lashed out, cutting at his chest with his strange, too-long halberd.

Lung collapsed, writhing on the ground as I poured bugs into the open wounds, where they bit and
scratched as he writhed on the ground. I stepped forward, watching his agony.

I shouldn’t feel as happy as I did. I should feel bad, because as he flopped back he began to lose size, first a few feet, and then all of it, bleeding out along with his arm, which was gushing blood on the ground even as it began to heal and scab over.

And then lying there in a pool of blood was an unconscious, naked man. He lacked an arm, but the wound was already more or less sealed.

Rachel was in my arms, and I tried to lift her up. “Judas, come.”

The dog loped over, panting. “Brutus,” I said, “come.”

Armstrong glared over at Velocity. “Inform the PRT that we’ve subdued him, and that we have two prisoners.”

“Two? You found Oni Lee?”

“You defeated Oni Lee?” Armstrong asked.

I looked at him for a moment, “Who else could you mean?”

“You have Hellhound captured,” Armstrong said, firmly, as he stepped towards me.

“No, I’m going to let Bitch go. She asked for help, I provided it.”

“She’s a criminal and a murderer.”

“Brutus, Judas, come,” I said.

Velocity frowned, stepping forward, “How did you do that? I thought that Hellhound controlled the dogs with her power.”

I stiffened, but I couldn’t reveal the truth, that she didn’t have a control power at all. “Murderer? I’ve gotten all the facts, and it’s involuntary manslaughter at best. Maybe even not that if you get a good lawyer and a cooperative jury willing to stretch things a bit,” I said. I was panting, and I was also maybe talking a little loudly.

In fact I was yelling. “You fucking lied to me. Or you were wrong. Either way, she’s not going to be taken in and locked up! So just back off.”

“You are aiding a villain to escape.”

“She’s my friend, and yes I am. I took down Lung, I got Oni Lee for you, and I’ve helped out several other times! So just fuck off,” I groaned. “Brutus, kneel.”

I realized just then that I was willing to fight Armstrong. I’d just almost murdered a guy, and probably given another enough spider bites to ruin their life, and I was willing to fight Armstrong if it meant protecting Rachel. The feeling in my chest was somewhere between furious and almost proud of myself. Then there was the doubt, worming at me. This was a mistake, and if it came down to a fight, I’d probably lose and get branded a villain, despite everything I’d done to help the city so far.

I wasn’t supposed to feel like I was owed something, but I did. I felt like Rachel and I had both been screwed over by society, and in my case I’d gone out of my way not to be the kind of person who went Carrie on her school. I hauled Rachel up, more by adrenaline than anything else.
“If you try to escape—” Armstroner began.

Velocity, the speedster, looked at him, and it was hard to read the expression on his face.

“Just allow me to leave for now. If you would like to talk about what I found out and why I’m doing what I am, we can. I’ve done nothing that deserves an arrest, not even now. You can even take credit, if that’s all that matters to you.”

Velocity wasn’t going to talk, or at least, he wasn’t going to make the decision. Armstroner was the one in charge. He was the one who would have to go to the Director either way. Angelica was so huge that I wasn’t sure how I was going to hide her movement. I’d need to find an alley and hole up in it, or help her dig out, or…

This was going to be a long night, even if he let me get away right now, and everything could easily go wrong.

Armstroner stepped back, slightly. “This needs to be discussed. At Protectorate HQ.”

“How?” I asked, suspiciously.

“No. On the record, right now, you are claiming that she committed involuntary manslaughter, and you’re also saying that you are aiding a criminal in escaping justice.”

“She needed my help. And yes, every fact of the case I know, including some I think you don’t know, points to what, from what I can tell online, is involuntary manslaughter. Who knows, though. You guys sent someone to the birdcage for accidental assault, so…” I shrugged, and Velocity winced a little bit.

Good.

Let them wince. I knew that if I got away now, it wasn’t because I’d won. It would be because they were going to give me enough rope to see what I did with it.

I wasn’t sure if they wanted me to hang myself, figuratively speaking. Trust should go both ways, and right now it went neither. “They called me in, and I called you in because I figured that you’d prioritize a known murderer in charge of a gang over a teenage girl.”

Armstroner looked like he wanted to hurt me. Or debate me. Maybe both. I knew that I had more ability to run my mouth off than he did, because of course he had more to lose. I was just some female vigilante. He was the head of an entire local organization that ran in part on its image.

“So, may I leave?” I asked. “It’s that simple: I’m asking you, because I don’t want to fight you unless I have to. You can record this: I intend to keep on fighting the gangs. I’m not even aligned with the Undersiders in general, even if we’ve worked together before.”

“What about Hellhound?” Armstroner asked, and I could tell that he knew something was up.

“I think she got a raw deal,” I said. “That’s all I’ll say. May I leave? Yes or no.”

“For the moment,” Armstroner said, as I finally pulled her up on Brutus. I wasn’t a traitor, not to someone I…

I blinked, almost startled by the thought I’d cut off. Maybe it was love, after all. I didn’t know, how would I know? But part of me just wanted to assume that’s what it was.
It’d be silly to allow myself to ruin my life for anything less.

“Angelica, Judas. Come.” I dug my knees in, and we began to retreat, retreat into the dark night past the lights and the sounds, past the sirens of the PRT vans, two exhausted girls. Together.

She must have been exhausted, because she didn’t wake up at all, even when I half-dumped her in a grimy, smelly alley as I tried to figure out what to do next. I needed to get her back to her home, and I needed to do it without being discovered. That meant, first off, that I monitored for threats as I dug my hands through flesh.

Tons and tons of gross, disgusting meat, the flesh suit within which was a normal dog. My costume was all but ruined, covered in blood and guts, and I changed out of it and stuffed it into a backpack that was similarly basically ruined as well.

I hadn’t been hit at all, but now that I was finally slowing down, my whole body ached in this weird, exhausted way. Rachel looked as if she’d seen better days, but I was able to drag her out of her costume and stuff that in my own backpack too.

Then I slapped at her until she woke up. I must have looked horrible, because she groaned and tried to go back to sleep.

“Come on, Rachel. Please, can you just get up for me?”

“nhhnhn. Taylor?” she asked. “What…”

“We had a fight.”

She clung to me tight, so tight that I struggled to breathe. “Rachel…”

“With… Lung?”

“Yes. We won,” I said. “We need to get you back…”

She nodded, and then we limped off into the night.

My costume was at her place. It was nearly eleven by the time I got back, and I half-expected that he’d be waiting there. Instead, he was lying in front of the television. My bugs spotted over a dozen beers before I even entered, and I could hear him snoring. I stumbled upstairs, threw myself down on the bed, and heart racing, failed to sleep.

I was still staring up at the ceiling when morning came.

Chapter End Notes

Rachel's dogs are dangerous, and Taylor's willing to step up to bat for her lover in a big way. Still, she's done a lot that can't be undone.
Bite 3.6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My ceiling was not particularly interesting, and so eventually I had to get up. It was far later than it should be. I needed to get to Rachel. I didn’t know why it felt so vital, but I just wanted to get to her.

Then it all came rushing back, like the tide that had briefly retreated for a moment. She was hurt. She needed help.

But why did it feel like what I really wanted to do was hold her tight and go to sleep. As if I were the one that needed comfort and help, and she were the one that could protect me. When I closed my eyes, I could see the blood.

I hadn’t paid much attention to it at the time, but it was amazing, how much Lung bled. I didn’t know the human body had that much blood, and of course it didn’t. It wasn’t a human body he had. The arm lay there, claws stretched out accusingly, blood soaked all around, no doubt staining into the ground.

When that’s what you saw with closed eyes, it was no wonder I hadn’t fallen asleep. But I knew I needed to. Instead of forcing myself to sleep, I rolled out of bed and looked in the mirror. I had probably looked worse, but only in those days right after I’d been taken to the mental ward of the hospital for observation. My hair had been covered in gunk, and parts of it had had to be cut off.

Emma loved the little touches, she always had and she always would. So of course she had also filled the locker with gum and other stick things. I hadn’t lost a lot of my hair, but she’d known where to hit me.

My hair was intact now, at least, but it was a mess. I’d been shifting around in bed the whole time, and I’d sweated so much I was surprised I was able to roll off the bed, rather than being glued to it.

My head ached, my back and shoulder were hurting, and I realized that I’d somehow lost my glasses somewhere.

I’d taken them off in an exhausted hurry, sure that I’d fall asleep, and now they were lost.

I had to spend a minute hunting for them, and then I had to strip off all of my sweat-soaked, dumb clothes off. I stared at myself for a moment more, and then gathered up some clothes and a bath-robe.

By the time I finally stumbled out of my room, which was a mess I’d have to clean some other time, I could smell pancakes cooking.

I went to the railing and yelled down, “A few minutes, Dad!”

“What?”

“I have to get a shower.”

Dad smiled, a little playfully, as he peeked his head out at me. “Who said they were for you? I had a hankering for some flapjacks.”

“Can I have one, maybe? Or two. I don’t want to ruin my diet,” I said.
Now that I thought about it, I was very hungry. My stomach was an empty pit, my body was stretched out and used up, and yet Dad had made pancakes. Maybe we could just avoid talking about anything awkward, and pretend that things were just as good between the both of us as they used to be.

Dad was a master of denial, so why shouldn’t I get some practice?

*******

When I was younger, it’d seemed as if a good shower could fix everything. If I was sick, I’d go in the shower and for at least a while the heat and the relaxation would drive the illness back. If I was tired, I’d step out refreshed. If I were sad, I’d at least be a more mellow sort of sad. It was a miracle, a panacea of sorts, and I’d always loved taking showers.

That had changed at some point, and I stepped out of the shower feeling only a little more human as I dressed in a pair of jeans and a green T-shirt, throwing on my clothes with wild abandon and slowly walking down the steps, as if every step was a trap, to face Dad.

“Hey, Taylor, almost thought I’d have to knock on the door, see if you were okay,” Dad said.

I wiped some water off my glasses, putting them on as I glanced at the table. Bacon, eggs, and pancakes with syrup were all waiting for me, the smell almost driving me wild as I trudged forward and sat down.

“You okay?”

“Didn’t sleep. Just stared up at the ceiling,” I said. It wasn’t even a lie.

The concern on Dad’s face wasn’t a lie either. He cared about me. Too bad for how he seemed to be able to show it to me. “I’m sorry to hear that, Taylor.”

“I’ll catch up with it,” I said. “I need to go to Rae’s in a bit. She’ll be worried that I didn’t show up. But… thank you for the food, Dad.”

“It wasn’t much,” Dad said. “Hope it’s alright.”

I tried to grin, though it felt fake, and almost threatening. “Of course it’s alright. You make great pancakes.”

“What are you going to do with Rae?” Dad asked, just as I took a bite of the pancakes.

I made sure to chew thoroughly, taking my time to reply. “Take care of her dogs. Probably sleep?”

“Why there and not here?” Dad asked.

I shrugged, since I didn’t get it either. I just felt as if I’d have better luck when she was close by. Plus, I could actually talk to her about what had happened. With Dad, I had to dance around why I felt so drained, why I didn’t want to close my eyes for too long. Did I feel guilty? No. And it was probably a bad thing that I didn’t.

I’d do it again. As many times as needed, if it was to protect her. It felt like a weakness, like a flaw in how I operated. In my moral code, for that matter, too.

“I…”
Suddenly I had the mad idea of trying to explain it. The fact that it felt better to do nothing with her than something without her, sometimes. The way we didn’t always even talk about anything important because it didn’t matter. Maybe he’d be able to understand, maybe he, who had more experience with this ‘love’ thing, would be able to tell me if I was crazy or not.

But how could I trust him, how could I tell them? The words caught in my throat as they tried to force their way out. I wanted to focus on the bugs, on what they were doing, to distract myself. If I trailed off, would he comment on it?

I wanted him to understand what I felt, but I wasn’t sure that he would be able to. And even if he did, would that just be another excuse for distrusting her? Or thinking she’d manipulated me to make me fall this fast and hard and make me this ridiculous and fumble-tongued.

I was used to being like that, but I wasn’t used to it being for a good reason, rather than humiliation and bullying. “I can’t say,” I said.

“Can’t say? Or won’t.” Dad leaned forward a little. “Taylor, I’m worried.”

“I know. It’s your job,” I snapped, and then took a bite of eggs. All of a sudden my bacon seemed fascinating: far more than actually looking him in the eyes. “I’m fine, though.”

“You’ve been tired most mornings, I’ve noticed it. And I know you’re doing something.” Dad leaned forward, I could feel his presence even though I wasn’t looking at him. Plus, his seat creaked.

“What? Do you really think I’m the sort?”

“I don’t. But…”

“But what? Am I supposed to be some unhinged madwoman just because I have a new… friend and like spending time with her?” I asked. “Or some sort of… of criminal or something, just for having friends? It’s a nice change from the rest of my life!”

“I know things are hard at school--” Dad began.

“I’m going to go to Rae’s. Thank you for the pancakes,” I said, setting down the fork. I’d eaten about half my food, but I didn’t think I could stand another bite.

Dad’s stare was stunned. He’d never seen me not finish the pancakes he made. I almost wanted him to call me back, ask me to explain, ask me to tell him more about Rae so that he could at least make up his own conspiracy theories with more knowledge.

It wasn’t as if the truth would make him happy, either.

But he didn’t. He shifted like he wanted to, and he even said, “Taylor?” as I walked up the stairs, before realizing that my backpack was at Rachel’s.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Will you be back for dinner? It’s chicken,” Dad said. “I could make it.”

“I can,” I said, stumbling upstairs briefly to see if there was anything I forgot. Maybe a few games? I wondered if we could listen to music together. I didn't’ have any makeup or anything on, but I knew she didn’t care about that sort of thing. There were plenty of people who didn’t care for makeup that still cared about it on other people: such as most boys. But she wasn’t one of them. I knew that I could come to her just about like what I was when I got out of bed, and she’d at most be worried that
I looked unwell.

Soon enough, I was off, and while I didn’t feel good enough to jog, I did try a fast walk as I let my bugs spread out.

My range seemed to be improving a little, and I focused on the bugs and what they could see as I moved. When I spent time seeing through the bugs, as it was as if my anger and doubt were all bleeding off. Still, I could imagine the harm I’d caused. I knew I’d done worse, at times, but I’d been disconnected from it.

I’d seen this.

It was vicious, it was hard, and I knew that Rachel would approve. But I almost wanted a second opinion. But not quite as much as I wanted reassurance.

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I knocked on the door, and it took two minutes for Rachel to get up and answer. Rachel yawned when she did.

“So,” I said. “You’re unwell. You should sit down, and let me work with the dogs. You were hurt yesterday.”

“Morning,” Rachel said, as if I hadn’t said anything. “You look like shit.”

I flushed beet red. “M-maybe, but it’s not like you’re a ball of energy either.”

Rachel’s hair was mussy, her eyes were drooping with exhaustion. She moved forward and hugged me tight, right there. People on the street could see, but I was too tired myself to care. I hugged her back, trying not to do so too hard, because I knew she’d been roughed up.

She’d fallen from her dog after a lucky swipe from Lung sent the dog leaping. The problem was that Angelica had been running rather fast, especially for her size. It wasn’t quite the same as falling off a motorcycle, not nearly as fast for one, but the same sort of principles applied.

It was lucky she was wearing armor, which meant what she mostly got were bruises and aches, rather than skin torn off or worse.

“I’ve fed ‘em,” Rachel said.

“I can do the rest. Just you sit down, and relax. I’ll take care of everything,” I said. Then I blushed, as images slowly drifted into my head. First, pleasant ones, and then images of last night. I shuddered a bit. “But once I’m done, could I maybe use your blankets and sheets?”

“Why?”

“I didn’t sleep last night,” I admitted.

Rachel hugged me tighter, and began to run her hands along my skin, as if I were a dog who just needed a little soothing. She focused on my hair though, because maybe I was a dog that needed soothing, because it hadn’t taken Rachel long to learn that if she wanted me to relax, stroking my hair worked wonders.

“Why?” Rachel asked again, stubbornly. I had a feeling that she’d keep on asking why until I spilled everything.
“I really hurt Lung, and I don’t regret it at all. I know, you’ve done just as much to people before,” I said. “But I haven’t. I feel a little sick thinking about it. But I don’t…”

“It’s okay,” Rachel said. She bit her lip. “It ain’t like I like hurting people. Or at least, it’s just a thing. If you really loved it, that’d be kinda weird.” She shrugged. I imagined that this was probably true. She hadn’t really cared about the people she’d mauled, especially if they abused dogs, but I could never imagine her going out of the way to hurt people, or taking pleasure in it.

So maybe she understood not wanting to do something, but not feeling bad about doing it. “I should sleep,” I said. “Once I finish helping out with the dogs. And… why was your team even there?”

“Some big team meeting, to talk about whether to take Coil’s offer and shit. I think I was going to tell them to fuck off.” Rachel frowned. “Or that I’d need more if I agreed, or something…”

“Because you wanted to…”

“With you? They left me behind,” Rachel said.

“I told them to. Sorta? I mean, I had the dogs, and Grue wouldn’t have helped,” I said, firmly. “But… yeah. If you don’t want to join them, then don’t. But the Protectorate probably thinks I’m a villain now. Best case scenario, they suspect…”

That I’m so friendly with this one villain that I’m sure they can change and I’m willing to help them all the time, which would make me basically a villain, but a well-meaning one. I wondered whether they thought about the possibility that I could be head-over-heels.

“Fuck ‘em. If you go out on patrols and bust villains and shit, then it doesn’t matter what they think,” Rachel said, firmly, as the hugging and stroking continued and she somewhat clumsily guided me towards the back room.

The dogs barked and gathered around us, but Rachel firmly ordered them off, and of course they obeyed. I stumbled and tumbled, my emotions racing in a thousand ways.

It should be me caring for her, and I felt wrong accepting all of this, but just being there in her arms felt good, and this was a chance to sleep with her. In the most innocent sense of the word.

I stumbled onto the pillows and the blankets, which smelled of her, still in her arms, and rolled over. When I closed my eyes, I could still see the blood and gore, I could still imagine that my entire life was going to be ruined by the Protectorate declaring me a villain.

I could imagine a lot of things, for I was someone who was very… imaginative, to say the least.

But there was something more than imagination. There were warm arms that were really there, unlike the blood, unlike the consequences. Unlike the anger and frustration and fear. And there was someone attached to those arms that I thought I loved.

It took too long to fall asleep, but the whole time, Rachel stroked my hair.

*******

I woke three hours later, tangled up with her. She was not quite awake, but she looked like she was stirring, and she shifted as she did.

We were still fully dressed, and I knew we looked a mess, the both of us. “Hey,” I said.
Rachel looked at me, and her eyes smiled as her lips wouldn’t. “Hey.”

There was pawing at the door, and I had to imagine that the dogs had wanted to be cared for. Needed to be cared for. But at the same time, I looked down at her, underneath me, and lucky at that too considering that she was rather heavy, and wanted to just stay like this for a long while.

I let out a breath.

“We should get up,” I said.

“Yeah. I need to…”

“I can handle it,” I said, firmly, trying not to smile, as I stared at her, really looked at her features and her emotions, tried to understand that look in her eyes. “You just lay back, and let me do everything. You’re the one who got bruised around.”

I reached a hand to touch her shirt, as if trying to imagine the bruises beneath it. But then, I didn’t have to imagine, did I? She was real.

Rachel was staring up at me, and it took a moment for her to think things through. Her brows knit, and then, gaping a little, she said, “Oh.”

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “Just wait.”

*********

I took care of the dogs. Cleaned up after them a little, gave them some attention, then went to the restroom and finally returned to Rachel. And then eventually we both had to get up for other reasons. Eventually was the key word, and by the time I finally got up again, I felt almost as good as new, even though there was that edge to everything I did.

Emma’s voice tried to mock me, but I didn’t care. I didn’t feel guilty about cutting a guy’s arm off, so I sure as heck didn’t feel guilty about anything else.

“Well, we should wash the costumes,” I said. “We have water, and I could just buy some detergent. And we need to go out,” I said.

Rachel frowned. “What time is it?”

“One,” I said, startled at how long had passed, but also not surprised at all, either. I’d have to go home in a few hours, but I didn’t want to. That wasn’t new, but I’d never felt the desire so strongly. “So we’d better get going.”

It wasn’t a whole day wasted, not if I felt better, but it definitely didn’t make me savor the idea of going back to school, and dealing with all of that nonsense. Especially since for all that I felt better, I’d still… I’d still gone pretty brutal, and I’d done it where my own, real eyes could see it. I didn’t know how I’d be able to hold back if they went too far.

What if I hurt someone?

I wasn’t as worried as I might have been, earlier today, but it was still enough reason to be a little leery.

I also hadn’t had a chance to help Rachel learn any more reading, but perhaps I could do that on weekday nights, I thought.
If I wasn’t busy making sure I hadn’t lost the chance to raid the Merchants. They still deserved it, and a few more days and I’d be back and ready to really make them suffer.

Plus, I thought, worries starting to pile up again, next weekend I was introducing dad to Rachel.

Which was sure to go well.

******

I didn’t have a car. That was the first difficulty I realized very quickly when we went out shopping. I had a list in my head, ideas to follow up on, but considering how big terrariums could get, there was no way we were going to carry it to Rachel’s on our own.

I’d gotten a few glass fish-bowls, a few terrariums for different sorts of bugs (the rare ones) and some cases and the like that would hopefully hold, say, a wasp’s nest so that when I wasn’t around it wouldn’t sting anyone. And mason jars for the bees.

Literally everything I was getting would have to go as far away from the dogs as possible.

So we’d had to call Lisa.

Lisa, it turned out, had a car.

Rachel was not the best shopping companion ever, at least in the sense that I always imagined it. She bought her shit and then paid for it in cash and then left with it. No mystery, and no window shopping either, but that was just fine.

We didn’t have that much time. Not because everything was that rushed, but because I knew that Dad was waiting for me. It was a nice day out, very few clouds at all in the sky, a real May day worth being out in, and nobody paid Rachel a second glance, too busy with their own lives, their own weekend plans.

They had busy weeks ahead of them, just like I did.

Of course, I paid attention to all of them. I was the spider at the center of the web, monitoring hundreds of people while we shopped. I couldn’t be too obvious, since a Walmart with hundreds of flies was… at least a little be too crowded with bugs. Slightly. But I still got an impression of the people, their movements, the way that they clustered around what I soon figured out were the sales.

Taken from above, even from the eyes of a bug, the sights I saw made me realize how much people were a group. It was odd, to both be observing a group and yet there with a single person, and I knew that this was a perspective that pretty much nobody else could get. It didn’t tell me anything, the few conversations I ‘listened in on’ (and the more conversations, the more impossible it was to focus) were as expected.

People talked about clothes, or what they were going to buy, or teased each other, or called out to their children not to spend too long in the Toy Section. It was all so very normal, and I should have felt either connected to it all by seeing it, or disconnected by the fact that I was seeing it through a bug’s eyes.

After all, wasn’t I just being a voyeur? But wasn’t this view too complete to be intimate?

Instead, I didn’t know how it felt. I did know that now if I had a piece of paper on me, I could have probably written down facts, dates, names.
If information was all that mattered, then I was getting plenty of it, and part of me wondered what Lisa would do with that sort of ability. I imagined the kids running with wide-eyes to check out all of the toys, and thought that they and she might have shared something in common.

I didn’t have her power, whatever it was in specific details, but I could figure things out if I wanted to. I knew that I had to have some sort of knack for multitasking, since I was still able to shop all the while taking in this endless wealth of information.

Of course, there was some distraction, as we waited for the car from Lisa, pushing shopping carts out into the crowded parking lot as we scanned for her. I didn’t know what sort of car Lisa would even drive, so I couldn’t even watch for her.

“You okay?” Rachel asked.

“Just… watching through the bugs,” I said, under my breath, low enough that only she could hear.

Her brow pushed together, and her expression looked more curious than I’d thought. “What’s it like?”

“I can see the entire store,” I said. “And more. All those people, all those lives, and it’s like I’m connected to them, and not. I… I don’t think I’ll be able to imagine my life without it, given time. Maybe even not a lot of time.”

“Huh, cool,” Rachel said, looking at me with those dark eyes of hers. Well, it wasn’t like anyone was going to say something.

I reached out and gripped her hand. It was a rough, blocky sort of hand, with short nails. And she was sweating a little, whether from the heat or stress or something else I didn’t know. It was warm, that was definite, and I gripped it tighter as she looked at me in surprise. “What?” I asked, squeezing her hand.

“Uh,” Rachel said, and there was red in her face, so cute I had to keep from trying to smile at it, though I had practice. “Didn’t expect that.”

“Why not?” I asked. I wanted to say more about that. Or mention girlfriends or something, but maybe just holding her hand would help move it in that direction.

I was red-faced too, and I knew that if Emma saw this, well. But fuck that. I needed to keep on not caring about what Emma said. The locker door was still there, no matter how much I kicked. I was definitely making progress, but school was rough enough.

“Dunno,” Rachel admitted. Then she said, as if it just occurred to her. “Thought you didn’t want to.”

“No, I mean. Sometimes I just worry what Emma would say if she--”

“Who gives a fuck about Emma?” Rachel asked, feelingly, as she leaned in a little. I had a feeling she was trying to comfort me.

“Well, for the next two years, I’ll need to. I have school.”

“Fuck it,” Rachel said.

“I can’t just--”

“Get a GED or whatever,” Rachel said, and then, her voice a little lower. “You’re really fucking
smart.” She sounded odd when she said that, vulnerable in a way I sorta understood. I knew that she sometimes felt that people with more education were mocking her. But I’d never do that.

“I mean,” I said, staring at her. The truth was, I hadn’t really thought about dropping out of high school. At least, not seriously. It just wasn’t a thing that was done, even if you were going to get a GED. Because that’s what people did: you went to high school for four years, and then you went to college.

The idea of just skipping that felt like it could go wrong. But honestly, I tried to imagine it, and I could. Summer would be great if I could get with it, spending as much time as I could with Rachel. I pictured getting a GED, and maybe taking a… gap year? If I could find a way not to go broke as a hero, that could be my job, and then I’d work my way through establishing myself that way. It was a path forward, I thought. And in the meantime, I could teach Rachel how to read better, get to know her more…

I realized with a start that in all honesty I was planning a life together. Rather more of a life than I should be planning for when I wasn’t even sixteen. But I wanted to.

“Yeah. And I can go to college eventually… later or something,” I said. “And we could fight crime together… I mean.” I shook my head, “If you wanted.”

“I…”

There was a honk of a horn, and then Lisa came up in a rather plain looking brown sedan.

“Well, that’s our ride.”

*******

Rachel and I sat together in the back seat, and I kept on holding her hand, wondering when she’d tell me to stop, as we drove along. The trunk was absolutely full, and we’d loaded stuff up into the front seat and buckled it in.

“So,” Lisa said with a smile that I had to carefully not return, “there’s some good news.”

“What?” Rachel asked, looking away. She closed off even more than at her worst with me, whenever she was around Lisa, and it made me want to open her back up.

“Well, I’m going to be able to get some more money to you. Coil’s throwing a little more money at us in general, probably hoping you’ll push the right way,” Lisa said. “But I can divert some of it to you, for… whatever you plan.”

“Whatever she plans?”

“No, whatever both of you plan,” Lisa said. “Together.”

I looked away, wishing I was someone else, but I kept on holding her hand.

“Taylor doesn’t want me to join Coil,” Rachel said, with narrowed eyes.

“And that’s fine if you don’t want to join, or even… if you want to leave the Undersiders. I don’t want you to, but I can’t think of any way to stop you,” Lisa said.

“Yeah,” Rachel said, crossing her arms. She didn’t believe Lisa, and certainly, Lisa could be charming.
But her charm didn’t seem to work on Rachel, so maybe Lisa had given up on trying.

“So I’d rather help you,” Lisa said. “Both of you. You’re good for each other and—”

“Bullshit. What’s your game?” Rachel asked, looking frustrated.

“My game is simple. I don’t want Arachne here to be unhappy. I think you help each other. I suspect she’d be in a far worse place if she hadn’t found you,” Lisa said. “Am I not allowed to have feelings?”

“I admit I’m suspicious too.”

“Well, I’m helping you now. My advice is that if you’re trying to go straight, find a way to make everything that Rachel did look nicer.” Lisa frowned, “Maybe play up the dog angle? Caring for dogs is pretty popular, as long as you ignore…”

She trailed off, but I knew what she meant. Even if she hadn’t ever really murdered someone, the ‘Kill’ command spoke of a willingness to do so if she was put in a situation where it’d work, and as brutal as she was, it was luck that she hadn’t done worse.

And I’d need to make sure she didn’t go too far. “I… we can figure this out later,” I said. “Right now? Right now I just want to try to get stuff set up. And then I need to go back to Dad’s.”

“I could go with you. Be another friend you met?” Lisa offered.

It was actually a very, very good idea, but it also seemed like it’d confuse the issue. I bit my lip, leaning back, and then shook my head. “No, thank you. But… it’s a good idea. Maybe if you talked to him he’d be less paranoid.”

“Is he doing anything?” Rachel asked.

“No. But he doesn’t trust any of this,” I said. “We’re going to have to hit it out of the park next weekend with the visit.”

“The… oh,” Rachel said, frowning. “I don’t have…”

She trailed off, and I could imagine filling in the blanks. She was sweating a little more now, nervous and uncertain. I hadn’t expected that.

“What?” I asked.

“Do you wear dresses or whatnot to… whatever?” Rachel asked.

I tried not to smile and laugh. “No. Just… dress in a nice pair of jeans and a decent shirt, and that’s it. You know, nothing much, just… you look nice in anything, anyways.”

Lisa stared at me for a moment, before shaking her head. I could imagine what she was thinking. Because yes, it was my subjective opinion, and I knew by now that I was completely compromised when it came to my judgement in this respect.

Maybe every respect.

She drove along for a while and said, “You know, if I were you…”

“What?”
“Go after someone as soon as possible, and turn them into the Protectorate. Prove that you’re genuine,” Lisa said. “They’re not acting now because they don’t know what you are. If they were sure either way, they’d do something else. More than that, though. I’d make sure to state that you captured Oni Lee.”

“Why?” Rachel asked, looking puzzled.

“If you get it and everything else out in the open, then they’ll be less willing to press-gang you. And less able. My analysis shows that’s part of why Shadow Stalker was so easy to co-opt. Besides going too far in her violence, she didn’t advertise herself enough,” Lisa said.

I nodded, frowning a little. I’d definitely paid a lot of attention to Shadow Stalker’s case, both for what to do and what not to do. She wasn’t my hero or idol or anything, but she was an example of a female vigilante in Brockton Bay. Who had wound up in the Wards.

“Advertising?” Rachel asked with a snort.

“Yeah,” I said. “Rachel gets fans without even trying that.” I was joking though, but Rachel looked at me, eyes narrowed. Not sure whether I was joking or not. “Seriously. You have websites of fans. Not a huge amount, but… turns out that people like dogs.”

“Some people,” Rachel said, and I knew she was thinking about all of those people who abused their dogs, or neglected them. “Not enough.”

“But some,” I said. “Anyways, it’s not important. I’ll… keep your advice in mind.”

Lisa failed not to smile, and Rachel’s mood got a little bit worse. But then, that was that.

*******

I cooked dinner. I took credit, typing in a bunch of self-serving truths. I went to bed and slept well, but woke up tense, worried. Nervous about what the week would bring.

For the first time in a while, my long term future seemed like it could work out, if I just found a way to not wind up declared a villain, and if the dinner went alright this weekend.

So instead of this odd, long-term dread, there was this feeling like I was walking on glass. If I did something wrong, if I was pushed too far--an arm, laying down on the ground, blood flowing everywhere--I could screw everything up royally.

When I got downstairs, I said, “Dad, do I have to go to school today?”

“Why?” Dad asked, narrowing his eyes. He wasn’t making pancakes this morning, but he did have eggs and bacon.

“It just seems… I don’t.” I frowned. How to describe the fact that I’d almost been pushed too far on Friday, and then I’d seriously hurt several men. They deserved it, but while Emma, Sophia, and Madison didn’t deserve that, they did deserve something.

I wasn’t supposed to think that way. I’d told Rachel about my choice, and stood by it, but violence bled over.

“You’re going. I’ll take you myself, if need be. If you’re not sick.” Dad said it with a frown and a glare, and I knew I wasn’t going to get away with it.
So I gave in.

*********

The day started promisingly at first. I’d managed somehow to get my homework done, and because I didn’t use my locker, and had all of it sealed up, there was nothing they could do, at least not easily. Not like some ‘accidental’ spilling of juice all over a completed assignment.

It probably made me look anal-retentive, presenting everything in plastic, but so what. My bugs were spread out, seeing everything, and I wrote it down in my spare time, tense and annoyed and waiting for something to go wrong. Or right, for that matter.

Instead, it mostly just went along, bobbing along in the stream of life.

By the time I ate lunch and talked to Greg about some new anime he was watching that he thought was amazing, but sounded a little weird to me. Of course, there wasn’t nearly as much anime coming out now as there used to be, as he explained to me—as if I hadn’t heard of Leviathan—but still.

Then, just before my last class, it happened.

I was walking with Greg when I saw Sophia coming up on one side. Actually, I’d felt her for a while, through my bugs, but I’d been sure that I could just give her the slip.

And behind me was Emma and Madison… ambush, then.

Oh, great. I bared my teeth and kept on walking, but Sophia stopped and stood up in front of me.

“Taylor?” Greg asked.

I was staring right at her, with my teeth bared. My shoulders were hunched in a way I’d seen Rachel do before, right before she attacked. I took a breath, and tried to step around Sophia. She stepped back in the way as Emma caught up.

“So, Taylor, a friend of mine saw you this weekend…”

I took a breath, unable to keep from flinching. If she’d seen me with Rachel, and somehow there was a picture, could she figure out who Rachel was and ruin everything? That was a downside to her lack of secret identity, though pictures of Rachel weren’t actually common online. Not compared to pictures of her as a villain in her old costume: perhaps it was a matter of censorship, and being careful not to entirely ruin the chance at a second chance.

Or perhaps Rachel hadn’t liked cameras.

I just needed to play it cool. What did she see?

“Jogging in the bad part of town,” Emma said. “What were you doing, looking for drugs? Snort a line of coke off the ground and…”

Oh. She’d only seen me going to Rachel’s, then. Or at least, me in that general area. I could work with that.

“Taylor,” Greg said.

I realized I was still furious, but I could control it. “You know, I wonder,” I said, sharply, “what your Dad would think about how vulgar and disgusting his daughter is, making up lies like that.”
“You weren’t there?” Emma asked, more amused than anything, as Sophia and Madison circled like sharks. It was in moments like these that it felt like Emma was the one in charge. At other times, Emma deferred to Sophia, but when it came time for insults and bullshit, she was definitely the one who the others followed.

I shook my head, hoping that the bell rang. I needed an excuse to back down even more, but I didn’t want to just duck my head and run away. I didn’t want to back down, and I found that I couldn’t, not really.

“Oh, maybe instead of that, you were being a prostitute, or something? Or maybe meeting some white-trash boyfriend of yours. Maybe that’s why you smell like dogs. He has a few, and he’s a filthy…” Emma trailed off, and glanced behind me. I turned, to see that Greg had winced.

“Really? That’s it? You have a boyfriend. How sweet. I bet he’s just as ugly as you,” Emma said, her voice sing-song.

The next thing I knew, I punched her. It was a reflex, I didn’t think. I just surged forward and felt my fist hit her face. It wasn’t a great punch, but she went down. My hand hurt more than I thought it would, and I stood there for a moment.

Just a quick breath, and then I felt something slam into my shoulder, and then I hit the locker face first.

“Agh!” I yelled, furiously, trying to avoid lashing out with my bugs, which buzzed and moved in the rooms for a moment. Just a bunch of flies, nothing to pay attention to.

Sophia grabbed my arm roughly, forcing it behind my back. “You’re fucking—” Sophia began, but by then a teacher was running towards us. I groaned, my shoulder aching even worse than I expected, and I glanced down at where Emma was, twisting my head as Greg quivered, looking as if he were just a single moment from rabbiting.

Emma’s nose was bleeding, and my shoulder was probably bruised up, but other than that it seemed as if the fight was over before it even started. In a physical fight, I didn’t stand a chance against Sophia, and it hurt.

Any fantasy of some sort of revenge evaporated in pain.

“Break it out! Break it up!” the teacher yelled. He was a big, balding man, and it took a pained moment to remember his name. Mr. Burowitz.

Sophia got off me, stepping away, and with an efficiency that I only wished they showed towards literally anything and everything else, we were all whisked away to the office.

*******

It was late afternoon in Principal Blackwell’s office, and I was pretty sure that it was going to be someone’s funeral. The pain was still distracting me, and I slumped in my seat. Myself, Greg, and all three of the Trio were all clustered here and there. There weren’t enough seats, so Madison was standing.

Apparently, as one of the wounded, and the one who started it, I got to sit down and listen to Sophia tell a bunch of lies.

“So then she just walked right up to us and started calling us names, and Emma said she wouldn’t stand it, that she’d tell a teacher, and that’s when she snapped…”
The Principal neither nodded nor shook her head. Dirty-blonde, narrow as a razor, and wearing clothes far too dark, she was not an imposing figure at all. “Taylor, is that what happened?”

“No,” I said. “Greg’d back me up.” I was crossing my arms, and I knew it was pointless to even try. “I was trying to get to class, and they stopped me and started insulting me. Making accusations.” I took a breath, trying to be sincere. I wanted to ask to get the book, to show them what the fuck they were doing, but I honestly wasn’t sure if they’d do anything. “I lashed out, without thinking. Then she slammed me into a locker before I’d so much as blinked.”

“It seems to me that both sides have erred,” the Principal said, in the kind of voice I imagined was supposed to come off as reasonable. I tried not to snort, but I was getting more and more annoyed. “However, let’s hear from other people.”

Emma told the same story, Madison told the same story, Greg told my story, which was also known as the truth, and the Principal frowned. “What matter was it?”

“I don’t know,” Emma said, through a handkerchief. I’d given her a bloody nose, at least, and I almost wished I’d done more. “She just stepped up and started insulting me. Calling me a whore…”

“I didn’t!” I said, loudly. “She’s the one who insinuated…”

“Calm down, Taylor,” the Principal said, and I realized I was leaning forward. “I believe that no matter what either party said, it doesn’t justify violence. Sophia Hess, you hit someone and slammed them into the locker. You’ll receive two days ISS.”

Sophia grit her teeth, but didn’t say anything.

“Taylor, by all accounts you started the violence, and thus I think it’s fair, and the handbook agrees, that you get three days ISS.”

“What the fuck,” I said. “How is that anything like fair?”

“Language,” Principal Blackwell said. “And what about that is not fair?”

“They’ve been bullying me since forever, and I’m the one that got slammed into the locker and put into a hold,” I said. “And she’s getting less? What the he--”

“Three days OSS,” the Principal corrected. “And your father will be informed of your misuse of blue language.”

Blue… language? Had she ever stepped out into the halls of this school? I grit my teeth.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes…” I do.” I understood that I wasn’t going to get anything like fairness or justice here, and screw even trying. I ground my teeth together, but added a nod, and she seemed satisfied with the form, if not the reality, of compliance.

“I’ll be calling both of your parents, and you’ll be going home today as soon as they arrive. Do both of your understand this? I’ll be writing up both accounts, and sending them home to your parents.”

“Yes,” we both chorused.

Sophia didn’t look like she realized that she’d won. I’d gotten punished harder than them for something that was mostly their fault. I hated it, and I wanted to lash out at them for real. Put a fly in
their soup, sting them with the force of a dozen bees.

Instead I trembled in rage and frustration.

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The first half of the drive home was silent. Dad drove wildly, clearly angry and frustrated, shoulders hunched.

Finally, once we were almost home, he said, “You hit someone. I didn’t teach you that.”

“I snapped,” I said, aware that he was right. He’d gone out of his way to be positively Blackwellian when it came to violence ever solving things, at least in my presence. It was mostly because he was afraid of his own anger, sometimes.

Not that I couldn’t understand that a little now. “You can’t snap,” he said.

“They were… calling me a druggie and a prostitute. And then they started talking about about…”

“Start from the beginning, Taylor,” Dad said firmly.

“One of their friends saw me jogging to Rae’s house, though they didn’t see her. And Emma and Sophia and Madison, they’ve been bullying me since the fall after Mom died. They’re the ones who did the locker, and they’ve done all sorts of things like it before.” I shook my head. “She didn’t even know Rae was a girl, she just guessed that I was meeting someone, and then Greg had to flinch, and she started talking about Rae…”

“So she caused this?” Dad asked.

“What kind of question is that. Emma caused it,” I growled, shaking my head, and looking away. “I just want to be out of there. I was talking with Rae, and she suggested getting a GED once I’m old enough. Then I can get to college early and be out of that miserable pit.”

“I’m not opposed to that,” Dad said, after a long moment where it seemed like he was trying to compose himself. “But why are you talking so much with…”

“With Rae? Cause I think I love her,” I said, and then realized that my mouth had run ahead of my brain. “Maybe? But either way, it’s not bad advice, is it?”

“No. Once you get home, we can talk about the details of your OSS, but this is an actual punishment.” Dad said. “I’ll try to do something about the bullying, and the fact that Emma was doing something like that? It matters. But responding that way…”

“Fine,” I said, crossing my arms. “I should go and see Rae, tell her what’s going on.”

“No. It’s clear, Taylor, that she’s a bad influence on you. Or at least, that’s the way it seems from where I’m sitting. So, until I have that dinner with her, you’re forbidden from seeing any of her.” Dad nodded to himself, as if he thought that this was some reasonable compromise.

“What’s the dinner for?”

“To see if I’m going to allow you to--”

“All me?! Allow me?! You don’t have the key on my chastity belt, and you’re not in charge of me.”
“Yes I am, actually,” Dad said firmly. “I’m your father and I’m worried.”

“Just because I got into one little fight?”

“I doubt that’s the only one. I saw bruises. Either she’s hitting you, or you’re getting into fights and not even telling me about it.”

I stared at him in horror. “So you’re forbidding me from seeing her again?”

I could barely breathe. I felt like I was trapped in a small, tiny little box. I felt like I was back where i was all those months again. I couldn’t breathe. My eyes were wet. I blinked back the tears, trying to be defiant but most of all feeling defeated and exhausted.

“At the moment, yes. But that can change.”

“This isn’t fair!”

“It’ll be alright, Taylor,” Dad said. “I’m sure that we can work all of this out, this weekend. We’re still on for the dinner. You have Tuesday through Thursday to stay at home, do homework, and we can think and talk this through. I can take a day or two off.”

To watch me. To make sure I didn’t go to Rachel.

I sat in silence for the rest of the ride.

*******

I threw myself down on the bed, leaking tears, and then took a deep breath, trying to relax and focus. A few months ago, I would have hoped that I could convince him through some sort of Friday or Saturday dinner. I would have been sure, if I could imagine this, that he’d see reason.

And I’d be patient enough to wait it out, hesitant and afraid. Instead, I got up after a dozen moments and pulled out a few bags. There was my backpack, and then I had a travel bag or two.

I also had a cell-phone. I dialed a number with shaking hands. “Hello, Rachel?” I asked, in a low voice.


“No. I…” I trailed off. “If I wanted to stay with you for a while, would that be okay?”

“Of course,” Rachel said, without even thinking about it.

“Can you…” I began. “Show up around here to pick me up? I mean, just in case…”

“What happened?”

“I punched Emma.”

“Good,” Rachel said.

“…Not so great,” I said. “But… can you?”

I didn’t really doubt her answer, and yet I still found myself nervously holding my breath as I waited. This was a stupid mistake, or at least, that’s what the voice in the back of my head was screaming. I shouldn’t--
“Yes. I can.”

**********

I had to pack light. Even if I loaded myself down like a mule, I didn’t have a car, and I wasn’t going to be able to take most of my books, for instance. So I tried to take the ones that mattered most. Ones I’d gotten from my Mom, and ones I could teach Rachel with. I’d leave my textbooks behind and…

And I admit I hadn’t thought that much further than that. Would the school send someone after me? I was pretty sure that truancy officers didn’t exist anymore, not in the same way that they did in movies. And Dad didn’t know where Rachel lived. So there was that.

Books, clothes, toothbrushes, tampons, shampoo, nail-clippers… I just piled what I needed into the backpack or the travel bag and hoped it’d be enough. I could always buy more clothes later, I thought, aware that this was a drastic step.

But there was no way that Dad was going to be reasonable and give Rachel an actual chance. None at all. And I don’t know how I’d get through three or four days without her, let alone the rest of my life.

Yes, it was a bit dramatic, but he was the one who cut me off after my first write-up. I’d had an almost-perfect record until then, and he knew what the bullying did to me, and yet it seemed like he blamed me for reacting… and Rachel for teaching me to react that way.

Maybe my experience as a cape taught me to resort to violence quicker, but I didn’t blame Rachel at all.

I waited, my bugs mostly spread out to watch for Rachel, though I kept a few downstairs as Dad drank, and then drank some more. Finally he stopped moving, though the bugs couldn’t hear any snores.

I waited until, just at the edge of my rather impressive range--it’d increased again, for the moment--I saw Rachel. Then I hitched up the bags and glanced around my room.

I wasn’t sure when I’d see it again.

But I couldn’t stay here. It was like a feeling in the pit of my stomach, this certainty that this was not the place for me. That this was going to end badly if I stayed. So down I went, down the stairs. At the bottom, though, one of my bugs saw Dad shift.

I paused, the stairs creaking as Dad stood up. He looked like a mess. “Taylor,” he said. “What are you doing?”

He sounded like he knew, and I said. “You can’t stop me.”

“Yes I can. You’re my daughter. Yes I can.” The second time he said it, his voice raised all the way almost into a shout as he stepped forward. “Go up to your room.”

Bugs were already gathering, and I had them fly out in front of him. He took a step back, almost tripping over his own feet, his eyes red and hard as I began to walk towards the door.

Then he stepped forward, right as I gathered a few bees. They buzzed in front of him, and he stopped, realizing that this was something off. Something wrong.

“Taylor?” he asked, again.
“I’m leaving,” I said, and my words seemed to echo in the swarm of bees I had, in a way I hadn’t expected. “I’ll call you. But this isn’t right, and it isn’t fair. You’re not going to give it a chance, and I…”

I trailed off, not sure what to say. The decision had come fast, but it felt like this had been building up for a long time. I’d been withdrawing from Dad, and him from me, for way too long to stop now.

“Bye.”

“Taylor!” he yelled, but didn’t step towards me, didn’t stop me as I threw the door open and stormed out into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Some girls would accept the pause and make sure their girlfriend left an amazing impression on Saturday.

Taylor is definitely not one of them?
By the time I was jogging towards Rachel, I realized how crazy this was. I had just run away from home without even really thinking about it. Sure, I could tell myself that it’d been building up, some sort of confrontation, but Dad hadn’t raged and stormed and done anything to justify me running away from him. In the traditional sense.

It’d almost be easier if he had.

Instead, he’d forbidden me, in a calm tone, from seeing Rachel. I didn’t know where I’d be without her, and I knew that it was sentimental and mad and all sorts of other things to think that way. As if I owed her my life. That was how I felt, though. Maybe I should be regretting my decision already.

Instead, I was just filled with doubts. But I knew there was room for me at Rachel’s.

Rachel, who stood there, watching as I jogged up, exhausted and nervous and imagining how much I’d hurt Dad. I hadn’t want to, but… but. What was I supposed to do? What was anyone supposed to do?

What I did know was that Rachel hadn’t even hesitated. When I’d told her what I needed, to stay with her, she had accepted it. She hadn’t wrung her hands and talked about maybe if I behaved she’d let me see her again in a week. She hadn’t jumped straight from ‘bullying for years’ to ‘But why did you punch her?’

Not acceptable? Maybe, but why the fuck did that need to be the first priority, and not any of the thousand other problems. None of which had to do with me punching one of the trio, and everything to do with a broken school, a broken world.

Against all of that, the fact that Rachel made me feel special and even… not pretty? But attractive, to her at least. And the way she listened to me?

Dad didn’t do anything, and his only advice was to endure it and tattle on people. As if the school cared. As if they would ever care about me.

I looked into her eyes when she saw me, and I saw it again. Reflected there. Warmth, desire, concern for me that wasn’t rooted in the same feeling every time I felt it that I was letting her down, or that she had let me down.

“Taylor,” Rachel said, and she did me the great favor of not asking if I was okay, but just stepping forward and quickly wrapping her arms around me.

It was a brief hug, but I leaned into it, and realized I was tearing up badly. The world blurred as I buried my head in her neck. I could smell her sweat, and that cheap soap she used, and--

She was stroking my hair, and I was probably getting tears all over her neck. “S-sorry, I just…”

I didn’t feel sorry, but you were supposed to--

“Why the fuck are you sorry?” Rachel let out a bitter laugh. “Just come on. I have… I dunno. I bought chocolate if you want it.”
“I would,” I said.

“An’ ice-cream and shit. I dunno. Lisa said that you might…”

She’d asked Lisa? Man, she must have really been desperate to have gone to those sorts of lengths to help me. “She gave advice?” I asked. “What did you tell her?”

“Just that you were upset,” Rachel said. “I’d never tell her personal shit.”

“Oh, good,” I said, taking a breath. “Wait, how do you have ice-cream?”

“Bought a freezer.”

Oh, of course. I assumed she meant some sort of little freezer, though that did bring up the question where she got power for it. Did she buy a generator as well? Just how much was she spending on me?

Now wasn’t the time to worry about that. “Got it. Thanks.” I clung to her for a few moments more and then broke away, following her as she jogged off. We could have walked, because it wasn’t as if Dad was chasing us. He’d have caught up already if he was. I’d have seen him leave the doorway.

I imagined how hurt he had to be, and I knew that I’d have to… well. I’d have to figure all of this out later. For the moment, my guilt was overwhelmed by my relief, and when we finally got close to what I thought of as her place, the dogs started barking.

Some things were always the same.

It was nine or so, and that meant it was probably time to sleep, but I knew the dogs would want to see me, and I nodded as she opened the door and I stumbled in, walking down the hallway and opening it up.

To a flood of canines.

*******

“Aww, that’s a good girl, Angelica. Roll over, please,” I said. “So I can scratch your belly more.” I smiled, amid a pile of dogs. The chocolate was in another room, since it was bad for dogs, but honestly the canines were a pretty good start when it came to cheering me up. They were always so happy to see me, especially if Rachel gave me a few treats, and they were warm and slobbery and…

Well, I’d always had something of a soft spot for dogs, and that spot had only grown. So I spent a while with them, though it occurred to me that if I was staying with her long-term I’d have to figure out how to bathe. There was a lot I had to figure out, I thought, as I got my bugs spread out over the three or four blocks that was my range now. Even if it was decreasing moment by moment as I felt better.

I wasn’t really prepared for it. But right now, it didn’t feel like it was going to crash down on me.

I knew that given time, the fact that Rachel lived mostly according to the sun—for instance, it was dark now, and she had no lights—and that there wasn’t a shower, and other things… they’d matter.

Right now, though?

Snuffling doggy noses and treats.

*******
It was about ten when I stumbled into bed, and Rachel stumbled after me. I was about to get into bed fully clothed when she asked, “Won’t your clothes get messed up?”

I doubted she cared, and of course, she’d seen me rather less dressed than in… oh, I’d have to find my pack and grab pajamas that I’d brought…

You know what? I thought to myself, stripping down to bra and panties. I could find it tomorrow. Tonight? I was just tired.

I snuggled into the blankets, and Rachel came in after me, and when I stared up at the ceiling, or rather the floor to the unfinished second level, it felt almost right.

*******

We woke up in a tangle of morning obligations and awkward rushes to the bathroom. I had to brush my teeth, and change into new clothes, and that meant I’d need to find a laundromat or something like that before too long. Then of course, I wanted to at least wash my face and get some of my body wet, even if it wasn’t really going to count for showers.

There were the dogs as well. As usual, I helped clean out the crates and pour their food and get their water, and they didn’t seem surprised to see me, and they were still excited to see me. Most of them, that is. Dogs had personalities just like humans did, but they were also trained. I remembered the way I’d ordered them around, and that made me wonder, in an idle sort of way, what they saw when they looked at me.

Or what they thought, for that matter.

We feasted on dry cereal for breakfast, and yes, it turned out that she had bought a little hand-crank generator, the sort that they often sold to people ‘in case of Endbringer’. Or rather, for the aftermath of such an attack. Which was optimistic, in a way, considering just how dangerous one of those was. But it meant that all she had to do was crank it for a while each day, and it’d store up power to keep the freezer running. It was a lot of work, but I wasn’t exactly full of great ideas, was I?

“Hey, can I play that one game?” Rachel asked.

“Sure, I did bring it along,” I said. It was about ten, and the day had gone slowly. But I figured, soon enough, I could start figuring out what to do. I had the bugs to deal with, get them in mason jars or the like, and then I had a whole host of things to go out and buy.

I’d have to be careful not to be seen by Dad, so I was thinking I’d go to some out of the way, run-down store. There was a Dollar Colonel a few blocks away that probably had plenty to sell.

I fished out the game-system and handed it to her, and she started playing, sitting on the pallet, keeping an eye out for the dogs. She’d no doubt get bored at some point and wander back over to take care of the dogs.

If I wasn’t in OSS, I’d be at school right now, and I expected to feel an outpouring of absolute guilt about this.

But I didn’t, not really, and it was nice just being here with her, watching her play and get frustrated and then angry and then happy again at some silly game with lasers that relied in reflexes that I really didn’t have.

It was getting towards noon when my mind finally returned to the fact that I had plans to make, and a schedule to keep.
“Hey Rachel,” I said.

“What?” she asked, as she looked over the dogs.

“I’m going to go out for a bit. Grab some food for the pantry, and maybe… whatever else I need. Is it okay if I take the money? I know you said yes, but–”

“Yes.”

“So you say yes again,” I said, feeling almost silly for asking. “Well, that works. Though we do have to think of a way to budget all of this.”

“You can do that,” Rachel said, and I knew that she wasn’t exactly the budgeting type. I was still getting used to the trust.

“I can. Though we have a lot to figure out. Like the bugs thing. And what were you thinking with the…”

“Wanna go on patrols or whatever together?” Rachel asked. She said it slightly fast, as if she wanted to throw it out there before I had time to change the subject.

“Does that mean you’re at ‘no’ for the Undersiders thing?” I asked. “For sure?”

“Prolly. So we patrol and see what we find? Or did you have some kinda plan?”

“I did, actually,” I admitted. “Going after the Merchants as soon as I could. With your help, it could be very soon.”

Rachel looked at me in that way that always told me that if she was the grinning type, she’d be grinning. Instead, it was just an intent look in her eyes. “Fucking Merchants.”

“Well put,” I said. “Is there anything else you know or would want to do? Have they set up a new dog-fighting ring, or anything like that?”

“I dunno. No clue if they did,” Rachel said. She glanced over at the dogs, and I could imagine her imagining more. For her, there was no such thing as too many dogs. One day when she was older, she might qualify as some sort of crazy dog lady.

Not that she was crazy. “Well, if they did, we’d need to get a bigger place,” I said. Then I frowned, thinking. “You know, if you were on the up-and-up, I mean, if everyone saw you as a hero, you could work with the local dog shelter?”

“Was gonna do that,” Rachel said. “Volunteered at local shelters. Then someone came, talked about a team and safety for my dogs and a whole lot of…” she gestured around at the building. “This.”

“So you joined up.” I said. It did make sense, really, but it was also something that could change. If she joined because of practical reasons, she could leave because of practical reasons.

I’d hoped it was that simple, because simple could be good.

“Yes,” she said, looking as if she expected me to say something about that. It was the stubborn look on her face. We hadn’t really gotten into any arguments, but I could imagine that she was not the sort to ever give up. Like a dog with a bone was a saying that occurred to me, for some mysterious reason.
“So, moving forward, if you worked at a shelter, and maybe people knew about it, maybe they’d be willing to donate. Or if you ran one.” I frowned. “People donate more to people for less. It’s very hit and miss, honestly, but dogs.” I shrugged. I’d said before how crazy people could get at dogs, and it was still true now as it was then. It’d always be true.

So I knew I was being repetitive. Repeatedly.

“Maybe,” Rachel said. The second time she seemed to be listening more, thinking about it, and I leaned towards her, not wanting to interrupt her, but fascinated by the look of concentration on her face. It reminded me of other looks, at other times, and that meant that I was red-faced and distracted.

“W-well, we’ll figure it out together, right? While I’m gone, feel free to play the games or look at the books. I’ll be back as soon as I can. And I’ll try to keep out of the way of Dad. Or anything that might lead me to go back.”

Rachel nodded, looking at me with a look that was simple in its trust: she didn’t doubt me at all, she knew I’d come back and stay back. Maybe I should ask her. Just ask...

‘Rachel, will you go on a date with me?’ It was the clear next move. If anything, it was a move I should have asked a long time before now.

Instead, I’d dithered and was still doing so. I should ask. Very, very soon.

Maybe in a few days, once we were settled down.

“Got it,” she said.

“I’ll make sure to write down what I take, and I can get you the receipts, too.”

“Thanks,” Rachel said, flatly.

*******

It was odd, shopping with someone else’s money. It was this feeling of responsibility that I couldn’t really have expected. I sorta got how married people got into clipping coupons and the like. Even if it’s the money of both people, there was a definite feeling that you don’t want to be wasteful and throw it all down the drain.

I bought clothes, but in order to miss Dad, I made sure that they were used clothes from a thrift store out of the way. I grabbed pop-tarts and cereal and as many things that could be eaten dry or cold as possible. Ice-cream would have to run into the problem of carrying it all, and even the clothes and the one bag of groceries were going to really weigh me down.

So I had to do it in stages. could I have asked for Lisa’s help? Yes. But instead, I went back, showing Rachel the clothes and then swinging around to buy a few more toiletry kind of things, as well as a flashlight. That’d be useful, certainly. I wasn’t sure what else I needed, and I stood around a little, thinking about what I could use.

Oh, maybe a water bottle? I could reuse it, and that would help me keep hydrated. Then, when that idea came, another few things occurred to me. Painkillers could help, at least enough that I should have it on me. It’d definitely pay off if either of us was injured, since neither of us had insurance, nor honestly any desire to use a hospital.

It was tough, being a villain, because you needed to find excuses for being roughed up. It was possible, sure, but that didn’t mean there weren’t complications. For instance, a bruise was far easier
explained than a bullet wound, which you’d have to find some sort of bribable doctor to deal with. Or someone who knew first aid.

I could… ah. I could get a first aid kit, of some kind. Even if all it had were basic things, I decided to add it to the list.

I spent a lot of time shopping, and a lot of time listening, which convinced me that I needed to buy a notebook or three. I didn’t write while I walked, but I tried to remember snippets of conversation and the like, and put it all together in my head, testing out what I could do with my bugs.

The truth was, by the time I got back to Rachel’s the second time, I had even more ideas for things I could buy, but I’d also burned through the self-imposed budget I’d set. So I just stepped in and saw that Rachel was outside, playing with the dogs.

“Hey!” she called out, nodding at me as she started to move towards the food. The dogs realized, and I worked on getting it open.

It was a free-for-all, but eventually the dogs were fed, and I babbled a little. “So I was thinking, we could maybe get more stuff, if we found a way to… do something with the generator? We should be able to figure something out. But that’s for later. Right now, we have some options. Do you wanna go out to get something? Or we can eat pop-tarts and cereal and of course I also got some granola, that kind of thing. I could have brought fruit, do you like fruit? I didn’t know what kind of fruit you liked. I’m not sure, but if you made a list of foods you liked and didn’t like, I could deal with that. Though I can’t really cook anything but I do known how to cook and maybe I could teach you if we ever got in front of a burner. That way we can share something, and it’s not like my tastes--”

Rachel listened to all of it. I could tell because her head turned to face me, and she nodded, and after a moment frowning she said. “I like apples. And meat. Chicken’s better than pig, but either’s fine. Don’t like spicy stuff.”

“Well, that helps,” I said, nodding briskly as Rachel turned to keep one of the dogs from snapping at the other for food. “And dinner?”

“Maybe stay here?” Rachel suggested with a shrug, and an odd expression. “Cheaper. An’ we can play games. Or fetch.” She gestured to a stick she’d put out of the way for that purpose. “Tire them out for bed early.”

For… oh. Oh! Oh.

Right. Yes. I nodded, deciding that this was a good plan and perhaps I’d underestimated her strategic genius. “Why not?”

Why not indeed? It was my evening… no our evening, and we could do what we want, go to bed when we wanted…

So I played video games and snuggled up to Rachel, and then threw fetch as it started to get darker, but not nearly so dark that the dogs couldn’t find the stick, until at last it was time. I’d begun to put some of my bugs away in jars or containers, and they sat there, under my command, though when I went to sleep, that’d be something.

Fireflies buzzed about as we made our way to bed, and in a playful, silly gesture, I had a few of them buzz overhead in the dark, when body met body at the end of my first day with Rachel.

******
It took time to get into a routine. But it was possible. She got up first, and went to go to the bathroom, and then I got up, later than her by a little, but not that much, and did my own business. It wasn’t quite yet time for my period, and I didn’t have a shower or bath to fiddle with, and so I wasn’t behind her any when I tripped out the door to feed the dogs.

The dogs came first, I understood that with Rachel, and only once they’d all eaten was I able to have honey cheerios and cocoa puffs and a cinnamon sugar pop-tart.

It was probably not the breakfast of champions, but it tasted good, and I decided that if I was going to eat like that, I needed to go out jogging. I didn't want to get out of shape, after all.

I wondered what Dad would do. He'd surprised me, but I didn't think he'd call the cops, and at the moment the school knew nothing. I didn't think he'd tell them. Which meant I was probably safe for now.

So I went for a run. Halfway through, sweating and tired, I realized that I didn’t have a shower, and that this was probably a big problem. But I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do about it, so I just sucked it up and ignored that gross and sweaty feeling. A little sweat wasn't going to kill me. I got home for lunch, and we'd have to go out unless we just ate jerky.

Or cereal. I could, but I didn’t want to.

Rachel didn’t comment on how I smelled, but I knew she had to notice, and what was I supposed to do? I changed into another outfit, similarly simple and a bit run-down, but I’d also have to get them to a laundromat I’d passed on the way jogging back here.

That’d be a little more money thrown down the drain, and with nothing to show for it so far except for temporary comfort.

Lacking an actual apartment and an actual income stream, especially if Rachel quit, meant that I needed to be thinking these things through sooner rather than later.

Perhaps I should get online, and send out a few feelers. I admit that right now it felt good just going through my day, as if all the little annoyances were okay since I was sharing them with her. And I did talk about the shower problem with her, and she nodded along and listened, though she didn’t have any easy ideas.

Then I had some time to try to help her with the writing. I’d ask her to spell a word, and then I’d help her with what she got wrong, and try to break it down, and then have her practice writing the letters.

Brutus, not Brootus. Angelica, not Anjelika, Judas not Joodas. It was not hard to get her to know that, but then the real difficulty was always going to be smuggling in learning about how it all worked. Because it was easy to see and correct for individual cases, but the rules of grammar and spelling were bizarre and sometimes arcane.

Of course, little steps were what mattered, I thought to myself, as the day wore on towards about when I’d be getting out of school. By around dinner time I started thinking about how to ask her out for a date.

There was a difference between two friends going out for dinner together and people going out for a date, I knew it. It was… it was how things were done, and so I should just ask her. Maybe she’d even say yes. I knew she wouldn’t lie, that was for sure.

I was stewing on these problems when I finally decided to check out my phone, to see if Lisa called me. I’d turned it off, and I wasn’t going to respond to Dad--though if Dad knew about this phone,
something odd would be going on—but if Lisa had some news or information, it was important to check on that.

What I saw instead was that Greg had been calling me. Again and again. Oh, right. He had to be worried about what had happened to me. He’d sent texts too, each of them more panicked than the last.

‘Where R u?’

‘What’s happening?’

I realized that I had another friend who mattered to me. Sure, not in the same way that Rachel did—if he did, that’d be awkward, for one—but he was still my friend. And I’d left him in the lurch completely, even if I hadn’t exactly had much of a choice. If I’d told him ahead of time, he would have had a chance to tell Dad.

But now?

Well.

I dialed him up, noting the time. He should be off of school by now. This could be really painful, or really helpful, and I wasn’t sure which one it’d be. Either way, it had to be done. It could be a first step towards talking to Dad. Was there some way I could explain myself without looking crazy?

I didn’t want to go back to live with him. Not yet, at least. But if there was some way to talk to him without him siccing the cops on me as a runaway, or something… even though I was a runaway.

The phone rang only once before he answered. “Taylor?! Are you okay? Do you need a rescue? Wait, if you did, would you say you did. Blink once for… wait no, no, um, say potato if you need a rescue, and pota-toh if you don’t. What happened? Your Dad called and he said--”

“One question at a time, please,” I said. How could someone deal with that, really? Better to ask questions slowly rather than babbling endlessly.

“Are you really Arachne? I mean, I know you are, but are you supposed to say you aren’t? Are you a hero? Is it fun? Do you kick ass?”

I let out a deep breath, but the truth was that there was no way that to deny it that didn’t look silly.

“Why do you suspect that?” I asked.

“Your father called me. Um, he was distraught, and he asked me questions. I, uh, didn’t answer anything much, but I could look it up and see that you were Arachne.”

“Then fine,” I said. “I am. I’m a hero.”

“Wait, does that mean that the girl with the dogs is… Hellhound?”

“Bitch,” I said, without even thinking. I should have denied it, I thought, my face going red as I was glad he couldn’t see me.

“What?” he asked, sounding scandalized.

“She’s called Bitch,” I said.

“Um, but that’s not a very polite name to, you know--”
“Then call her Rachel. That’s also her name.” I took a breath. “You didn’t tell Dad? He’d only worry.”

“I didn’t, but he’s going to figure out if he looks. I mean, online the news is abuzz about how close the two of you are. There’s speculation and everything.”

I shook my head, trying not to panic prematurely, “What sort of speculation?”

“That you’re teaming up, or fooling the Protectorate, or something,” Greg said, vaguely. “I mean, I don’t wanna…”

“Well, that’s fine then,” I said. “Or at least, not unexpected. Dad… well, don’t tell him we had this conversation.”

“So you’re dating… Bitch?”

“I just need to ask her,” I said, firmly. “Though really, it’s not your business.” I took a breath. “But I know you mean well, and—”

“And I messed everything else. I blew it! I messed things up like… like.” He trailed off, trying to think of some simile that worked.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. Yes, Greg’s face might have provided hints for Emma’s attack on me, but I couldn’t blame him for not being a great liar, or not having a poker face. At least not if I was being honest, since it wasn’t like I was a mastermind either. “But either way, I’m living with her for the moment, and I’m going to… I’m going to try to convince her to go straight.”

“Uhh, Taylor. Oh! You mean legitimate.”

I blinked, “What else could I have… really?” My lips pursed. “Really?”

“S-sorry, my mind just… anyways! Uh, how’s gaming going?”

“Pretty good. Rachel really likes Laser Panic 2.” Which was a silly name, but it was this laser dodging and redirecting game, where you used mirrors and other tricks to get around them, and the lasers grew more numerous as the level went on. It was, honestly, something that you’d imagine as some free-to-play game that wound up getting an actual budget and turning out alright.

“Really?”

“I play video games with her, yes,” I said. “I mean, she said she likes them.”

“You have two game-players?” he asked.

“No, one. And then I sorta lean over her shoulder. Or against her, and play it. You know?”


“What?” I asked.

“Are you sure she’s not playing because it means time with you?” Greg asked. I could almost feel his blush through the phone. “I mean, it’s something people do.”

“Well, maybe. But she likes it too. Anyways, so, I’m going to be living with her for a while. We’ll see what happens,” I said. “But I thank you for not telling Dad about any of this, it wouldn’t have ended well for either of us.”
“Your Dad, he sounded upset.”

“He was,” I said. I took a breath, tense and worried, feeling my hands clench and unclench. “So am I. But he was going to refuse to let me see her.”

“Really? That sucks,” Greg said. “Um, Taylor. Maybe not immediately, but can we meet sometime in the next… sometime. Like, to eat something? Or hang out? I promise I won’t tell your Dad, and I won’t go to her… wherever she lives.”

“Maybe. We’ll have to see. I’m going to be very busy the next week, but… I do want to see you again. You’re my friend, after all,” I pointed out. “So, is there anything else?”

“Your Dad hasn’t told anyone you ran away yet. Um, other than me. I asked about that, and he’s keeping it down low. He can’t do so for long, but if you miss Friday, he won’t say anything, and they won’t think much of it. I mean, they’ll call, but…”

I wondered how long it’d take before people realized I was gone. Let alone care. I took a deep breath, wishing I could just lay down and think this through and come to some easy, perfect solution.

There wasn’t such a solution, and there never would be. I should just accept that, but…

But I didn’t know what Mom would think of what I was doing. Probably not anything good.

“Okay, will he cover for me?” I asked. I didn’t really know what happened when someone just stopped going to school. I say stopped, because if Dad knew I was at school, he could call someone, the cops say, and ambush me. Which meant I couldn’t go back. Which was going to be a big problem, since school went all the way into June. I had weeks left, weeks that they would be asking questions about.

“I hope so. I mean, I dunno if my Mom would, but…”

Greg trailed off. He didn’t talk about his Mom, and his Dad wasn’t in the picture. She was a single mother, college educated but probably a little underemployed, and since he was an only child, she doted on her son. Well, in a controlling sort of way, from what I remembered. So yes, he did know what his Mom would do if he skipped even a single day of school and hurt his chances to grow up and go to Law School or enter Congress or whatever the heck she wanted.

It wasn’t fair to him, but then, had either of us exactly been blessed? “Oh, right,” I said. “Anyways, so, about the other news.”

“Other news?” he asked.

I was just saying something to buy time, but now that I thought of it, Greg had mentioned that there was a new Game Station coming out next year. It was like Playstation but for poor people from Earth Bet who didn’t have Aleph’s version of Japan to make these things. I sometimes wondered what things were like, on Earth Aleph. It was apparently a better world than ours, happier and better.

But then, it didn’t have Rachel in it.

“Well, like Game Station 2, did you see the press release? I didn’t, but you said it was…”

Greg seemed really, really glad to be on a topic he actually knew something about, and we wound up talking for almost fifteen minutes before I hung up.

*******
That night was the same as so many other nights, but different. It wasn’t the air, though it felt like it’d rain at any moment. And it wasn’t the mission, because it was simple. I wanted to be ready for a real attack on those Merchants. I was tired and frustrated and perhaps if we brought the Protectorate the Merchants in a bag, they’d be more willing to listen to my arguments.

It was a plan. Was it a good one? I wasn’t sure, really, considering how I was apparently being treated online. But as I wrote and wrote, details flitting to mind with every moment, it felt like I was adding up to something. I had the kind of information I needed to take them out, even if they got away, and while the Protectorate probably had an idea of what I could do, did they know all of it?

No, the difference was that I had a bodyguard.

She was wearing my costume, even the collar, and I had to squelch that moment of possessive joy. She was standing right by me as I spaced out and focused on and my pen, the paper, and the bugs, without having to worry about something happening.

She was there, watching my back, and I knew she had to be bored.

“I’m sorry,” I said at a break where we were walking to another alley to hide out in.

“Why?”

“You’re bored,” I stated.

“A little, but eh.” She shrugged. I couldn’t see her face, of course, but I could imagine it. “Shit needs doing.”

“It does, but…” I trailed off. “You know, Rachel. I was planning on asking you something—”

I froze. Were they killing a guy?

A bunch of Merchants were beating up a drunken old man, who was screaming and trying to run, and I paused for a long, horrified second, my mood dropping as the man eventually crawled away. Vomiting. Stinking of cuts and bruises.

I should attack them.

But what if it ruined my cover? Or led to…

My bugs were already swarming the three young punks, as they flailed themselves, shocked. Then the wasps came. I frowned, and Rachel didn't talk, just watched me as I defeated them. Probably didn't even know what was going on.

It wasn’t complex, it wasn’t hard, I just beat them. Not even worth dwelling on. And then the bugs left.

“What?” she asked, finally.

“Was just beating up three Merchants who were attacking an old man,” I said. I frowned, though she couldn’t see it behind my mask. “Man, it must be really weird, since I was just standing here and all.”

“Yeah, a little,” Rachel admitted. “What were you saying?”

“Would you like to go out to lunch tomorrow? With me?”

“Yes?” Rachel asked, and again it felt like she was confused. Unaware of what I meant.
“Together,” I said, stressing the word.

“Ye… wait.” She frowned. “Lisa texted or something. She said she needed the answer on whether I was staying with the Undersiders. So I have to go meet her tomorrow and tell them to fuck off.” She nodded, as if this was obvious.

“Oh. Well… maybe after that?” I asked, aware that I hadn’t actually said the dreaded ‘d’ word just yet.

I hadn’t made it official. But maybe I’d ask, when she made it official that she was off the Undersiders.

We were patrolling together, we could be partners, and I could ask her out on a real date and… well, just figure it all out.

*******

It was raining in the morning when we woke up, really storming like it hadn’t in a while, and it made the ground in the backyard a muddy mess. So of course the dogs were tramping around in it, they didn’t really have any other choice if they wanted to potty, and besides that, some of them seemed to like the rain.

I was sleepy and a little out of it that morning. We’d stayed up too late and woken up too early, not that this was all that unusual, in another sense.

I could check the weather on my phone, and apparently it’d dry out at around ten. Then she’d be going to meet with Lisa and the rest at eleven, eleven thirty.

Then I’d try to pop the… wow, thinking about it like that made it feel like a lot more than what it was.

“I should get more cereal later today,” I said, as much to myself as to Rachel, as she finished with the dogs and wandered over to look at what I was writing down. I had been looking over the details on the Merchants that I’d been able to find, trying to memorize it, and turn it into a rather seedy walkthrough of more than a few distasteful figures.

“Sure.”

“Maybe some variety,” I said, smiling. “And we can figure out other parts of our… partnership.”

“I have a lot of money, if you wanna go somewhere big or something,” Rachel said, with the kind of look on her face that made me aware that she wasn’t the type who really was interested in something like that.

But she thought I might be.

And truth was, she was right. Though I had no idea what qualified as ‘big’ to her. Expensive? Formal? If so, then she didn’t really have something to wear, and neither did I.

“Maybe. Let’s take things hour by hour,” I said.

“Sounds good,” she said, and then gestured to the dogs. “We need towels.”

“You don’t have any left?”

“They need to be dried,” Rachel said. Oh, right. We could really use, say, a line or something. It’d
save money at the laundromat.

Little details like that would have to be managed, I realized. That’s what living together meant, and I’d realized it several times already. But I kind of liked the idea of it. Figuring it out with her, and all of that.

I was waiting for the shoe to drop.

Perhaps I should have been waiting for the boot to stomp down on the world’s face.

Because as I nodded and began to talk to her about air-drying and laundromat costs--and she nodded along, just letting me talk out like Emma used to do with me, but it felt more real and genuine, or perhaps I was fooling myself--there was this moment of silence and restfulness that felt as if it were false, somehow.

And then I heard something, loud enough to be heard across the entire city.

It was like an air raid siren, a symbol of disaster. I’d heard it only in drills for this moment. Loud and shrill and grating, the kind of sound you couldn’t ignore or miss. I covered my ears for a moment, as my heart almost stopped.

“Endbringer,” I said, in a terrified, tiny little voice.

Chapter End Notes

This next section will perhaps be leaning slightly more towards the action/adventure half than the romance half. And in fact, the balance will sorta shift a little from here? Romance-adventure, and all.

Also! I went through it line by line to clean it up a bit. So, not quite the same as SV’s version.
Greg Veder was not a sociable boy. His mom might have used terms like ‘closed in’ or ‘needs more sun’ but the truth was, he just didn’t… he got out, surely. What were the tournaments? What about the video game gatherings? Sure, it was all impersonal, all indirect, but wasn’t that the point?

Greg Veder asked himself a lot of questions in the safety of his head that he couldn’t really answer, not without having to wonder about his future. He wasn’t arrogant, though he did have his pride, and his own sense of… well, that he was smart. And he was. He got A’s, and he was a pretty decent card game player, and he was… maybe not eSports level, but he had some skill at video games.

But listing it all out like that made him feel inadequate. Especially when his mother got on to her stories about his father.

“Your father was in the military, a SEAL, actually,” she’d said once, before launching into an involved story involving his father and a prank that had been played during boot camp. He had listened and nodded, fascinated in the moment.

His thoughts overflowed in an excited babble at times, but he’d been content to just hear it all, take it all in.

He had a lot to live up to, and he wasn’t, not really. He was just messing about online and living his life. It was as if his real life would start once he graduated college with a degree in… something? His Mom wanted him to be great, and had given up on him being military, and that left… what?

He didn’t really know. Usually he didn’t ask. Usually he just talked and babbled and raced ahead in life, towards an end he hadn’t figured out yet. Taylor listened to him, even if nobody else did that. He liked that.

She was… special. There was something about her that just made him sweat and get nervous, his pulse racing, his body just…

He needed to say something, but he wasn’t Hero Law. He’d seen tons of romances in the fantasy and sci-fi novels he’d read, let alone the anime, the movies… there was a lot of media for him to draw on, and all of it seemed to be saying the same thing. He should give it a try, he had a chance.

Friends became lovers. The smart loser got the girl if he just asked and respected her. And he didn’t know how he couldn’t respect Taylor. She was so smart, and she had to deal with the bullying, and she made time for him in a way that he knew that most people wouldn’t have bothered with.

And there was something about her eyes that haunted his fantasies. Something about his imagination that made him feel like a horrible person. Something? No, he knew exactly what it was.

How did you do two things at once? How were you a friend and a romantic interest? How did you combine respect and desire, anyways?

And there was a lot of desire. Overflowing desire, and… and.

Well, he didn’t like to think about that too much, except when he did, and either way it was all terribly, dreadfully awkward.
Movies didn’t really talk about that, did they? Couldn’t have, not if they didn’t want to be censored.

So he’d watched her. He’d learned about her, and he’d seen her in his dreams and in his head, he’d memorized her laugh the few times she did, and he’d grown to appreciate the smile, even as rare as it was. She’d smiled so rarely each one was a treasure.

Greg would like to think that he was his own sort of expert on Taylor Hebert. How she thought, what she thought. As it turned out, he was wrong, but even at the time he was dismayed when he realized that she wasn’t smiling any more than usual.

Still occasional, though with this odd look in her eyes that was guilty and then confused for a moment, as if she were sorting through something. But even when she wasn’t smiling, there was this odd, cute, tight-lipped satisfaction about her, even on the days when she was down. It was happiness without a smile, because it didn’t need one, it was just as beautiful and just as welcome.

And yet, he hadn’t begun to guess what it was until she told him. Someone.

No, not just someone. A girl.

A part of him had wanted to lock himself in the room and rage and… he didn’t write poetry, but bad poetry was probably what teenagers did when they learned that not only had they lost the ‘race’ but that they weren’t in the running at all.

A part of him was very stupid, and a part of him was also aware that it was cruel, and stupid. His mom had raised him, he knew—or thought he should know, even if parts of him deep down were squirming—that he had absolutely no claim on her.

He was… just a friend.

It was the kind of phrase that weighed on you, weighed you down, and he hated that. So he’d not let it weigh him down, at least not much. He’d tried instead to be a good friend, and happy for her, and was glad that there seemed to be little chance that it’d get out anytime soon.

The kids at school were cruel, not just to her, but to him as well. More taunting and jokes than anything else, comments about his clothes and his hair and the way he walked and talked and acted.

Nothing like what they’d done to her. But it had felt like kinship, at the time. It felt like he and she shared something, and maybe they did. But so did friends, which was what he was to her, and what he had to be, what he had to act like.

It was still just really, really odd to watch how she changed. He wondered if she knew about it, if she realized how different she was becoming, and how fast. He wanted to talk to her about it, babbling as he always did, but he wasn’t sure what she’d say. What if she knew, and revealing all of this proved that he paid too much attention to her. He wasn’t a stalker! Or something. But what if she thought he was and then they fought and then, and then.

His mother was a worrier. Sometimes in the privacy of his own mind, he was far more like her than he would have wanted to admit.

It was the little things at first. Happier, slightly more sure, at least until the course of true love or whatever hit a few snags. Then she worried in a way that was… also quite impressive, in its own way.

But what really, really got him were a few details. First, as time went on, she glanced around in worry less often. She’d walk through a room as if she owned it, as if there was no chance that she
could possibly be stopped or tripped up, and she’d ignore every cruel word one day, and the next, instead of flinching, she froze instead, like she was on alert and battle music was about to play.

There was something hard and strong about her eyes when she looked at Emma, something far less broken and scared than he was used to, and she spoke with more confidence. Not just happier, but stronger.

But it was definitely the regal part that made the most sense when he learned the truth. The way she knew everything. ‘Don’t try the soup’ she’d say one day, and then some kid would complain that it tasted weird that day.

...or that there was a fly in it.

She didn’t trip, she didn’t stumble, she moved with an effortless, beautiful grace that had him staring. It wasn’t even… it didn’t seem like grace at all. It seemed like thoughtlessness. But then it kept on getting her to step over the bullies, step around their little verbal traps, and he knew that she struggled with it still.

But that was her very impressive change in demeanor forcing them to try harder and harder, to push the limit of their new normal, after the wakeup call impossible boss fight that was the locker.

That was what they’d done to her before.

He hadn’t ever expected her to be baited. He hadn’t expected how this would all end.

*******

The weekend before his life changed, he was sitting up in his room, watching an old anime from the 90s, back before everything went to heck. His room was small, but filled to the brim with video games and posters on the wall and books everywhere. It was a mess, and it smelled horrible, even by his own standards, and he was used to it.

He ate there, he slept there, he threw himself into bed some nights without showering, he did all sorts of other things there, and then he didn’t clean up except the obvious stuff.

He didn’t leave dirty dishes in the room, and he did nothing that crossed the line from unhygienic to really, really gross. Still, when his Mom, a short, plump woman, stepped in, she waved her hands. “You have to clean this.”

“What is it Mom?” he asked, looking up as he scrambled. He was on the floor, and it took a moment for him to grab the remote and turn the volume down. In that moment, he almost knocked over a drink, and did knock over a bowl of cheetos. “Darn,” he said, and began picking them up and putting them back in the bowl.

Better than stepping on them later.

“A friend at work wanted to have a family get-together,” she said, rubbing her eyes. She’d looked tired lately, and her job was very important, really. She worked in one of the offices, as… some sort of mid-level executive. She had a lot of debts, and her life was sank into the slightly run-down house (another thing he shared with Taylor), but she made good money, there was that, and he knew that he couldn’t do her job to save his life.

Probably never would be up for it.

“Oh?” he asked.
“His daughter’s coming, and her boyfriend. It’s next week, so I was thinking… you could ask Taylor.”

Greg spluttered. He… he hadn’t given her the impression that Taylor was his girlfriend, had he? He stood up, “Um, she’s not my…”

“Oh, I just assumed,” his Mom said, sounding disappointed. “Well, you could ask her out. Or ask her to come as a family friend, if you wanted to… lure her? I’ve always thought that she sounded like a levelheaded girl from what you described.”

“O-oh,” Greg said, imagining for a moment if he just… made up some sort of trick to get her to agree to come (because she’s never come on her own, she was too aware of what it would be), and then somehow his life turned into a third-rate sitcom. “Well…” he began, startlingly tempted by the vision of what a disaster it would be.

It was like when you got to the edge of a cliff and then for a moment you thought you’d step forward and go over, or when you held a knife and had this sudden terror that you’d cut yourself… despite not having any desire to do so.

Perhaps it was just him that felt that, of course, he reflected.

“I… she has something next weekend. I’m not sure when. But…”

Greg trailed off. What was he allowed to say? He didn’t want to betray her trust, and he knew that when it talked, he talked. He was the sort of person who would crack under pressure, and that meant that when it came to secrets, it was best not to get close to them.

He wasn’t proud of it, really. He also didn’t know what his Mom thought of that sort of thing. It couldn’t be too bad, or he’d hear an earful, and you couldn’t work in a major corporation without at least being able to ignore that people were different, and some of those differences included, well, who you were dating. Or who you had married.

At the same time, you never knew, and it wasn’t his secret. “Well, I’m not sure what day, but, uh, she has dinner with her Dad and a friend.”

“A friend? Do you want to go?” his Mom asked, looking at him thoughtfully. “If it’s not at the same time, you could. A trade, for instance, would be quite beneficial…”

“A trade?” he asked.

“Building ties is important. He’s going to support a move I’m making, and so I need your cooperation, Greg.”

“Mom,” he said. “It’s important. She’s… this is a friend that her Dad doesn’t--”

“A… male friend?” Mom asked. “Someone she’s dating?”

“Um, no? I dunno. I mean I wouldn’t know, who do you really get to know everything about there’s always a part of someone that is hidden and secret and you shouldn’t violate that secrecy because it is a bad thing and it makes you a bad friend and bad friends are a plague upon our society, as Hero Law would say, and so--”

She let him babble. And then she said. “That is a yes, then, Greg?”

“N-no! I didn’t say it was a yes. Why do you think it’s a yes?”
“Because I know you,” his mother said, with a shake of her head. “Well, if she can’t come, she can’t come.”

Greg tries not to slump in relief. Greg fails in this, as he’s always failed when it comes to hiding things, except from Taylor… and sometimes he wonders if she’s just politely ignoring it.

******

It came in slow motion. The crash, the collapse.

He hadn’t expected it. He didn’t think she expected it. He stared, somewhere between horrified and dreadfully, nonsensically proud.

It wasn’t as if they didn’t deserve it, after all.

Yet maybe he’s his mother’s son, because the first thing he thinks is, ‘Oh God, this is going to go wrong.’

He’d never wanted to be right less in his life.

It wasn’t until late at night when he knew how right he was.

*******

At eleven o’clock, he should be asleep. Instead, he was playing games and surfing the internet, even though he knew his Mom would have skinned him alive if she knew. She set a clear bed-time of ten, and he turned down the volume and crawled into bed, and then crawled right back out once she was asleep.

The phone rang downstairs, and he almost let it keep on ringing, but what if it was Taylor or… something?

She hadn’t answered any of his texts. All twenty of them.

So he mussed his hair and exited out of the game, and then raced downstairs.

He picked up the phone, hoping his Mom hadn’t woken up. “H-hello?”

“Is this… Greg?” a voice asked on the other end. He recognized Taylor’s father.

“Yes, uh, is Taylor alright?”

“She left,” Dad said. “Do you know where she could be?”

“She left? What? Where? Why?”

“I… might have told her something.” There was a sigh on the other end, “She got angry, she left. She… there were bugs or something, and they spoke with her voice.”

Spoke with her voice? Greg tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“It was like she was controlling them. Is she some sort of villain or something?”

Bugs.

Her voice.
Greg almost dropped the phone. “What?!?”

He said it so loud the door to his mother’s room upstairs opened, and her head peeked out. “What is it, Greg?”

“N-nothing.”

He knew a hero who could do that. “Do you know something?”

“Oh, uh, she’s not a villain. Definitely not,” Greg said. “Oh god, is she really… I have to go. Now. Um, your daughter is probably safe and stuff, I know she has a friend and—”

“I know too. That’s what it was about. Things got out of hand. She left with a bag.”

Greg stared at the phone. What.

It got worse from there.

*******

It was when he started looking up Arachne that he started to realize just what was happening. Rachel Lindt.

Greg was very, very thorough once he started looking, and he didn’t sleep all night, as he got more and more incredulous. Arachne and Hellhound were working together, fighting crime. Hellhound’s actual name was Rachel, and her power involved dogs. Arachne’s power involved bugs.

His best friend was dating a supervillain! Only… was she? He had no idea, but he kept on reading, and he wound up making angry posts defending her. Everyone thought she might be a villain, or at least, it was a common question, and he knew that they were just being morons.

He had a lot of experience arguing about things in an online message board, and so he sort of just dived in, and only later did he wonder whether he just drew more attention to her. Or whether he came off as if he were her secret alt, though the mods were pretty good at noticing that sort of thing, so they had to know he wasn’t.

But it was not the same as fixing anything. Taylor wasn’t answering, and Taylor could be in danger. She could… he didn’t know what she could be.

*******

The answer was… no, not perfect, but good enough. A good enough friend that when it came down to it, she was willing to talk about his interests rather than what he knew she could be talking about. She was living with another girl. A girl that she was dearly interested in, and she still took time to talk about that video game system.

It heartened him, but it also made him feel as if he were responsible for the world. If he messed up, she’d suffer.

If the Trio learned about Arachne… it’d be disaster.

She was placing a lot of trust in him.

He really wished she didn’t. Because the truth was clear: she was strong, and he…

*******
He couldn’t take it. Even two days of their nonstop bullying, and he was already subsiding, already not answering as much in class. They wanted to talk to him, they wanted to get out her secrets, whatever secrets those were. Or know that she was suffering. They were angry, and when Sophia came back, that anger redoubled, and they were willing to do anything.

He wasn’t Taylor. He couldn’t fight back, couldn’t ignore it.

They kept on confronting him. He struggled to find an answer for what they were doing, struggled to find a way to get out of it.

He… didn’t succeed at that either.

******

“C’mon, surely you’ve heard something from her,” Emma said, drawling a little. She was really pretty, but like one of those evil Queens, she was also very evil. The two sometimes went hand in hand, and he took a step back, waving his hands nervously, trying to find the right words to tell them to go away.

But Sophia was looming too, leaning against the locker nearby, her dark, watchful eyes reminding him that she could go after him if he ran.

“N-no, of course not!”

“Really?” Emma asked, with a smirk. “I suppose she doesn’t care about you. It’s to be expected, she never was a very loyal…”

“Shut up about her,” Greg said, though he didn’t move to hit her, or do anything to defend her in the way that Greg realized Taylor had been driven for her girlfriend.

“Oh? Why?”

“She’s a lot better than you, she’s actually…”

Greg trailed off, realizing that he’d been about to say that she was actually working to make the world a better place, actually working as a hero.

“Actually what?”

“Uhhh.”

“Do you know a secret about her? Is she dying? No, no, let’s say... Is she a Merchant, or just dating one?” Emma asked, with an easy smirk.

“What?” Greg asked, before realizing that he’d reacted too strongly, too incredulously.

“Or maybe she’s… no, you were proud of her,” Emma said. “What could cause that? What if she was… oho.” Emma’s smile was the most vicious, twisted thing he’d ever seen, and he turned to run. “A hero?”

But he was running, booking it, hoping he hadn’t given away too much. It was his face, always his face.

He hid in the bathroom, texting desperate words of apology in Taylor’s general direction, wondering when she’d get them.
He was still there when the sirens started wailing.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah, Greg's a little better this time than he was in canon. But he's still a terrible liar and someone who won't always rise to the occasion.

He's well-meaning, though. Next update coming in a few minutes.
They don’t really prepare you for something like this. I just stared for a moment, as if somehow the alarm would turn into a recording saying that this was all just an elaborate test, and that everyone could go back to their lives, the ones that weren’t about to be ruined by a giant monster rampaging through their city.

But of course, that’s not how it worked at all.

A part of me wanted to run and hide. I had control over bugs, not a power to inspire much fear in something like an Endbringer. I didn’t even know which one, but that didn’t matter at all. It probably said something bad about me that my first instinct was cowardice, but my second instinct was to call my Dad, tell him to get clear, move and protect him, and nobody else.

But I couldn’t actually protect him either, even if I could call him at this very moment. He was already warned, and going with him to one of the Endbringer shelters--where he’d surely be hurrying--wouldn’t make him any safer, at least while the attack was going on.

At the same time, as I breathed in and out, and Rachel looked at me, I wasn’t sure how much good I could do, showing up? I could… I could use my bugs, though. To track them. The Simurgh flew, so maybe she wasn’t hard to see or keep track of, but… it was something, right? And I could bug some capes, so that I’d know if they were in danger. I didn’t know how Endbringer battles went at all. It was something they kept under wraps, something that nobody talked about.

My breath caught in my throat as I thought about something. “Rachel,” I said, “that’s an Endbringer siren.”

Rachel frowned, looking almost as if she wanted to question it.

“I’m going to go. I need to. I’m not sure where it is, but surely we can find it out. I want you to come with me,” I said.

Already an idea was starting to form, slowly but surely. I was inventing new ways that we could help out as I spoke, and they did make sense.

“For what? Not going to throw my dogs against a fucking Endbringer,” Rachel said, with finality. I knew there was no way I could convince her, but then, that’s not what I had in mind. I understood perfectly what she meant. It was cruel to send dogs after something like that, and I knew that any losses at all would be devastating.

Not just for her. I knew these dogs: they weren’t people, not the way they were to Rachel, but I’d miss every single one of them.

“Search and rescue. Power up one of your dogs, and we can grab people who are downed, and get out of here. Neither of us have to fight,” I said, firmly. “But if we save people, that’s something, right? And if we see the Endbringer, we just need to run away. There’s no use risking our dogs on something like that.”

Rachel frowned, considering my words as I hurried over. The dogs were barking now, and outside there were sounds of chaos and panic. People were the same everywhere. They ran, they hid, they
gathered in crowds. I could imagine cars being abandoned as people sprung out of them, racing for
the nearest shelter.

I could imagine a lot of things, but I didn’t know where Dad would be. He’d be at work, and that
was pretty close to the waterline, if we had a Leviathan attack. But then again, if it was the Simurgh,
than nobody was safe anywhere. And Behemoth? I had no idea where he’d come from, what he
would attack.

All I knew was that I would hate myself if I failed to show up, failed to try to defend my own city. I
also knew that I wanted Rachel to be there, wanted to… I couldn’t imagine her not being there,
worrying about whether she was in some danger I didn’t know about, whether she hadn’t been killed
in some accident, or trapped in a quarantine after being too near the Simurgh.

There were just too many possibilities, and all of them were bad.

“Maybe,” she said. I threw off my clothes, and turned away from her. I could almost feel her eyes on
me as she watched me strip and begin to get dressed in my costume. I wasn’t an expert at quick-
changing, but I was going as fast as I could to get it all on, because Endbringers always came as a
surprise.

The fight had probably already begun, and I needed to get in it. Rachel and I would just search for
downed people, and that’d be that.

“Answer soon, please,” I said. “I can’t wait for you too long. Please, I promise that this is going to be
okay.”

“What about the others?” Rachel asked, and when I turned she was looking at me, her eyes soft and
worried. Of course, if she left with two dogs, one for each of us, then that’d mean that all of the rest
would have to sit and stay.

“We can keep track of where the Endbringer is. If they’re moving in this direction, we can retreat, try
to save them.” I wasn’t sure if we’d actually be able to, it’d depend on the Endbringer, but it was at
least in theory possible.

Did the Simurgh’s scream work on dogs or not? I didn’t actually know.

“Okay…” Rachel said. Then she nodded, a little more firmly. “Fuck it.” I didn’t smile beneath my
mask, too trained by being around her, but I was really happy that she was coming along. I knew that
Endbringer fights were dangerous, but having her there would be a comfort. I… I wasn’t sure what
else to do, as I took out my phone.

“Make sure to keep the doors closed, and…” I frowned, looking around. “Is there anywhere higher
to put the dogs? If it’s Leviathan?”

“No,” Rachel said, turning to look at them. “Okay, I’ll get into the costume. Brutus! Angelica!
Come!” The dogs perked up, stopping their barking immediately as they trotted over to her
obediently.

I nodded, as I gathered up bugs of my own, spreading them out. It was chaos outside, but there was
no Endbringer within a few blocks, at least. That really wasn’t saying much, I thought, nervously.

Rachel began to get dressed, and I watched her as the costume came on. My costume. Of course, all
the spider silk in the world wouldn’t save her from the kinds of attacks Endbringers threw around
like they were nothing, but I still felt better, knowing that she was in my costume.
It took a little time, and I began to pace, before I stopped and started petting the barking dogs as the siren kept on screaming onward. By now everyone in the entire city had to know about it, but it kept up. I knew that every Endbringer attack, there were at least a few stories of someone who didn’t hear the sirens, and got caught out and either killed--some tabloids, grotesque things that they were, ran stories about the last words of such people, shouted into a phone--or survived and spoke about how terrifying it was.

I had no idea how anyone could, but that was people, wasn’t it? They surprised you. I frowned, and then called Dad just as Rachel started getting your mask on.

It went to voicemail at his office, and at home. I let out a breath I hadn’t known I’d been holding in, since of course if he was running for a shelter, he wouldn’t return the call. He didn’t have a cell-phone, and so I assumed he was long gone, and as safe as he was likely to be.

I felt horrible, just leaving him to huddle somewhere, not sure what his daughter was doing. Or all too sure.

But I couldn’t do anything else, I thought. My mouth felt dry, and I was sweating pretty badly already. My only idea was to start running and see if there were any signs of an Endbringer. That’s how it worked, you just threw yourself into the fight. Or, in this case, kept away from it and waited for someone to get hurt that we could potentially save without getting in range.

“Bitch,” I said, as she began to slowly pump up her dogs. “I’ll ride one, you ride the other. How long will they keep amped up?”

“Long enough,” she said, firmly, looking at me thoughtfully, starting to get into it. “I’ll tell you if we get close to hitting the limit.”

“Alright,” I said, frowning. I grabbed a pocket knife that Bitch had in the other room. It wouldn’t help much, but perhaps if we needed it, it’d help just a little with getting the dogs out of their meat-suits if we had to do it in a hurry.

Endbringers wouldn’t give us time to do anything else. Then I grabbed a box of cereal, pouring some down my mouth, chewing and swallowing without tasting it. I didn’t want to eat too much, but… just a little bit, to tide me over through to whatever happened.

I was panicking, and I knew that if given enough time to worry, I’d brush my teeth just to make sure my corpse had a minty-white smile.

Rachel was the one who knocked on the door. “Taylor, come on,” she said, firmly.

“But I… I mean, what if I need something here or--” I began, taking a breath. There was just so much at stake that I couldn’t help but imagine what would happen if I fucked up again, the way I’d done before.

“You have everything. It’s okay,” Rachel assured me, her voice quieting down some. “You sure you don’t want to just run? We could take the dogs, clear out, see what happens in the meantime.”

I could imagine it. Honestly, it’d be pretty fun to go on a roadtrip with Rachel, but… dozens of dogs, tons of money, way too much to take and my Dad in the line of fire while I ran off again. I couldn’t always run away from all of my problems, even if running away from Dad hadn’t gone that badly so far.

Perhaps I’d come to regret my decision sooner rather than later. I couldn’t know, and in the absence of knowledge, I tried to be positive. “No, let’s do this,” I said, stepping towards her and reaching my
hand out to squeeze hers.

I got on Angelica, she got on Brutus, each of them amped up to be large enough that another person could fit on the back of each dog. There was some rope, if we actually had to tie down some people, and after a moment’s indecision, I grabbed that first-aid kit and decided to bring that along. I wasn’t sure how much help it’d be when we were talking about Endbringers, but better safe than sorry.

And finally, after way too much dithering, we were off.

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Outside, it was absolute chaos, but there was something to be said for people on the back of giant dogs. We urged them forward at a moderate pace, no sprinting here at all, but it was enough that the panicked crowd dodged aside as we moved. It was amazing what horrible dog monsters could do.

In many ways, since we also got more glares and nervous looks from police than you would ever imagine. They were directing the panicked crowd, armed and clearly nervous, and each of them kitted out in riot gear.

Was this the Simurgh? That would almost fit, what with the way that her screams could mess with people’s minds. There could be riots breaking out, especially if the police had to secure an area after an attack.

I couldn’t guess what horrors awaited. So we hurried onward, until we stopped in front of a police line.

The police shifted, and one of them, in riot gear, looked up at me. He was short, with greying hair and a goatee, and his face was twisted into distaste as I dismounted. “Excuse me,” I said. “Which way to… well.” I took a breath, “The Endbringer.”

He frowned, and pulled out a piece of paper, thrusting it into my hands. I glanced down, and saw that they were directions. Was the Endbringer not here yet? It was to a place between the Docks and Downtown, an area which had been contested territory between the ABB and the E88 for as long as I could remember.

It wasn’t a bad part of town, it wasn’t a good part of town, but it was a crime-adjacent part of town. Not that that mattered right now, I thought, as we hurried off. I was able to use my bugs to chart a clear way around the lines of cars and the crowds of pedestrians, all of whom got out of our way pretty quickly.

We were pretty intimidating, all things considered. The crowd was thinning out anyways by the time we got near the building, and I could begin to see people streaking through the sky, headed towards the building. Capes were clustering, though I had no idea how many there had to be.

We had to be late, but for what? Wasn’t there usually no warning at all?

The building itself was pretty unremarkable, six stories tall in brown brick, and guarded by PRT officers, who also looked as if they were kitted out for a real fight. There were vans all around, and the fact that the meeting place was on a raised hill offered some protection, maybe. I hurried forward, dismounting smoothly when we reached the parking lot.

To the left, behind the hill, was Dragon, the famous Tinker, in a huge suit. It was almost as big as any three cars put together, and was covered in bristling weapons, as well as an odd electric pulse. When my bugs sat down on the robot-suit, they stopped transmitting signals quite as well, as if there was some sort of static fuzz going on. I wasn’t sure if it was intentional, or part of some sort of
The suit itself was black, and looked, to be honest, really, really cool. And somewhere inside there was the most skilled Tinker in the world.

Missiles, what looked like spears that glistened steel blue… it looked like it was made for… something? Definitely long-range.

Which could mean nothing or everything, I thought, biting my lip as Rachel and I walked forward, and our dogs followed. The capes too gave us a wide berth, perhaps because they weren’t sure what to make of Brutus and Angelica.

I supposed I could understand that.

We headed inside as fast as we could. For all I knew, the Endbringer would attack at any moment. Leviathan, if it was them, could be in the ocean right now, racing for us. We could be about to be dropped in on by the Simurgh. Nervously I headed forward, until we got into the meeting room.

It was a lobby, filled with folding chairs and more than that, capes, including the Triumvirate. They were the most powerful capes in the world, and they were just one among the many here, clustered in such clumps that it took a lot of effort to track them all, even as I spread out with the bugs in order to view all of them.

It was so much I almost wanted to not even try, but it was going to be very necessary, very soon.

Brockton Bay was pretty well represented, including by… what the fuck.

Lung. Lung was standing there, arms crossed, dressed in a prison jumpsuit. There were multiple guards facing him, armed with nozzleled guns that seemed to attach to a large container of something or other.

Was this some sort of deal to let him out to fight the enemy in exchange for some kind of leniency? I didn’t even know, but if it was, then Oni Lee wasn’t included in the deal, which could mean many things. He didn’t look like someone who had been horribly injured by me. He was alive and well, though the moment he saw me, he glared, and if it wasn’t for the other people in the way, I knew he’d probably stalk over to me.

As it was, I almost wanted to go up to talk to him to make sure he wasn’t going to just veer off to murder me the moment nobody else was paying attention.

He wasn’t the only one there, though. The Undersiders were in a corner, and there was another confrontation that I’d have to have. Rachel was with me. Rachel had been planning on ditching the Undersiders to be with me long-term (a thought that still felt magical despite the panic) and so eventually it’d all have to collide.

On top of them, there were others. No Merchants, which said a lot about their priorities, but I recognized a local rogue, Parian, who was involved with fashion, and one or two of the independent villains. One, Smash N Grab, was a pretty simple brute who was also surprisingly fast. He did just what his name said he did, and little more. Another, Aerial, was involved in a number of heists, and seemed to be some sort of variation on the Alexandria Package.

Alexandria was one of the Triumvirate, a flying bruiser who was all but invincible, and there were many capes that had a similar sort of power set, such as Glory Girl. Alexandria herself was off to the side, watching everything, right next to Eidolon, who was often called the most powerful cape in the world.
He deserved it. Both of them had a darker color scheme, the sort of thing that you didn’t expect from heroes, though when they’d made their costumes, there hadn’t been nearly as many people to copy, or try not to copy.

There was an entire contingent of out of town Wards and Protectorate members, including Myrridin, a strange cape from Chicago, who was wearing a robe and carrying a staff. He thought he was a wizard, and that his powers were magic. He was powerful enough that people were willing to tolerate his quirks.

He was talking with Chevalier, the leader of the Philadelphia Protectorate. He had a knight aesthetic going on, silver and gold armor and a giant sword, a cannonblade, that apparently was far lighter than it looked. Or he was far stronger, the specifics were always hard to find.

The Wards were an even stranger collection of people, including a man who seemed to be made of metal, and they were trying to mingle with the Brockton Bay Wards, who were talking to them as well.

Then there was Shadow Stalker, sticking off to the side. I almost wanted to approach her, and would have if I wasn’t with Rachel, because asking her questions might help with a few issues I’d been imagining with Rachel’s image. Surely someone who was more than a little bit violent at times could know how to not cross the line. Or not be shown crossing the line.

I stuck close to Rachel as I took in everyone. New Wave, out in force, every single one of them, looking like a model set of families, Faultline, a mercenary who ran a nightclub with her crew, the Undersiders of course, and a corporate team.

It was so many people my head spun trying to keep track of and remember who all of them were. I knew that all of them would be important, whoever the monster was. Or however they’d figured it out.

The E88 were there was well. Kaiser… wait, how did Hookwolf get out? Or the other valkyrie? Another deal. There was that new cape of theirs, Othala, and quite a few others… an impressive clump of fascists indeed, many of them glaring in my direction. Though it seemed that besides Hookwolf and the Valkyrie, anyone still in prison was being kept there. Night and Fog weren’t, though, instead looking around at the scene with a vague air of menace. Just looking at any of them made my skin want to crawl off and die.

I nervously made my way towards the Undersiders, almost wanting to hold Rachel’s hand for comfort. But I didn’t know what people would say, and this was the largest gathering of heroes and capes I’d probably ever see unless I went to another Endbringer fight, which wasn’t all that likely, considering that my powers weren’t always that useful. But I didn’t know.

I moved through the crowd rather easily, and people got out of the way of the dogs. We took up a lot of room, but what other choice was there? We’d had to get there in a hurry, because we hadn’t known when the fight was going to start.

Regent looked up and waved lazily at us. “Yo, bitch,” he said.

Bitch nodded, and I bit my lip, looking at Grue and Tattletale, as I’d have to think of them right now. “Uh, hello,” I said. “Do you know which Endbringer it is?"

“Not yet,” Grue said, firmly, when Tattletale opened her mouth. I guessed that her power had somehow told her, but she wasn’t going to share? Or perhaps she just had speculations. “Tattletale wants to make us guess. Bitch, are you going to be sticking with us?”
“You’d said you weren’t interested if an Endbringer ever attacked,” Tattletale said, her voice filled with enough teasing that I knew she’d figured out why she’d come. Our friendship was strong enough, I knew, that I could convince her to do things that she wasn’t at all sure of.

“Changed my mind,” Rachel said, and then she reached a hand out to grip mine, so firmly it was as if she was afraid I’d run away. I flushed, glad my mask was hiding it.

“Ohhh,” Regent said, and his voice sounded like he was about to make a joke before Tattletale elbowed him in the ribs. “So, that’s where you’ve been this whole time. Neat.”

“Neat?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Regent shrugged.

“So, are you?” Grue asked.

“Arachne said that we could act as search and rescue,” Rachel said, firmly, turning towards me as she kept on holding my hand. I wanted to squirm away somewhere, because it just wasn’t the time for it. This was an Endbringer fight, no PDAs allowed.

But I wasn’t sure how to say it, how to set the limit there, in a way that wouldn’t come off as rude, especially since I eventually wanted to actually be dating her. So I took a breath and squeezed her hand back, trying not to admit to myself that despite the feeling like every eye was on me, I was comforted by the presence of her gloved hand in mine.

“Oh, alright then,” Tattletale said. “It makes sense. After the fight is over, if we’re all in one piece, we can talk about other matters.” She nodded. “Arachne, make sure Bitch stays safe.”

I expected Rachel to growl something about how she didn’t need any help, but instead she said nothing and, a little awkwardly, I said, “I’ll… try.”

“That’s all that’s required,” Tattletale said, quietly. “And all that’s asked.”

Rachel shifted, tensing a little, but said nothing as I said, “Angelica, Brutus, follow.”

We turned, ready to leave, and Regent whistled as we did and said, almost out of my range of hearing, except of course for the fact that I had him bugged, “Since when did she let other people order around her dogs.”

Since when? Since me, I thought, feeling something like pride. People had to see what we were doing, and it was dangerous, of course. I was Arachne and Taylor Hebert, whereas Rachel didn’t actually have a secret identity worth having, so if Arachne was seen with Bitch, and Taylor Hebert with Rachel… well, there would be a lot of questions.

A whole lot. It was why capes had to be careful, though I’d heard rumors online that at least some of the Wards and Protectorate were dating each other. The most common rumor was about Assault and Battery, of course, owing both to their names and the way they seemed to treat each other.

Still, nobody commented, too caught up in things, as we tried to find a corner that wasn’t taken. On the way, I passed a cape I didn’t know. She looked as if she were a Ward, maybe, wearing a rather tight looking dark purple body-suit. She had a visor covering her face, and like Shadow Stalker, her weapon of choice was a crossbow. It looked tinker-made, complicated and high-tech, and her whole costume was extremely well done, which increased the chance that it was a Wards costume.

They had a budget, for one. She stopped in front of me, and I could imagine her staring, considering
whether to say anything.

Homophobia wasn’t exactly popular anymore, but that didn’t mean it didn’t exist, and from the way she was tensing, I all but knew what to expect.

Rachel felt my own fears, and tensed in reply, but she just looked up at the dogs, and then after a moment said, her voice surprisingly breezy and offhand, with a slight New York accent that immediately allayed a lot of my fears--Legend was leader of the New York Protectorate, after all. “Hey,” she said.

“Uh, hey,” I said. I took a breath, trying to relax, and glancing over at Rachel, who was remaining tensed, as if ready to strike at any moment. “I’m Arachne, what’s your name?”

“Flechette,” she said. “I’m a New York Ward. And who is this?” She pointed at Bitch.

“Bitch,” I said. She flinched for a moment, and I quickly said, “Well, that’s her name. I think the Protectorate calls her Hellhound, but it’s not a name she likes.”

“No,” Rachel said, bluntly. If one could see her face, I had no doubt one would see bared teeth.

“Well, Hellhoun--Bitch. It’s nice to meet both of you. What are your powers?”

“Bugs,” I said. Then, as if I needed to explain. “I control bugs. And her? Well, look at the dogs.” Which wasn’t a full explanation, but was a very quick demonstration.

“Ah, local heroes?”

“Trying to be,” I said, absently. “I think that it’s harder than it should be. Plus there’s the whole thing with Bitch.”

“What thing?” Flechette asked.

It wasn’t really her business, and so I shrugged, glancing over at Rachel, still hand in hand. “What’s it like, working under Legend?”

“I don’t meet him much, but he’s pretty great. The real deal,” Flechette said, stiffly. “Oh, I think he’s going to speak. We should probably listen.”

I pointed to the far wall, “Bitch, I’ll be right over there in a sec.”

She nodded, and she said, “Angelica, Brutus, come.” She glanced back at me as she did, and I knew she was wondering what was going on.

Legend indeed was headed up towards the front of the room, where a television was placed, as well as a platform. We had only a minute to talk, so I said, “She’s… well, she’s going to be a hero, and that’s that. Sorry if either of us were a little stiff.”

“It’s fine,” she said, in a distracted sort of way. Then she let out a breath. “Don’t worry about it, I understand. I mean…”

What she meant, I didn’t learn, because Legend began speaking the next moment.

He was a tall, handsome man in a blue costume, the kind of person that just screamed superhero. It was the jawline, and the way he spoke, it was in every movement. It just was, in a way that impressed me as I stepped back, edging towards Bitch as I listened to the speech.
“We owe thanks both to Dragon, Armsmaster, and a number of other capes for this early warning, as well as the previously obscured results of the last Endbringer fight, in which we were able to successfully predicted Leviathan’s target an hour before it hit.”

I hadn’t heard much about the Taiwan fight, except that many capes had seen it as a chance to save Kyushu from Leviathan all over again, but doing it right this time. I’d heard, in a vague way, that we’d won, but the details were of course never released.

People started murmuring, and I was one of them. If they could predict when the Endbringers would strike…

“We’ve had time to gather and prepare for the arrival of the Endbringer, through a modified seismographic record. Our reports seem to indicate that Behemoth will strike somewhere within a fifty mile radius of this area, and the only target worth attacking within that range is Brockton Bay.”

Behemoth. The Hero-Killer.

“But thanks to this warning, we have an advantage. With good luck and your hard work, this could turn out to be a good day. But you should know your chances coming in. Given the results of previous encounters with Behemoth, a ‘good day’ will mean that one in three of the people in this room will probably be dead before this day is done.”

Oh shit.

"I’m telling you your chances now because you deserve to know, and we so rarely get the chance to inform those individuals brave enough to step up and fight these monsters. The primary message I want to convey, even more than briefing you on the particulars of his abilities, organizing formations and battle plans, is just how dangerous Behemoth is. I have seen too many good heroes,” he paused, “and villains die from lack of understanding of his strengths and limitations.”

“Behemoth was the first to arrive, and to whatever extent that matters, it does mean that we know more about how he operates than the others. The oldest child, his primary power is dynakinesis on a truly impressive micro and macro scale, capable of hitting both individual targets and broad swathes of enemies, depending on what he needs. He has an aura of energy precisely thirty-two feet in diameter around him that he can activate. Getting within this range is not an instant death sentence in theory, but in practice he only refrains from killing a cape if he’s trying to lull them forward for some other purpose. There are several capes here that can grant or possess invulnerability, but even if you are very tough, do not assume you can survive this Kill Aura.”

He looked around, and I glanced at Rachel’s dogs, not sure what would happen to them if they got close, and knowing that neither of us would like to try that if we could help it. It was bad enough, imagining them sacrificed in a fight, but sacrificed for nothing?

“Even those who can get close find that he’s a physical powerhouse, and his manipulation of energy can include the energy of attacks, as well as lightning bolts, fire, sound, radiation, heat… the only limitation he has consistently shown is that he rarely uses more than one form of energy manipulation at a time, and only breaks this rule for short periods. That is to say, if he’s giving off radiation, then he is not usually shooting lightning. All of his attacks are highly lethal and dangerous, and thus a fight against him involves caution and careful countermeasures. But he can be made to feel pain, he can be driven off with enough force, and we have done so before.”

Everyone brightened a little bit at that, but the fact was, my bugs wouldn’t be able to do much if that’s what he had, at least not to him. And if he hit anyone, it’d also fry my bugs in the vicinity. Still, I had to try at least, and maybe it’d give me an idea of what was going on.
“Behemoth is very slow in movement, but he devastates and destroys the environment around him. This city is a soft target, with old, decaying industry, as well as an aquifer that could be damaged by the earthquakes that herald his arrival. We cannot stand back and allow him to set this city ablaze, or worse, and so we will have to divide into active squads of capes capable of harming or redirecting him, creating circles of defense that keep the damage he does as localized as possible.”

Earthquakes, fires, radiation. Even if we won a total victory here, Brockton Bay would be devastated.

“That is our first priority, our second is hurting him. Those with long-ranged powers would probably be the most useful, and those with close-up powers who cannot survive incredible punishment are encouraged to keep away and wait for opportunities, or request assistance from capes that can grant the ability to survive his attacks. Be careful not to throw yourself at him unnecessarily. You are doing a good thing, the best thing that a cape can do, in fighting against the seemingly inevitable, the dangerous. It is for this reason that society tolerates us, allows us to fight on their streets and walk in costume. Because we are needed. Thank you for coming, and I turn it over to Armsmaster.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel. We’d learned a decent amount, but it’d also been disheartening, and Armsmaster’s dry delivery of an explanation of some sort of armband system didn’t help. I listened, noting down what he was saying, but no more than that. It was important. There was a grid system in place that I didn’t quite understand, but which would be very important when it came to trying to save downed capes, though I knew as deadly as Behemoth was, this would be a difficult task.

The part where we could use the armbands in case of emergencies seemed important.

Suddenly, in the middle of the speech, Legend called out, “Capes! Those of you who have fought an Endbringer, stand up.”

Half of the Protectorate, a third of the Wards, Bambina, a villain, about half of a commercial team, and one or two others stood up. And Lung stepped forward, drawing attention to himself. I frowned, noting them.

“When in doubt, look first to the Protectorate for orders and advice, and second to veterans, whose instincts might be useful. Now, in addition to the Wards being sent around,” Legend continued, “we are going to send around Protectorate members, who will ask if you have a power capable of either hitting him long range, navigating a ruined city, or hitting him close up if in conjunction with another power or your own. I ask all of you not to stick together in squads that cannot work merely because you know the other members. Instead, we will be breaking it up into teams. Flyers, as well, should make themselves known, since they might be needed to transport people to or from the battle…”

He continued to talk, and I noted it down. We were going to encircle him with teams, and push forward or back based on his actions. It all seemed pretty complicated, and I had to assume that somewhere there was an official plan for all sorts of scenarios, as soon as they knew that they could predict the attacks of an Endbringer to some small extent.

It couldn’t be a long warning, but we listened as people starting to break into groups, talking fast, trying to find teams and combinations. We stayed there, and Armsmaster approached us.

“The dogs could be used to attack Behemoth,” Armsmaster said, without preamble.

“Nice to meet you too,” I said.

“Fuck you,” Rachel said, with feeling, as she leaned forward.
I felt about the same way, and my own teeth were bared beneath the mask. “There’s no guarantee they wouldn’t be killed immediately like anyone else, and they’re not expendable attackers. They’re dogs, you jerk,” I said. “We can use them to ferry people to and from the combat zone, if you need to do it a little lower to the ground.”

I’d thought about how lightning bolts and throwing fire all meant that flyers might be obvious targets. “And we can serve as search and rescue,” I said. “My bugs can help me note down where civilians are, and if any are in harms way, though the armbands sorta… get rid of one of my ideas.”

I’d thought through this, even though I was angry enough to spit.

Armsmaster nodded, not even apologizing. “Very well, I will note that down when the armbands come around.”

“Yes, note that two heroes are here to help out,” I said, acid in my voice. “And then tell me why the hell you let Hookwolf and the other Valkyrie go? Let alone Lung?”

“They could be useful,” Armsmaster said. “It wasn’t my idea.” He seemed frustrated as well, which made me blink. Than whose idea? The Director’s? Kaiser’s, as an offer they couldn’t refuse?

“Oh,” I said. “Sorry to hear that. Hope they don’t get loose.”

Which was to say I was honestly hoping that the Endbringer killed them. It was cruel, but… the world was better off without the E88 and ABB, and if a third of everyone here was going to die, then why not them?

Armsmaster nodded. “Understood. I’ll pass along the information.” He was gruff, terse, and nervous as he walked off, and a Ward finally passed us armbands.

They were pretty cool looking things, high tech. A flat, square screen on them showed a satellite view of our location, and when I put it on, a display read ‘State name.’

“Arachne,” I said, at the same time as Rachel said, “Bitch.”

I confirmed it as correct when prompted, and looked around for others that we could group with. We were on our own, yes, but it looked as if most teams were starting to come together, and if we waited too long, we’d lose out. The main problem, of course, was that most of the teams were four to six capes large, which meant that we couldn’t really carry all of them anyways.

“Strider,” Legend said, still talking about strategy, “will be bringing some teams in. This will make them a target, and therefore we will transport others by foot, or using fliers. Those who can fly are advised to be careful, as Behemoth has been known to send massive attacks to clear the air, and you are to keep as low as possible in order to minimize the chance of being hit.”

Alright, then, I said, looking around. Flechette was talking to that doll-girl, Parian, and they were both moving towards a short, grey-haired woman who was floating in the air. The woman, talking to a man who looked like he spent all his life lifting weights, shook her head.

I thought for a moment, and said, “Rachel. Do you think you could move Flechette and Parian? And…” I looked to see who was joining in. There was a short, stout young man with dark-brown skin and a costume that looked vaguely house-shaped, who after a moment nodded and gestured around animatedly.

“Whoever that is.”
“I can,” Rachel said after a moment, glancing at her dogs. Three others was pushing it, but they could fit on well enough.

So I began to stride over towards them, ready to offer arguments and counter-arguments, when a mechanical voice said. “Behemoth has arrived at the following coordinates.”

I glanced down at my armband, as everyone suddenly stared, and in the space of a moment, as I looked down at the icon centered around the hills of Brockton Bay, the place erupted into absolute chaos.

Chapter End Notes

So it begins. Oh! I'm also adding a secondary romance tag, but I won't be tagging anything related to that romance because it'd look weird since it's going to be very out of focus, and I wouldn't want people to confuse it with the main romance.

Mutual pining, for instance, makes sense for Sabah/Lily, but not so much for Taylor/Rachel.
Suddenly, I was swimming upriver. I had to push to get to people, and I could see Flechette’s group still searching for someone to transport them, most likely. They could hit the armband and see who showed up, but it was still a very sketchy process, and finally I reached them.

“Hey!” I yelled. I was drowned out by over a hundred capes shouting and talking and moving as others appeared and disappeared, flying through the doors or being transported in a single flash by Strider. “Do you need transportation?”

Parian turned first. Parian was a short girl, dressed like a Victorian era doll. It was a beautiful dress, in the old-fashioned sense, blue and a gold that perfectly matched her perfect golden curls, which I suspected were dyed. She had a porcelain mask on, a blush and a smile painted on it, and she shrank away from me for a moment.

“Oh, Arachne,” Flechette said, glancing over at the others. “What do you say, Shelter?”

Shelter, the boy I’d seen them talking to before, nodded. “That’d work,” he said, with a slight accent that told me he was from down south. “So, how do you transport people?”

“I don’t,” I said. “But Bitch’s dogs…” I gestured back at them.

“Those are dogs?” Parian asked, faintly. Her voice was rich and smooth, with a faint, almost not there hint of accent.

“Yes,” I said. “Her power bulks them up. They’re big enough to ride on, I’m sure you’d agree. Three on one, two on another.” There was enough room, though of course it’d be pretty tight, to say the least.

Flechette hesitated for a moment and said, “It should work, and we need to get going soon. I can travel with my crossbow, but Shelter doesn’t have a way to get around.”

“I guess so, then,” Shelter said, uncertainly.

“You won’t regret it,” I promised, turning and gesturing. They followed me, as we weaved around the moving capes. We were already falling behind, and I figured that at any moment now, the armband would start revealing losses. I knew it was going to be horrible, I just had to hope we could make it through it.

“Bitch, this is Parian and… Shelter, right?”

“Yes,” Shelter said.

“They’re going to be riding along. Um, Shelter can go with you, right?”

“Okay,” Rachel said. She gestured to Angelica, and Shelter stepped towards the dog, which turned and growled. “No. Angelica, down.”

Angelica knelt down while the others gaped, and then she climbed on, pulling Shelter in to get behind her and dig his knees into the sharp fur. She really needed a saddle, and maybe that’d be the
next thing I made if we survived.

That left three of us on Brutus.

“Brutus, down,” I said, and I gestured as I climbed up on top. Then came Flechette, who helped Parian up, as they both looked for places to grab. This was certainly going to be awkward.

Saddles, definitely some more saddles would be good if we were going to get around like this more often.

But the dog was a better perch than one might think, because Brutus was large enough that the flat portion of his back could fit two people easily, and then a third person draped down near the end.

Flechette, for her part, held Parian close as she got settled on.

“We really could use with a saddle,” I said, glancing over at Rachel, trying to project some bravado, keeping my voice calm as if this were normal. “If I forget, can you try to remind me after we’ve driven off Behemoth?”

“Sure,” Rachel said, just as casually, though she was looking at me stiffly. I could read her body language even with her costume, and of course she was worried about me. I was worried about her, almost as I was worried about myself, maybe even more. “Let’s go,” she grunted after a moment of looking at me, mask to mask.

“You work together?” Parian asked, and I could imagine a frown as she tried to figure things out.

“Yes,” I said. Then I added, biting my lip as I dug my heels in. “Brutus, forward!” I pointed, and we began to jog forward. We got out the entrance pretty easily, not the last ones, but definitely not the first as we began to run. The armband told us where to go, and I could point out and tug which way to go. We’d get there eventually, though it’d take a few minutes, especially because the ground was shaking.

In fact, everything was shaking and falling to pieces. A stop-light came down just behind us, as I tried to breathe, looking up in the sky for any sign of Behemoth looming far, far ahead. He was over forty five feet tall, and it wasn’t something you could really hide. He didn’t even bother. He just marched forward and destroyed everything in his path. From the way the road was actually moving up and down, impossibly, he had to be using his power to create earthquakes right now.

Dogs were screaming--it wasn’t barking, not like that--in pain and fear all around, people were running away even now, and it was absolute chaos in the morning sky as we continued onward.

Everything was going to heck, and we could no more stop to save random civilians or their dogs than we could singlehandedly beat Behemoth. We had to get them in range before we dropped them off.

It was loud, but I leaned back. “Did you hear something!” I yelled, mostly because of how loud everything is.

“Not much. Was just curious!” Parian yelled back.

“I made her costume,” I said, loudly, pointing at it. “Sewed it myself!”

“Really?” Parian asked. “How?”

“Spiders,” I said, as if that explained something, and then I was too busy yelling out orders to the
dogs. Left, right, we had to swerve to avoid a car.

Then, “Jump!”

Brutus leapt, and we went straight over a foundered car as the street began to fall apart and collapse in on itself.

The city was going to pieces right before our eyes, and people would start dying soon if they were out in this, and it wasn’t even Behemoth in person.

We hurried onwards, no time for talking anymore. The armband announced, in a robotic voice: “Alabaster Down, DC-7.”

Oh, already?

We still were another minute or so from the battlefield, and I focused on yelling out orders as I tried to spread my bugs far and wide. I could get a vague glimpse of the battlefield, and despite my fears, Behemoth didn’t always immediately fry my bugs. Immediately actually meant that about a second after someone entered the area to attack, Behemoth got around to effortlessly killing them, zapping them with such ease that I knew that it was entirely distraction, or something, that held him back.

At this rate I’d quickly run out of bugs, but even the incomplete picture I had was pretty startling. Chevalier was pushing forward, as the Triumvirate hit the monster again and again. A number of capes were actually destroying the local area, creating a trail of wreckage that Kaiser was manipulating ot wrap around and try to hold in the monster.

Faultline, Spitfire, Geomancer… their powers all seemed to work pretty well for certain purposes, and so Behemoth was being very temporarily slowed by this. But it involved getting stunningly, unnervingly close to the monster, so I wondered if they’d really thought it through.

Chevalier surged forward, only to be slammed by a bolt of fire. Behemoth seemed to be trying to melt everything that was being thrown at him, which seemed only to lead to more and more molten metal and stone being wrapped around him, as they tried to harden it. Of course, he just walked through all of it, but as slow as he was moving, it meant something.

*Chevalier Down, DC-7*

The fire spread, and a cape went down, screaming and trying to retreat, as the defenses collapsed, Faultline and Spitfire retreating as Geomancer bent down to pull up some sort of barrier to stop all of the fire.

It didn’t work.

*Eschutheon Down, DC-7, Eschutheon Deceased, DC-7, Geomancer Deceased, DC-7*

On the other side, capes had tried to push the issue in their own ways. The combinations of powers were way too complicated for me to follow with bugs that kept on dying, cutting off my vision at the wrong moment, but as they started to fall, I felt a cape leap out of cover to try to recover one of them.

He had a sword.

*Raymancer Down, DC-7, Cloister Down, DC-7, Furrow Deceased, DC-7, Oaf Deceased, DC-7*

Then he was zapped, though I could feel Raymancer crawl behind some rubble just in time, dragging Cloister with him.
Brigandine Deceased, DC-6.

Holy shit.

Alabaster Down, DC-6

Wait, again? Oh, his power, I thought, as Behemoth finally was close enough to almost see directly, not through the eyes and senses of bugs who couldn’t possibly take in all of what he had, even if they didn’t keep on dying.

Over forty feet tall, a giant monster… it was rather hard for a bug to notice all that, when to the average bug, a human is large.

So, when my eyes saw him for the first time, I gaped. He was still in the distance, half-obscured by a few buildings that he was slowly knocking over as he surged forward, having all but broken the cordon of capes. There was almost nobody standing in his way, which had to mean that the Triumvirate were backing off for a moment, though in the sky, people threw bolts of energy of all sorts of colors at him.

It hit him and from what I could see, did little more than scrape against his skin. He was tall and grey, a mountainous mass of skin that looked as if it were its own environment. Crags of rock and cooled magma gave him a texture, made him geography itself, and he was huge and muscular, with massive arms bulging with meaningless muscle, and hands that were just mangled black growths of stone.

A single red eye, a glowing mouth filled with jagged black teeth that looked as if they were made of rock too, and horns all combined to create something that just fundamentally looked like a boss. It looked like what you’d imagine a final boss of a video game to look like, once they’d ditched the pretty forms for something ugly and horrible.

I hoped Greg was okay, the sudden fear almost out of place as Flechette and Parian both dismounted, along with the others, hugging against the building as if considering their options.

“So,” I said, leaning down towards them. “Do you need anything else? Or do you have it from here?”

“We should be able to do it,” Flechette said. “Shelter can protect us, and hopefully I can get some shots in when he goes this way. Unless he’s going to go somewhere else.”

I nodded, glancing over at Rachel, who hadn’t said anything. “Alright, Ra… Bitch. Let’s loop around, try to be there in case anyone needs an evac. Or help with anything.”

She nodded, and I turned to yell, “Good luck!” at them before we were off, looping around a few old buildings, crumbling and falling apart so much it was hard to tell what their old purpose had been, with the windows shattered.

Bugs were dying in the fight by the score as Myrridin charged forward, waving his staff, along with Armsmaster and the Triumvirate, who were apparently running interface. It was slowing him, definitely, as we looped around, now probably a hundred feet or so from him.

He loomed, as we looked and saw Kaiser and two bodyguards in the form of Fenja and Menja, about fifteen feet tall at the moment, retreating away from the scene of the attack.

I hoped that he was going to regroup and return to the fight. It hadn’t been but a few minutes, and I knew that his power, which allowed him to control steel, would be useful in trying to slow the monster down.
That seemed to be all anyone could do. My bugs were dying too fast to really have a grip on events, but my range was excellent, and so I could see the way that teams were coalescing, and just like the E88, people who knew each other were sticking together.

Laserdream and Glory Girl were hovering over Clockblocker, Aegis, and Gallant, providing, I assumed, covering support. I wasn’t sure how Clockblocker would get close enough to use his time-stop powers on Behemoth, but if he could do it, it’d probably help a lot.

As it was, the monster was staggered, time and time again, by one attack after another, without really being inconvenienced.

We kept on moving, looking for someone in need of a lift.

*Pelter Down, DD-6*

Pelter? Who was that, I thought, as I looked to see where he or she was down. I felt them, beneath some rubble. Not even a direct hit, I thought, trying to judge whether they were too close to Behemoth to save. Velocity seemed to be moving towards where the figure had been buried, using his speed to keep from being affected by Behemoth as he dug at the rubble, clearly ready to flee if need be.

Behemoth paused, half-turning, and a bolt of lightning slammed into Velocity just as he began to move.

Somehow he didn’t die, instead hurrying forward, almost a blur, before slamming against a building and tumbling through the broken glass.

The city was falling apart, I thought. Which meant if we weren’t afraid of collapses, we could just push our way around back and rescue both of them. If neither of them were killed in the next few moments.

Which reminded me. I tapped the armband and said, “I’m going to try to save Velocity and Pelter, can someone distract him, or something?”

“Acknowledged” a robotic voice said.

Well, I had to hope that this worked. “Bitch, let’s get in that building.”

I covered my eyes and leaned back as we urged the dogs forward, leaping into the building and beginning to run through. The doors were wide enough, and where they weren’t, they’d fallen apart.

In the lobby of what I realized was a run-down hotel, Velocity was lying amid the broken glass and shattered room.

I hoped he wasn’t too injured, because I couldn’t do anything if it was fatal except apologize for being useless.

I hurried over, ahead of Rachel, and then knelt down. Despite having been hit, the damage wasn’t as bad as expected. His red costume was scorched and peeling, and I knew enough not to try to force it off, but he was still breathing, albeit a little shallowly, and he twitched every so often, groaning as I waited to see if he’d wake up.

“Rachel, can you help me lift him?” I asked.

Rachel nodded, jumping off the dog, and going over to grab his shoulders. I shifted over to grab his
He groaned, but I made sure not to touch anything. Nothing was broken, or he’d be screaming by now, and I carried him over to lay down on top of Angelica as I grabbed some rope to tie him down, having brought more than I needed in the way of supplies. We’d have to walk with Angelica if we were going to get out of there, but it was something.

I pressed the armband, trying to think, aware that I was not the best choice for life flight. I was tying a wounded man to a giant dog. The signs were everywhere that this was a bad idea, but what was the other option? Leave him there? And everyone else was busy actually fighting. “I have Velocity. We’re going to have to go slow to make sure he’s not jostled, so if you could… maybe come to meet me with someone who can heal him or something, that’d help,” I said.

“Understood,” the electronic voice said.

“Alright, Brutus, come with me. Bitch, stay here, I’ll be right back.” She tensed, and I imagined her not just asserting but telling me that she was coming with me. But she didn’t, and I hurried out the window, over towards a pile of rubble.

I took a breath, glancing up. Behemoth was actually almost out of sight, in part because he was covered in rubble and debris as he marched straight through a building as if it wasn’t there. At the same time, I did know that if he wanted he could probably send something my way.

I’d probably be dead almost before I realized how bad things were. “Brutus, dig.”

He was a good dog, and he dug until I said, “Stop.”

And there was Pelter.

She wasn’t badly harmed either, I thought, hopefully. She was wearing a bomber jacket, and a blue scarf wrapped around and covering her face. Her skin was light brown, and she looked maybe a year or so older than me, with soft, slightly pudgy features. She had to be new, since her costume was incredibly minimal. She had to be from Brockton Bay, because nobody with that little of a costume would have been able to catch a ride to arrive here.

Some new cape, probably not even had a first or second patrol, rushing into a fight she wasn’t prepared for.

I frowned, and shook her. There was a welt on her head, from where some falling rubble had hit her, but she stirred after a dozen seconds of shaking. “Ugh,” she said. “What… who?”

“It’s Arachne,” I said. “Can you walk?”

The fight was slowly moving away from this area, which wasn’t necessarily a good sign considering what was in that path. Tons of buildings and places where people lived. The core of the city, including the richest business district areas.

*Brandish Down, DD-5*

“What’s that?”

“Dog monster. Completely harmless,” I said, deadpan, aware that every second wasted talking was another second that something could go wrong. “Can you walk? Yes or no?”

“Geeze, you don’t have to…”

“Endbringer,” I said, taking a breath. “I’m rescuing you.”
“I… think so.” Pelter took a breath, and I could feel the nervous smile on her face as she got up, almost stumbling, clearly weak on her feet.

“Climb up on the dog then,” I said. “Brutus, Kneel.”

The dog knelt, and both of us pulled ourselves onto it. She grabbed her arms around my waist in a death grip, and I said, “Brutus, forward.”

We went through the window, to where Rachel was. “Got her,” I said.

“Good.”

“Alright, now…” I said, pressing the button on the armband. “We have two downed capes retrieved, at around DD-6. We’re going to continue south, away from the action, if you can find anyone to pick them up or heal them.”

“Acknowledged. Will send Othala in that direction.”

Ah, right. I glanced over at Pelter as we began to walk the dogs through the building and then slowly along the wrecked streets. In the distance, I could see a glow that I had to assume was radiation, coming from Behemoth, but we were probably out of range of an attack. Hopefully.

“So, what’s your power?” I asked, trying to calm her down.

“I can throw things really hard,” she said. Then she blushed, gesturing to the pockets on the jacket. “I can also sort of charge them a little before I throw them, to make them a little harder. Which means they don’t fall apart when I throw them as hard as I can.”

Huh. I could see uses for that power, definitely, though it’d depend on how hard she could throw things. “Did it hurt Behemoth?”

“No. Not even close,” she said. “I can’t really do anything.”

“Well, then you should withdraw,” I said. “Bitch and I are doing search and rescue, but that’s… that.”

Othala was approaching, as was Purity, the bugs still on them to show their movement.

_Exalt Deceased, DC-4_

Ah, I thought, nervously. So the fight went on, though the deaths had started to temporarily taper off, and I had to assume that either he was being stopped, or he was continuing without resistance. Either almost felt better than people throwing themselves at him to do absolutely no damage.

The fight hadn’t lasted long, even now we were barely started with how long it might take before Scion showed up or Behemoth threw in the towel.

Othala was looking worse for the wear, covered in dirt and limping a little. She must have gotten pretty close, but not close enough to be attacked. Purity, on the other hand, looked perfect.

“These two?” Othala asked. Then she froze, staring right at Pelter. “You… I fucking know you, you goddamn n--”

“Brutus,” Rachel said, her voice hard. “Growl.”

Brutus growled loudly, even though he had no particular reason to be angry, despite Othala’s voice.
“W-what do you mean?” Pelter asked.

“Don’t talk to her,” I said. “We just need a heal on Velocity, and I suppose Pelter as well. Can you do that, or do you really want to start a fight during an Endbringer truce?”

Rachel was stiff, looking between Pelter and Othala, as Purity frowned down on both of us, glowing as she always did.

“Othala, we cannot afford to let you start anything.”

“Fucking race traitor’s whelp,” Othala muttered, but she stepped forward towards Velocity, who still hadn’t stirred. She laid a hand upon him, and after a moment he stirred, as she stepped back, arms crossed.

“And now Pelter,” I said, firmly.

“I’m fine, just…” Pelter began.

Othala crossed her arms and walked over right next to Pelter. She waited a moment, waiting out the time limit before the healing finished, and then tapped Pelter on the shoulder.

“There, you happy?”

“Just peachy,” I said to her, trying to sound casual, even as I wanted to hit her. Pelter’s welt disappeared, and she sat up straighter.

_Labyrinth Deceased, DD-5_

Another dead, though I couldn’t see why, exactly, though I could feel the cold as some cape seemed to be sending a lot of ice at Behemoth. As many bugs as were dying, my grasp of how the fight was going was only going to devolve, I thought.

“So, we done here?” Othala asked.

“Yes,” I said, just as the armband beeped.

“Arachne, Faultline and several other capes are requesting repositioning at this location.”

I tapped the button. “Understood.” I turned to Purity, and then said, “Good luck.”

I didn’t really like either of them, they were Neo-Nazis, but this was a fight against something a lot more dangerous than all of that.

Purity flew off, as Othala jogged to follow, leaving Velocity to stumble off the dog, having gotten through the rope in moments.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You returning to the fight?” I asked.

“Yes,” Velocity said. “But more carefully.”

“Good,” Rachel grunted. “And you?”

She was looking at Pelter, who looked away. I could see the tension in her eyes, the uncertainty. Her costume didn’t hide her emotions the way mine and Rachel’s did, even if I was used enough to
Rachel that I could read her anyways.

“I… I didn’t do any good. I should probably get out of here. I mean, I wanna help, but I can’t really beat an Endbringer like this.”

I decided that, while she was older than me, if she was as new as it seemed that this wasn’t a bad idea.

From the way Rachel had stiffened, it was the wrong answer, though. “How about you find a shelter? You can protect it. There’s going to be assholes like that,” I said, gesturing to where Othala and Purity had gone, “after Behemoth is gone. People who’d take advantage of the chaos.”

It was hard, as one looked around the ruined landscape, to imagine that Behemoth would just be something one got through, but… well, I knew that in the aftermath of Endbringer attacks, there were usually stories about how crime spiked along with poverty. Many cities never truly recovered from all of this.

“I… can do that,” Pelter said.

“Good. Can you continue on foot, we need to get back to the fight,” I said.

“No problem,” Pelter said, looking a bit more enthused now that she could imagine herself as helping people. She hopped off of Brutus and hurried away, making sure to go away from the devastation.

Rachel watched her leave. In a low voice I said, “Not everyone can fight the Endbringers. It’s not like you want to throw your dogs at him.”

“Sure,” Rachel conceded after a moment, but it seemed like she still didn’t like that mindset.

I checked the armband, and we shouted our orders and hurried off.

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Before we reached the point designated on the map, there was another flurry of deaths.

_Laserdream Deceased, DE--3, Flashbang Deceased, DE-3, Glory Girl Deceased, DE-3_

I could also tell that Behemoth was closing in on a shelter. Inside, the people were crowded together, a sitting duck if they weren’t evacuated, and I could tell that that’s what he was going for.

Bastard, I thought, as we hurried to see that Faultline, Spitfire, a big Ward in power armor, and a man dressed in a monk’s habit. Cloister? I guessed.

“Alright, we’re here. Where do you need to go?” I asked, gesturing to the dogs. Two on each seemed a stretch, but hopefully we could manage it.

Faultline’s face was visible, and I could see that she was not in a good mood. Labyrinth was one of her team-members, I knew, and now she was dead. It was to be expected, it was an Endbringer fight, but I still felt for her as she climbed up on board without a word.

Unlike Cloister, who gaped. “What are…”

“Dogs,” I said, feeling like I was going to be spending the rest of my life explaining Rachel’s dog-monsters. “Get on, please.”

“Ahead of Behemoth, if possible,” Faultline said in a quiet voice. “We’re going to try to slow down
the march. We need to evacuate as many of the shelters in that line as we can.”

I nodded, and let them get on. The city was still falling apart, and it was easy to avoid his trail of destruction. By now I was too focused on the details to worry as much as I should have. My bugs were spread out, agitated and trying to keep track of things, while I was calm, or perhaps merely detached, not even bothering to have a conversation with them. I finally managed to pull ahead of Behemoth, though I could hear the explosions and see the glow of fire from here. The big glass buildings that had been filled with office workers, the center and core of the New Brockton Bay (after everyone had abandoned the docks and their workers) was being ripped out.

I let them off, and then I gestured with Rachel. We needed to open some distance, because there was no way we were going to be able to help out a shelter full of people. We just couldn’t carry enough people at once, and the dogs were tired and no doubt testy. They obeyed orders, but I couldn’t imagine that it’d be a good idea.

“Need to switch,” Rachel said.

“Switch?” I asked, a little confused. “Dogs. They’re going to have to get out of their suits.”

“Oh, right,” I said with a frown. “Well, let’s find an alley then and work on that.”

*******

It was gross. Of course it was. We were literally ripping meat suits away. With our hands, dragging the dog out from the monster, just so that we could do it again. As we did so, the fight continued. I hadn’t seen it up close, and I was glad of that, because I knew people were dying. I heard it, and I knew that some of these deaths were grotesque and gruesome. But I’d have to get back into the fight.

Blood shouldn’t bother me, not after what I’d done to Lung, but it did.

Meat bothered me too. I was soaked and I knew I looked horrible when Rachel began to finally start pumping her dogs up, slowly but surely. In the meantime, people were dying.

One by one, and in clumps. The first died just as we reached the small, ruined alley, trash cans tipped over and spilling out. The dogs sniffed at it, clearly wanting to eat some, or roll around in it, but too well trained to do that without permission. The back alleys of the city weren’t places congenial to hygiene, so maybe any attempt to be clean was doomed even before we started ripping away monster-flesh.

Browbeat was a strong new Ward, one I knew almost nothing about, who I had never met. All of the strength of his flesh—for he was supposed to be a bit of a brute, a strongman with whatever his powers were.

Whatever they were, they couldn’t stand up to an Endbringer.

Then, within ten seconds of each other, Rime, Cache, and Tecton--I wondered who that was, and if I’d seen him and just not realized who--all died. I could imagine it, could stretch my bugs out almost far enough to get a picture of what was happening.

It was a desperate defense of fleeing civilians. The highest sacrifice, and yet what I thought as I leaned against the wall and tried to prepare for going back in was more along the lines of gratitude that it wasn’t me.
I was being selfish, but I was afraid, really afraid.

Spitfire Downed, DE-4 it announced just as we were about to get back into the running. I didn’t know whether we could save her or not, because that was blocks and blocks away.

Hopefully she lived, I thought, mounting up on Angelica this time, glancing over at Rachel. We were silent, we were already tired as we raced off, heading in the general direction of the fight.

We passed Spitfire, actually, laying by the wayside, groaning.

Faultline wasn’t with her, but one cape was, a short, stout man in a thick armor who seemed not to want to touch her.

Of course he didn’t. Her skin was badly burned, mangled even, peeling and black in places, her costume clearly melted into her skin as well. I stared at her, my stomach churning, as she groaned. I pressed the armband, even though I knew that the guy--Chubster?--must have already announced it.

“Spitfire down at our location,” I said, knowing that she couldn’t be moved without either being healed, or an ambulance.

But it was broken ground, rocky and shattered, and if it was hard to navigate on foot, or sometimes even with dogs, there was no ambulance in the world that could reach them, even if there wasn’t a giant monster just barely in the distance.

I was trembling a little, mostly with fear, but there was a little anger as well.

“Acknowledged,” the robotic voice said.

Hoyden Down, DE-4

“Hoyden is under cover. She can be retrieved,” a voice told my armband, as I glanced over at Rachel. Well, another person to save.

Fierceling Down, DE-4

I winced, imagining the chaos, and we raced forward on the dogs, who were back and no longer exhausted after more of Rachel’s power had been pushed into them. I knew that this was only temporary, and that it was at the cost of Rachel’s own growing exhaustion, but it was all we could do.

I glanced at the Armband, which displayed a location on the map. The last place the armband had pinged against.

I finally got close enough to see Behemoth, surging forward. He roared, so loud that even from a distance I winced as one of the capes just collapsed, and another tried hurrying out of the way, only to flop down.

Frenetic Down DE-4, Quark Deceased DE-4

We hurried towards Hoyden, left behind. She was dressed in some odd mix between medieval armor and cowboy gear. Chainmail that looked like jeans, and slick leather boots. Her face was covered, wincing and dragging herself back. Her costume seemed torn apart at places, smoking slightly from the heat of whatever hits had downed her, but she didn’t seem as if she were in any danger.

Fierceling, on the other hand, was screaming. “Gah! Ahhh!” He was short, dressed very minimally,
as if he were going for some sort of barbarian look.

“Fuck, I’m fine. Get him,” Hoyden said when we got closer.

“I guess I could….” I turned. “Rachel, stick by her, see if you can get her up on Brutus’ back.”

“Okay,” she said, not in any mood to question my order as I urged Angelica forward.

Behemoth turned.

My heart stopped. I knew that he wasn’t looking directly at me, that he was in fact aiming right at a cluster of capes, one of whom was holding what looked like a giant boombox, which seemed to be turning Behemoth’s roars back on themselves as they retreated.

Almost casually, Behemoth roared and grabbed at some building, which melted in his hands like putty and, a moment later, hardened back up as he tossed it straight at them. It hit some of them, and then kept on rolling, slamming into Fierceling just as I was about to reach him. Brutus leapt out of the way, barking angrily. “Back!” I yelled, terrified that it was going to turn on me and kill me.

Where Fierceling had been, there was meat. It was gross to describe it that way, but the slick puddle of organs and blood and other unmentionable substances didn’t look like anything that could have ever been human.

It was just nothing. One moment he’d been screaming for help, the next he was dead.

*Acoustic Down, DE-5, Grace Down, DE-5, Mister Eminent Down, DE-5 Penitent Deceased, DE-5, Fierceling Deceased, DE-5*

Behemoth turned, ready to finish them off, only for Legend to fly up, blue-white lasers slamming and then splitting off against the monster’s skin. They seemed to bounce, spreading outwards as Behemoth stepped back for a moment.

Even after all of those minutes of fighting, at most there were only a few places where I could really tell that damage had been done, and none of it got even close to his center. If Behemoth had a weak point to attack for massive damage, I didn’t know what it was, and there was no glowing heart to hit.

Narwhal stepped forward, her forcefields slamming into Behemoth. She was just beyond the kill radius, as a few other capes all pressed on. I could see Othala, Kaiser, and Clockblocker all hanging back, feel them with my bugs. I could imagine the combination the three of them could work on together.

Narwhal’s forcefields held the monster back while Acoustic, Grace, and Mister Eminent were all being saved.

“Alright, we need to get out of here,” I said.

“Frenetic,” Hoyden said. I turned to see where the cape was, aware that at least for a moment Behemoth was distracted. Frenetic was thin, and unconscious, and I hurried over, in the shadow of that great monster, as it bore down, trying to tear through Narwhal’s shields, almost ignoring anyone else.

Then the earth shook, just as I managed to pull the young man up, exhausted, onto Angelica’s back.

The ground gave way beneath Narwhal’s feet, and she tried to compensate, lashing out at Behemoth, but that moment’s distraction was all it took.
We were already running, as were the capes that had managed to be evacuated, when the armband said, as I knew it would the moment she stood against Behemoth like that.

**Narwhal, Down DE-5**

I turned back, and even lying on the ground amid rubble, she stretched her forcefield up to protect the retreating capes.

Hoyden was growling at us, and Rachel was tense, aware that we were a big target if Behemoth turned around.

**Narwhal Deceased, DE-5**

The deaths I thought, exhausted and wanting to hide already, seemed to just keep on coming.

We ran off for temporary safety, as the casualties mounted.

We were losing, I realized all at once.

Losing badly.

Chapter End Notes

Also posting 4.3, because I forgot yesterday.

Behemoth is rough.
Hoyden wasn’t Pelter. She wanted to get back in the fight, even though it was clear that she was more than a little out of it. I didn’t know how irritable she normally was, but she groused and complained the whole time we retreated.

Rachel had to be as frustrated at me that we were doing so little, relatively speaking. I thought I’d feel like a savior, dragging people out of danger, but Behemoth was so dangerous that we spent most of our time keeping as far away as we could. We were saving people, I told myself that, but then I saw the city.

When you imagined Behemoth’s area of effect, you imagined a single long trail of destruction, but the aftershocks and the destruction spread out. Small fires were spreading here and there, with no cape able to stop it when there were more pressing matters. The roads were destroyed even a quarter mile from anywhere Behemoth had attacked, just from the shockwaves of his entrance and, from what I could tell, work he was also doing on occasion. He wasn’t headed for the aquifer, at least as far as I could tell, but the devastation and damage he’d do to the city as a whole meant he might as well.

Buildings lay shaken and shattered around us, and when you combined cars and broken glass, it was a wonder we got through anywhere at all.

Sham was downed, I could see, directing some people from a smaller, private shelter out of the way.

The people didn’t leave him, surprisingly enough, considering the situation. I didn’t want to be cynical, but I’d expected it. Instead they helped him up, and it seemed all of them were headed towards the docks, in the hopes that Behemoth would continue his northward march without turning.

Uglymug, Zigzag, and Saurian all died. I didn’t even know who they were, but here I was, with the privilege of hearing their deaths announced to the world.

“When’s she getting here?” Hoyden asked, glancing over at Frenetic, who hadn’t stirred the whole time. Was it a head injury?

I didn’t know. I did know that Othala was busy, which meant that someone else would have to pick them up, and it’d need to be someone who could fly, because anyone walking on that ground would have big problems.

There were telephone poles down everywhere too, and with the damp and the rain it made the situation even worse.

“Soon,” I said.

And my bugs did notice Lady Photon and Panacea headed towards us, flying low.

Lady Photon was wearing a stained white bodysuit, dust and mud covering it already, and she was staring straight ahead. It was a focused sort of look, unless you had a bug on her. Then you could feel how she was trembling.

Panacea, in her white hood, was staring blankly ahead, with none of the fake determination.
One of them had lost a daughter as well as a niece, another had lost a father and a sister. Three family members dead within a dozen minutes. Almost no time at all to weather even one such loss. I stared at them as they flew up, trying to find the words for it, trying to find what it was you were supposed to say.

I knew that she didn’t want to be thanked for what she was doing. She wanted them back, wanted them back more than she wanted anything else.

I knew, in the moment, that this was probably true for both of them.

Panacea wasn’t blinking as she touched down, or rather, she was blinking slowly, as if she didn’t want to see the inside of her eyelids.

She just stared.

I felt like I understood that too. When I closed my eyes, I was afraid I’d see my mother’s body. A car crash wasn’t a pretty thing, and I saw her before the closed casket funeral. Or maybe I’d see the dead bodies I’d been exposed to recently, playing over and over and over in my head and refusing to quit or end or even stop as they dragged me along with them, the memories that just wouldn’t allow themselves to be put into the past, but instead stayed as an eternal--

As far as I knew, Dad was still alive, but it felt as if I’d lost too much already, just seeing this happen to the city.

“Alright, good,” Hoyden began, and then froze at the look on Lady Photon’s face. “Oh… right,” she said, quietly.

Panacea stepped forward, not even asking or caring about the dogs, just going to one of us and beginning to heal them as the ground shook. She ignored it, and I glanced over at Rachel, wondering what I could say to her, either. It was just moment after moment of survival. I was glad she was there. As dangerous as Behemoth was, if she died, I’d probably die as well, and right about now, looking at Panacea with her broken frown, and Lady Photon with her too-intent look, as if she were trying to keep up a pose long after the camera should have gone off, not living to see her dead felt like a good thing.

I watched, not sure what to say. I was saying too little and feeling too much, and so I decided to keep it that way. They had to be getting close to the targeted shelters now, and I wondered whether they’d made it far enough to survive. Already, I knew, the odds were good that the casualties were absolutely horrific.

And that wasn’t counting the smart people who would be hurrying out of town, perhaps never to return. People gave up on cities after an Endbringer attack. Dad wouldn’t be one of them. I knew he wouldn’t ever give up, not in that way.

If he didn’t, then I couldn’t. “Done,” Panacea said, as she stepped away from Hoyden.

“Good job,” Hoyden said. “I’m going to get back into the fight, though…” she looked around skeptically at the ruined streets. “Could I get a lift to the front-lines?”

It was a pretty hazardous trek. I couldn’t refuse. I was nervous, and wondering just what Behemoth was going to do next, but that wasn’t any excuse. “Sure. Bitch, that alright?”

“Yeah,” Rachel said, sounding almost as lost as everyone else here.

Hoyden nodded to herself. “Pretty stoic,” she muttered, stretching a little as she pulled herself up to
sit more fully on her dog, and grip it with her knees. “Ride ‘em cowgirl, then?”

Rachel didn’t respond to the joke or the comment. I didn’t know if Hoyden had even expected her to. She seemed to be saying it just as much out of nerves, out of trying to throw up barriers, and if I looked at it that way, I could understand it, even if it annoyed me slightly.

“What about you?” I asked Frenetic.

The cape looked at me for a long moment. I’d paid very little attention to him. Grizzled, tired looking, an experienced Protectorate cape, but not one who had drawn attention. He was thin, a speedster who seemed almost skin and bones.

“I suppose so. I can’t do much.” He shrugged.

“There’s evacuation,” I said.

“They should have that done by now,” Frenetic said. “Or close.”

I wondered what was holding them up, or if anything at all was?

We hurried onward through the broken streets, and as we got closer, more deaths were announced.

*Prism Down, DE-7, Ursa Aurora Deceased, DE-7, Revel Deceased, DE-7*

I wasn’t even in range to see their deaths as we hurtled along, and I clung on tight as we hurried towards the front lines. When I got in range, I saw that the civilians were slowly evacuating from the two or three threatened shelters. The power lines, the water, the destroyed road, all were slowing them down, but they were almost all evacuated despite that.

Behemoth, though, was starting to go a little faster, rushing at buildings and tearing at them, throwing them around like a child playing with a toy. I stared at the destruction, well aware of what would happen if it focused on me. I could see capes gathering, Alexandria and Eidolon prepared to strike, but it was Clockblocker that ran forward, flanked by several flying capes, and touched the Endbringer.

Clockblocker’s power let him freeze time, and all at once, clearly made safe by Othala, who was standing just a little off, with her bodyguard and much of the rest of her team, had given him some sort of power that let him resist it.

“Now’s the time to get off,” Hoyden said, gesturing to Frenetic. “While we can reset and figure out what to do.”

People were fleeing en masse, and Clockblocker retreated, glancing over at Othala.

I thought, staring at the scene, making sure to keep well out of the way of Behemoth, that he seemed almost like a figurine. But the moment he came back, his kill aura would activate, and so everyone was keeping their distance.

No attack could do anything against him right now, from what I’d heard. I wondered if Clockblocker could repeat it.

The number of capes in the area had been winnowed, and then winnowed again, and now people were in loose clusters, the teams broken up. I could see Flechette and Parian and the others, preparing to strike the moment Behemoth was able to move. Parian had large stuffed animals out, which were serving as a sort of fluffy shield for the group.
They were sticking together, but almost everyone else was starting to revert into their comfort zone, sticking with members of the same team no matter whether it actually made sense. I had already done that with Rachel, but I could at least justify it in a way. My bugs at least could tell me information if the armband didn’t.

Off Hoyden went, and Frenetic.

This part of the city had once been pretty striking, in a cheap-optimism sort of way. Biotech and biomedical companies, electronic corporations relying on the influx of skilled Japanese labor that had also brought in people like Lung?

And then, to service it, hotels and restaurants and apartment buildings, condos and slices of upscale suburbia: all had been the result.

I’d been optimistic about all of it, in a way. Or at least, it’d been easy to try to look on the bright side, to think about how Medhall was making jobs, and how that was important.

It was in ruins now. Buildings were collapsed, and the glass was so thick and deep at places that it almost stopped being a hazard.

I could smell smoke and fire everywhere, in the center of the devastation, having been attacked directly by Behemoth.

Wrecked giant skyscrapers lay half-broken or half-melted, like the leaning tower, a declaration of failure and unimportance against this… this thing.

This was the part of Brockton Bay that had seemed to hold so much promise. Of course Dad was bitter about the docks fading, and so so was I, but that didn’t mean I wished this district harm.

But who would stay here, after the city was devastated? Where was the money to repair it?

It was an odd certainty, as we began to retreat, keeping within sight of the fight and the monster, that we were seeing the end of the city in some sense.

Bruised, battered, and knocked out, I feared.

“Rachel,” I said, quietly.

“What?” she asked, and her voice was quiet too as she watched. I could imagine her eyes, taking it all in, and I wondered what she was thinking.

“This makes me sick,” I said.

Behemoth started moving, and Clockblocker and some of the others tried to retreat.

Flechette slammed two or three bolts in quick succession, each of them piercing deep in its skin, but it ignored her, and ignored her party, still going straight for Clockblocker as if he was truly able to hold a grudge.

Kid Win came blasting in on a hoverboard, trying to distract the Endbringer.

It swatted the boy out of the air like a fly, and almost as lazily. Kid Win tumbled, but was caught before he hit the ground. Even so, the armband chirped

*Kid Win Down, DE-6*
Fire hurtled at Aegis and Clockblocker, as the groups tried to retreat. Aegis was hit hard, but the fire
seemed to merely pain him, and he didn’t scream or retreat as he kept on sheltering Clockblocker.

Steel beams, like those that had been melted and destroyed by the fight against Behemoth, slammed
into him as Kaiser stepped up.

He was one of the most powerful capes in the city, and it was showing now. Behemoth slowed for a
moment, and then, for the second time, the earth cracked as the monster used tectonics against
someone. But Purity was pulling Kaiser out of the way, dragging him as Othala tumbled.

Then Behemoth roared, and people died.

Othala Down, DE-6, Clockblocker Down, DE-6, Night Down, DE-6, Alabaster Down DE-6

(Again?!) Fog, in his gaseous form, reformed just in time for him to be hit as well.

Fog Down, DE-6

And Behemoth kept on going.

Lightning clipped against his armor, and Purity dropped him, startled, as Behemoth began to stomp
over all of them.

Kaiser Down, DE-6

Dragon’s craft absorbed lightning and shot it back at Behemoth, who caught it and shot it back as
Legend and Eidolon both poured on the fire trying to save the downed capes.

It was a horrific display of firepower, and yet it seemed to do nothing at all. Down came the foot as
Behemoth turned.

Othala Deceased, DE-5, Clockblocker Deceased, DE-5, Aegis Down DE-5

I blinked, surprised, trying to figure out how the rest of them were alive.

I’d… Strider. Strider had come in, maybe, somehow, and…

Oh. My bugs had brushed up against Velocity. Speedsters for the win?

One of the valkyries roared and ran at Behemoth, who all but ignored her, turning and beginning to
go towards...us. Away from the rest of the ruined district.

“Shit,” I said, cursing that I didn’t have better language for it. “We have to retreat.”

Fenja Down, DE-5

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“The deaths?” Rachel asked, three alleys away. Behemoth was advancing tirelessly, but at least
nobody else had died, so far. But I was beginning to worry, because of how Brockton Bay was laid
out.

The city wasn’t that packed in, but there was wealth next to poverty. At the rate Behemoth was
going, he’d slam into the poor parts of town before he knew it. There was just not enough space, nor
the right economic situation, for the layers to be that separate.

More importantly, on a personal scale, there was the fact that this was... this was in fact our base. If he kept up in this direction, it'd be close to or on where we were staying before too long.

I knew that it was just some other street, and that he wasn’t aimed that way, but I knew that the moment Rachel realized what was going on, she was going to freak out. She was going to want to abandon the fight, and that wasn’t right. I wasn’t helping more than a little—though I knew that Velocity might have been part of saving those people.

We’d contributed, but no more than that. And we, the city, was losing so much.

The villains, well-- I thought about the Undersiders, wondering where they were and what they were doing? Lisa would be useful, and perhaps Grue’s power would work against radiation, if it was needed?

But the heroes that were dying couldn’t be replaced, not easily and not, perhaps, for a long time. “N-not just that. The city. I care about it so much, and it’s... you know there’s dogs, trapped in apartments, that were not able to be taken into the shelters. There wasn’t room. They’re in the path, too, and people who were unable to evacuate, or fools that thought it wouldn’t hit them, or... we’re all together in this.”

“All helpless. All trapped.”

“Oh,” Rachel said.

Just Oh. Oh what?

I took a breath. “It’s not important.” It wasn’t, there was an Endbringer on the loose. The itching, trapped feeling, the fear and the despair, they were normal in a disaster like this. They were understandable, and I shouldn't focus on them so much. You powered through stuff like that, didn’t you?

Rachel said, firmly, sounding almost baffled, “Of course it is.”

I looked away, as if she could see my red face.

_Prism Down, CB-4_

“Why? We’re fighting a...”

“Because it matters to you,” Rachel said. She leaned in, and I was frozen between a dozen emotions. Gratitude, surprise, hope that she didn’t realize that by the reckonings, our particular home was BD-4, and that he was thus far closer than it might seem at first. He still might be stopped, Scion still might show up, but every moment meant another chance for her to figure it out.

I didn’t want the moment to end. “Thanks.” I took a breath, trying to confront her with the truth.

_Shadow Stalker Deceased, CC-4_

Oh. I’d never get to talk to her now, never get to ask her how it worked, how someone who was at least a little rough around the edges, like Rachel was, could be a hero. I couldn’t ask her to see what she said, and figure out what she did wrong. She had to have done something right, and also something wrong, to have been a vigilante for so long and then to no longer be one anymore.
Something had slipped, or perhaps she’d had bad habits that had caught up to her, but then what had my life told me but that everything caught up to you, and sometimes all of a sudden. I hadn’t expected to run away from home the day I did. It just all tumbled down, and…

My eyes widened at that thought. Some people would say that I was still in the aftermath of that. It’d happened so fast, and today had already dragged on far too much.

I leaned in, across the gap between the dogs, who panted and waited, not sure what was going on. They were angry at times, obedient at others, but they clearly had no idea what an Endbringer was, they had no conception of the endless stream of names, the dead that piled up.

Piled up like debris and rubble all around them, everywhere.

I leaned in, and hugged her close for a moment, aware that this was wasteful. But the very act of hugging her centered me, made me realize that I actually had someone and something to fight for. And that meant I couldn’t ignore the threat, just because I was afraid of what it’d do. I probably should be afraid, but that didn’t mean I didn’t do it.

“Rachel,” I said, quietly.

Alabaster Down, CD-4

If it wasn’t a human life, it’d be almost comical how many times he’d gone down without actually dying. When I didn’t hear the armband chirp about his death for a moment, I decided that it was done. A one-off, rather than a clump of people. I breathed out.

“Behemoth’s almost to our place. We should go save it, while we can,” I said.

“He is?”

“We’re BD-4, roughly. I think?” I frowned at the armband, but it wasn’t displaying things as exactly as I would have liked. Or, here was another answer, I couldn’t get it to list the street names, and so an overhead view of sectors and sections was fine for knowing how to defend against a monster, or where to go, but wasn’t any good at getting an exact view unless you really knew the area.

“Oh,” Rachel said. “Fuck.” She tensed, and pulled away.

“Yeah, we need to save our stuff, and the dogs. Then we can get out of there,” I said, thinking about how if he kept on looping the right way, he could even hit Dad’s neighborhood. It all depended on how much longer he was going to be fighting, and so I leaned in. “Angelica, go!”

Off we were, and this time, it was a race to see who got there first, unless Behemoth suddenly shifted directions.

It was easy to see his trail of destruction, easy to notice the way it had zones, layers, from the most completely destroyed to the areas where collateral damage was key. So I knew we were still behind him, but he was being fought, that much was obvious.

Alabaster Down, CD-4, Blitz Deceased, CD-4, Hookwolf Deceased, CD-4

We hurried onward. I knew when we were passing Behemoth by the distant roar, and then as we went around a half-crumbled building, we saw him. Armismaster was closing in, wielding his halberd and shouting something, surrounded by what looked like small robotic drones, though I couldn’t imagine what they were doing, except that he was too close. Close enough that the kill aura should have finished him, which meant he had a way to survive it. Legend was flitting close, as Alexandria
came in behind the monster, but I didn’t believe any of them would beat the monster, not anymore.

I’d read stories about Endbringer attacks before, though they never described the fight, and sometimes they mentioned some damage that had been done. Once Legend had worked together with a bunch of other capes to cut off Leviathan’s right hand, and that had been news as scientists around the world studied it--under lock and key--to see what they could learn.

When you grew up on stories like that, you almost imagined that it was just a matter of time before some headline blared that at least one Endbringer had been defeated.

It was a child’s hope, but sometimes it was all you clung onto, long after the public will for donating large sums of money in the aftermath of an Endbringer had dried up, because give just this once was one thing, but what about when you heard about one catastrophe after another for years and years?

I didn’t think it was going to happen, or if it was, not anytime soon.

The streets kept on collapsing, and by now I could hardly recognize the area.

The dogs were barking loudly when we ran up on the small structure, which hadn’t started to come down, thankfully, but looked very, very fragile. Behemoth was still not here yet, and we went around the back, leaping the fence as the dogs hurried to meet us.

I was leaping off almost before we stopped, spreading my bugs wide so that I’d know as soon as Behemoth was getting close.

“Rachel, get the dogs and…” I frowned. “Can you power them up a little? Make them slightly bigger? It’d make them stronger, which would help at first, if we’re going to be running them on the street.”

I was picturing the glass and the electricity and the dampness. If each of the dogs was a little pumped up, that’d help, but there were too many, weren’t there?

“I’ll try something,” Rachel said, firmly. “Get the money and shit.”

Money and shit was the word for it.

I hurried inside, pushing back the dogs, which were barking and screaming so loud I wished I had earplugs.

*Armsmaster Down, CD-4.*

I grabbed my backpack, deciding that I’d focus on that first. The terrariums were doomed, but I’d already emptied them of bugs, only for them to die uselessly, unable to do anything to anyone. So those were not a major loss. Books, electronics, supplies… the bedding could wait, we’d find something, eventually.

So, toothpaste, clothing… I wished we had travel bags, but I just kept on stuffing stuff into my backpack, and then looked around, for something I could pack more stuff in. It was one of those huge backpacks that kids broke their backs wearing, carrying all of their schoolbooks for every class so that we didn’t have to bother going to our locker--important in my case.

But it was only so big, as I pulled out the money, I knew that this was about all we’d be able to take. One or two sets of clothes, toothpaste and toothbrush, tampons, aspirin, and then games, books, money… that’s about it.
All our possessions cluttering me up, but I knew that Rachel was going to be busy with her end of
the evacuation. When I stepped outside, the dogs were all around her. It was like those paintings of
saints walking through the crowds of lepers begging to be healed. They pressed on her, quiet and
suddenly intent despite the fear that had to be gripping them, as she leaned in, talking softly but
firmly to each one as she pumped them up. Just a little, just enough that they might not bleed out and
die the first time they ran into shards of broken glass.

They increased slightly in size, but no more, and I watched, paying attention to two scenes at once.

Then my bugs started dying.

*Armsmaster Deceased, BD-5.*

Even him? I’d had memorabilia of him, I’d seen pictures of him. He’d been in charge of the
Protectorate here for quite a few years, and… well. Even if we hadn’t gotten along, even if he’d been
and ass and even if honestly I didn’t trust the Protectorate as much as I used to, that didn’t change
that he was the leader of the city’s heroes.

Someone important. That didn’t matter either.

We didn’t have much time left. “He’s just a few blocks away,” I said. That could be a while, with as
slow as he seemed to move, but I also knew that his fire and lightning and attacks could travel pretty
far, especially since this wasn’t a region filled with tall buildings. If I looked outside, I’d probably be
able to see him in the distance, bracketed behind by the trail of destruction he’d wrought.

My skin was crawling as I followed his trail in the death of my bugs.

“Okay,” Rachel said, frowning. “Halfway done.” She was hunched slightly, as if she were in pain,
and maybe it hurt, pumping this many dogs up, even a little. But if it did, she wasn’t complaining,
instead. I could imagine her gritting her teeth and ignoring the pain. She was very stubborn, I
admired that in her.

I took a breath, standing close to her, reaching out to rub at the ears of the dogs who came to see
what I was up to. They were scared, and they wanted reassurances I couldn’t give, even if I spoke
their language. But I could rub their ears and say nothing in many soothing words.

One by one, in a race against time, she gave them strength, she prepared them for what was to come,
as best she could. I knew that any dog that died, any one dog, would devastate her. I had no idea
what she’d do, except that I did and didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to consider what would
happen.

There was a pit in my guts, as I could feel fire and heat slamming into areas far ahead of Behemoth’s
kill aura. It was obvious that this was a losing fight, but there weren’t any more deaths, not for a full
minute of her going through the dogs, until at last she had them all.

*Assault Down, BD-4.*

In a technical sense, he had arrived, even if he was still about a block and a half away. It wasn’t far
enough to matter. A thousand feet away or less might as well be nothing when it was against
something that could throw lightning. That wasn’t much more than a football field.

*Assault Deceased, BD-4*

Battery, my bugs still on her, drifted forward. She didn’t freeze, which is what I had assumed she’d
do, freeze and charge up to try to go in and get vengeance. Instead she was moving, and thus not
charging her powers, but so slowly that she was just… moving. Towards where he’d been downed by… fire. It was fire, I decided after a moment and a few more dead bugs. He’d been scorched alive in a matter of moments, dead almost before he would have begun to scream.

Almost was the operative word.

She drifted. Rubble crashed against her, and she toppled as if she were just a puppet with cut strings, collapsing in a way that felt familiar as the armband chimed Battery Down, BD-4. She didn’t try to get out of the way, she didn’t try to get up, or at least, she didn’t seem to be struggling much, it was eerie and yet oddly familiar, an echo.

When Mom died, Dad had fallen apart, for a while. I was doing badly, but he was doing worse, and yet both of us had seemed to rally, had seemed to recover coming into the summer. I’d gone off to explore nature and found something worthwhile there, though looking back I wasn’t sure what had actually mattered at the time.

But at first, Dad had been inconsolable. Quiet. Dull and dead, his eyes bleak and yet tearless, as if he lacked even the energy to cry.

He’d changed, and then he’d seemed to change back, a little, going back between two states as easily as if he were a shapeshifter. And then something had changed, just as I was changing again too, and now we were separate.

“Are you ready? We need to hurry,” I said.

“Yes. Let’s go. Dogs. Follow. Come.” She gestured, her words and voice firm, and the dogs followed us in a crowd out out onto the broken streets. He was about a block away, clearly visible, huge and embattled as Legend tried to box him in, hurt him even more.

I wondered whether Scion would show up. He had to, eventually, that golden hero, and at the moment he seemed like our only chance. The fight still wasn’t going well, and the losses were starting to pile up. This wasn’t a good day, that much I’d realized deep down in my bones a while back.

Outside, there was Lung. I hadn’t even thought to put that many bugs in the direction he’d come from, down the street, because the fight and the Endbringer were all north. But there he was, leaning against a wall, pacing a little back and forth, shirtless and wearing his iron mask. He seemed unchained, and I had no idea where he had been this whole time. Out of my range, certainly, but what did that mean, what did that say? His arms were crossed, including the new one I thought had to be courtesy of Panacea.

He looked up when he saw us.

He didn’t say anything for a moment, but he was in a position to attack us as we passed, if he wanted to violate all sorts of unspoken and unwritten rules that everyone had to assume existed, or else wouldn’t the heroes or villains use it as an excuse to kill each other and blame the Endbringer. It was petty, but Lung was a murderer.

“Lung,” I said, when I saw he wasn’t talking. I didn’t know what to say, but I didn’t want to leave it be, because now he knew where we were. “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting. Also, I wanted to see.” He shrugged.

“See?” I asked, as Rachel tensed, clearly ready for a fight despite the circumstances.
“A snitch told me that Bitch was here.” Lung said. In custody?! How? He couldn’t see my face, but somehow he guessed my question. “Last night.” There was a shrug.

Huh. And what would he have done with that information? He had a gang, so he could have sent them against us, but both he and Bakuda were locked up, unless he had some sort of other plan. I couldn’t imagine what it was. But if he knew, other people could know as well, and if that was so, then--

I didn’t think I wanted to imagine it. Our time was limited, whether we knew it or not: like the day before I moved out, like so many other moments that had passed before I even realized it.

“You’re going to fight that?” I asked.

“Yes,” Lung said, sounding bored already, as if he had ran through his quota of words for the day. Perhaps there was scorn in his voice, but if the day ever came when I cared about the opinion of a sex-trafficking, vicious gang-leader, then it wasn’t today.

I took a breath. I turned.

Lightning roared out of that monster’s mouth, shooting across the sky to slam into Lung’s shoulder. He stumbled back, but did not fall, despite how much that had to hurt, stepping just out of the way as he began to grow.

I gestured. We had to go, if one bolt could hit at this distance than another could…

Stumpy, whose tail lived up to its name, was seared by a bolt of lightning probably meant for Lung. The dog twitched and collapsed, and Rachel all but howled out in rage.

“Rachel!” I said, loudly, as she turned. I could imagine her sending them against the monster, though the dogs themselves were scattering in panic.

She was striding forward now, and I was reminded of Battery, if Battery had been far more pissed off.

“Ginger, Kuro! Come!” I yelled, trying to gather up the dogs. “Bitch! Do what I say. Follow me!”

She froze, and I could imagine the outrage on her face. But firmly I repeated, “Come.”

I wished she could see my face, so she could see the ‘please’ I knew was on it too. She needed to do what I told her, because if she went against Behemoth right now, it was going to end badly for everyone. She needed to trust that without me putting it to her, without yelling the words at her, and I was too stressed to even be able to do more than think them, do more than feel the certainty that we needed to get out of here.

She nodded, glaring at Lung as she hurried off.

I knew there were still people to fight, still people that would die, sooner or later, but the image of death was in my mind, I’d seen the elephant or however you wanted to call and, and I’d come away… not reassured. But not damned in my own eyes either.

We ran to save the dogs, and Lung turned and went to fight the monster, and I knew which of us was the better person, no matter what Legend had said.

*****
What happened next?

One more dog died, Kuro, from falling debris and the chaos of trying to get out of there, in giving up the fight, but we gathered all the rest, under her iron will, my bugs warning me in case he got closer, in case the monster was after us.

Behemoth was terrifying, but we were past that. Past that, but not what it’d do, to us and to the city. He was turning away, and my Dad’s home would be hit before too long, I thought.

It might have even moved into the path in the last minutes, the last minutes as Lung died as he lived, I had to assume. Viciously, angrily, fighting and attacking.

Others died--

*Lung Deceased, BD-4*

Others went down but didn’t die. But very few. It wasn’t a good day, but it seemed as if either they’d run out of capes to throw at Behemoth, or they’d figured out how not to die. Maybe the weaker capes were all knocked out, all giving up on stopping him.

I didn’t know what I could do about it, except run and run.

Until at last we were out of the way, though I could not think of after, I could not think of what would be done after the city had to recover from this. The earthquake had spread far, even if it wasn’t a very strong earthquake, and there was no part of the city which wasn’t at least a little impacted. But the core was the worst, the parts of the city that had belonged to no gang.

The Merchants would be untouched, because of course scum prospered. The city would be reeling, and I had no idea how long disaster relief would take. People would stumble from the shelters, maybe Pelter, maybe others, to pick up what was left. Jobs gone, everything…

Then I saw a flash in the sky, and flying overhead was a golden man in a white bodysuit, his hair trailing down as he flew in Behemoth’s direction.

I watched the trail, and I knew the fight was over, really. Finally.

*Scion* was here.

Chapter End Notes

And thus ends a two-chapter Endbringer fight. I hope it was impactful and a little rough, but having a whole arc wouldn't fit for what Behemoth is, anyways.
When Behemoth left, for the last time, the earth shook everywhere. We were as far as we could be from the center of the fight, we’d given up on it, and from the way that the deaths seemed to peter out, that wasn’t that bad of a decision. We hadn’t abandoned people to die, we’d seen our way through most of the deaths, through most of the chaos, and so I didn’t feel all that bad that I wasn’t sticking it out.

Now what we needed to do was survive what came after. Not all the buildings would be destroyed, not even that many, but the damage was considerable even all the way to the docks, as I’d find out, and would at least take a few days to repair, at best, and weeks and months at worst.

Then, there was the aftershock. We’d been hurrying along, headed towards the docks, or at least, towards more wide-open areas where the ground wasn’t broken, as the roads had been all the way around Behemoth for blocks on every side.

Nothing had fallen down this far away from him, no buildings at least. That was lucky, a bit of luck we’d need more of.

Here, at least, the buildings were more solid, but everything was shaken up and tumbled, and the roads were not built to stand up for this. No doubt even in the least affected places, the rooms would be disarrayed, and in the aftershock I almost fell, and some of the dogs did.

They screamed and kicked up a racket as we waved away dust and cursed and muttered: for all that they’d been through all of this, they were still panicked and startled.

There were fires in the distance, though I could see capes flying towards them already, and high in the sky, I could almost feel Scion’s glow. Maybe he’d fix it. Maybe he’d have to, because I didn’t know how much beyond my sight as still intact. The city didn’t seem destroyed, but what had happened…

I could smell oil, and fire, I could smell rotting sewage, and see burst pipes, water in the streets at places, sinkholes forming. I could imagine the sounds of screams other than the barks in the distance: I could picture the corpses I’d seen made in front of me, smeared and destroyed effortlessly. I couldn’t unsee them. I couldn’t undo what I’d done, in choosing to take part in the fight.

Deep down I was just as worried as the dogs, but I knew my mask would hide it, as I looked over at Rachel, and said, only, as the dogs got to barking, “I think… that’s probably it.”

There was one last shock, and then nothing. No more names, the way I’d expect if Behemoth was really running rampant still, because surely the quake would have downed a few more capes, when combined with a fist or a foot, to finish the job. I could picture it in my mind’s eye, the puddles of gore, the organs flopping out, the bodies in various states of death, but not decay: no time for decay. Fresh, ripe bodies, people who had been alive not all that long ago, and people I had known. Armsmaster, Othala, Lung: not all of their deaths I regretted, really, but I felt them all.

I had to stop, even though I’d said that it was it, that it was over, because it didn’t feel over. I’d saved a few capes, and Pelter hadn’t died, and neither had Velocity. I’d transported Flechette, Parian, and the others, and… and. It all felt like so little, too little, that I needed to do something else.
It was quiet on the street, but the Merchants would be out soon, I felt it in my bones as I leaned and tried to clear my mind of the horror. I couldn’t stop picturing it, that was the problem. My imagination was too strong, now that it was fueled with reality, and it felt as if I were about to be shaken to pieces along with the buildings that were in the way of Behemoth.

The city had toppled, and it was fallen now, at least for the moment. And where would money come to fix all of this? Endbringer insurance wasn’t… it wasn’t something that always existed. The richest people, of course they had insurance to cover that, but everyone else? Plus, the earthquakes, there were insurers who would probably argue, because a person could argue anything, that they qualified as that, and not an Endbringer… and nobody had earthquake insurance. It would be like buying insurance against tornadoes in California. Or against Hurricanes in Ohio.

It’d be a mess, and mostly things wouldn’t be picked up, not for months. There were cities that never recovered from an Endbringer attack, just limped along. I’d heard all of those stories and all of those minor outrages and I’d never seen it as something to do with me. It’d been bad, of course, something to be shocked about, but no more than that, because it had always been someone else.

Until suddenly we were the victims who would languish. The world was wide, and there were so many cities and potential targets that you just started to hope they’d never get around to you before someone figured out some way to kill them, or stop them.

Or do something other than fight again and again.

We’d saved shelters full of people. I said we as if I’d been doing that, but… still. It was something, but in all that time it hadn’t seemed like we’d ever stood a chance of destroying the monster.

That was a thought that could leave you cold and shivering at night.

And the thought of night brought me back up. “Rachel, we need somewhere to sleep.” It wasn’t night yet, not even close. The whole fight had been… I wasn’t even sure. I didn’t have a watch, but there were still hours left until the sun dipped, and hours still, this close to summer, until it was dark out.

But we also had no home at all. I knew there would be shelters, or camps that would be set up, for people who were displaced, who couldn’t go back to their homes… which would be a large chunk of the entire population, because even the houses that weren’t down were at least unsafe enough to raise eyebrows.

That was all things I considered at the time, before I thought about what buildings would be standing at all. We didn’t need structural integrity, after all. I breathed in and out as the idea slowly came to me. It wouldn’t be occupied, and there would be plenty of room, and there was likely food still frozen, if you were willing to tolerate it, and what choice did I have?

The very idea turned my stomach, actually, but another element of it felt almost… fitting. It was payback for what they’d done.

I grit my teeth and said. “I know where that is?”

“You do?” Rachel asked. She looked at me, and I wondered what she was thinking. I’d ordered her around, and I wondered if that was okay, if she’d trusted me. I knew if she’d thrown her dogs at Behemoth, it would have been a disaster for her. But it had to gall her, it had to go against everything she’d acted like before. She threw herself directly at targets and enemies, she didn’t back down, she just kept on pressing with more force until it worked, and I didn’t even blame her for it.
It’d worked for her before, so of course she’d try it again.

Could she really have trusted me that much? That was another reason I was trembling, some distant fear that I’d offended her, and she’d let me know at the first safe moment. Because I knew what would have happened if Lisa tried to give her an order like that, or anyone else, no matter how well meaning. I didn’t trust it, the idea that I was…

I don’t know what I didn’t trust, just that I didn’t trust in it.

It was a foolish sort of mindset, but it was mine. “Yes. You know Winslow?”

“The school?” she asked, and I didn’t smile beneath my mask, but if I was in someone else’s company, I would have.

“Yeah, the school. Everyone’s gone from it to get into a shelter,” I said. “There’s a few somewhat near the school, but even if they get out of it right now, they’re not going back to school.” Sure, the school, like most public buildings, had to partially Endbringer proof at least a few parts of themselves, so it was probably standing… more or less. But the roads wouldn’t be safe.

I nodded and stretched my hand out, to gesture at the dogs, who were all gathered around, clearly not sure what was happening next. But like sheep following the good shepherd, they trusted in Rachel to see them through, even if no doubt they couldn’t have thought of it that way.

“And there’s room,” I added, now that she was looking at the dogs. “For all of them. No dog food, but there’s meat, and there’s other stuff. It won’t be great for them, but one night, and then we can find…” I trailed off, thinking. “A dog shelter, or something. To… take over. Or make use of. But I don’t know where one is now, and I just want to be somewhere, and know where I’m going.”

It was a cry from the heart, and Rachel nodded after a very long moment. Or it felt like that, but I knew I was racing, weary and exhausted, for any port in a storm: a metaphor that might have meant more if it was Leviathan who’d attacked.

“It wasn’t in the path of this,” I said, not sure which would have been worse. I couldn’t imagine worse happening to my city than what had happened here. “We should get rid of the armbands, though.”

Rachel reached over and took hers off, and then I took mine off. I looked at them for a moment, wondering if I should have explained myself to yet another person.

But no, it wasn’t needed.

The battle was over, and it wasn’t any of their business where I was.

I tossed it aside. I took a breath. It felt almost final in a way, though I knew that them and I weren’t done, we’d never be as long as I was fighting crime and so were they. But I’d worn their armband, and now I wasn’t wearing it.

Rachel stepped forward, and pushed her mask out of the way. “Taylor…” she began. Why was she hesitating.

“Yes?”

“Your Dad,” she said. It was as if she were forcing herself to say the words, or as if she thought I needed to hear them. I looked in her face, rough and sweaty. She looked like a mess, red in the face, and not from blushing. Her lips were drawn taut, her thick nose snorting a little as she breathed.
Her eyes were dark and I stared into them for a moment, struck again. The pictures in my head faded away for a moment, because how could you look at her and not see anything else? Even if you weren’t head over heels and ignoring her every flaw, there was something striking about her, even if it wasn’t attracted. About the way she stared at you. She looked at you and only you with all of her might, as if she had laser vision and was going to do something, when she was angry, or as if she wanted X-ray vision when she wanted to know what you were up to. I knew that it wasn’t just the eyes.

There were other features that probably told me her moods, because eyes were just eyes, after all, but it’s the eyes I noticed, that my conscious mind interpreted, using all of those unconscious cues. And she trusted me, and wasn’t angry at me, or at least, no more than a little frustrated. That’s what her face told me, as open as a…

My mind grasped book first, but were books open? The best ones tested you, they had secret meanings that Mom had unveiled and uncovered. They surprised you. Rachel could, sometimes, but not in the same way. She had her own special way.

“You okay?”

Was I staring? Of course I had been. “No,” I admitted. “Not after… after all of that. Your dogs.”

The pain was real and deep and wrenched, her teeth gritting at that, as she almost growled. “They…”

“We’ll protect the others, and, I think.” I stopped, not sure what I was about to promise. “I won’t forget them. I won’t let anyone forget them,” I said. I had no idea how to do it, just the odd certainty that I’d definitely do it.

“Good,” Rachel said.

“I’m going to gather the bugs, so that we’ll know if anyone is coming to attack us. We need to hurry, though. There’s plenty of time, but I’d rather just… lay around. I know there are couches in the teacher’s lounge, and there’s pillows in this one teacher’s classroom. She uses them to take naps.”

One time a kid had stuck a blunt in her mouth, and then lit it without her waking up. Then, according to her, slipped a tiny baggie of coke into her pants pocket. The administration had believed it, because who carried illegal drugs in their pocket when they went to school as a teacher?

It was a stupid frame-up, which was entirely typical of the class of criminals and scum that haunted Winslow at times.

“Okay,” Rachel said, pulling her mask back on.

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Many bugs had died, but enough survived, and I gathered them about me as we went, spreading them out, creating the net, the web that I was used to having. They’d done little good, except tell me what I already knew about the fight. But now they were vital. We’d wasted a little time going south, and now we were going to have to wind our way through the streets, whose cracks and tilts made it look drunken, until at last we got to Winslow.

People were moving, people were hiding. There was a shelter we passed on the way to Winslow, and then another. They could only hold so many people, but they weren’t as air-tight as they should have been. Heck, they were barely as water-tight as they’d have needed to be, considering I managed to slip bugs in. In one of the shelters, the doors were opened, as if to get in air.
The people were crowded together, stinking, exhausted, clearly out of it, clearly in no mood to stumble out just yet. The food there would last them for up to a week, in theory, though I had a feeling that both of the shelters I passed were over-capacity.

My Dad was in neither of them, that much I managed to figure out after a few minutes of careful consideration. We weren’t riding on the dogs, but just pacing along leisurely. Or so it appeared. Rachel was watching all of them, commanding them to stay and not stray, to not chase the smells, to follow me, at the lead, and yet only half there, not appreciating the scenery, what little there was of it, but anticipating the road ahead.

Now and then, I saw flickers of people moving, running through alleys. Some people were out and about, and I had to assume they were criminals, but I didn’t want to hit them until I was sure, and I didn’t care enough to stop and start some little fight blocks away.

The silence stretched between us, and I wanted to talk to break it, but again I was too busy with the bugs, seeing to our safety.

My bugs, the dogs, we had many lines of defense, and so I should have felt safer. But the people out and about, they were going to be looting. It was inevitable. Heck, what we were doing was probably looting in a sense. Definitely, it wasn’t the prettiest of actions, but the food would go to waste, and we weren’t going to stay more than one night, so I didn’t feel as bad as I should have.

Once we found somewhere to stay for good, we could be heroes, we could stretch ourselves out and get comfortable and make up for any wrongdoings.

It wouldn’t be hard, I thought, looking at Rachel. Or maybe it would be, but I knew that she could do it. We could do it, for that matter.

Power was another thing that was down, I thought, probably in huge chunks of the city, one way or another, with all of the disarray. But Rachel and I were used to not having power, to going to sleep when it got dark, and I knew the school had a backup generator. Part of disaster prep that had never really paid off.

There’d been a hurricane that had hit Brockton Bay once, decades ago. That’s when the generator was from, before capes even were around, if I remembered its history right. Then when capes and Endbringers had come, they’d become even more common and better made.

Little facts like that rattled around in my brain, the result of education and the kind of mind that could remember the best character build in Xeno-War 2. Little details just stuck to me, sometimes, even when they weren’t important.

Greg was even better for little details, and I hoped he was… unhurt at best, but if not, at least alive.

As I approached the school, I began to realize a few things. First, it was not in the best of conditions. Nothing had collapsed, but the parking lot was cracked all over, the bugs seeing that detail rather clearly. And the second floor of the school was now full of holes in some places, the structure wrecked enough that I wouldn’t want to step on it… and in a few of the worst cared for classrooms, the roof had caved in altogether.

The bottom floor, though, seemed relatively intact, even if the inside was possibly a mess of glass. I knew where a janitor’s closet was, and if we could just step over it, we could brush it all out of the way. We were already having to do something like that with the streets, and I knew that even moving at all was a danger.
Still, the school was standing, and so were most of the buildings, including the gym. So that first piece of news, while not great, wasn’t a disaster either. It was something that I could work with, which was more than could be said for a lot of the possible outcomes.

The other thing I realized was that it wasn’t empty. In the school, spread out in handfuls and clumps, were people. Some of them smelled of alcohol, and others were in the nurse’s office, no doubt raiding it for anything that could be made into drugs. My bugs could smell all sorts of things that added up to drugs and alcohol and poverty. Flashes of their appearance—men and women both—seemed to indicate that these weren’t members of the E88 (none of the right tattoos, and too many non-whites among them), except for one cluster in a far building, which was away from the rest, and no doubt unaware, since they were in one of the ‘mobile classrooms’ around back.

So, the Merchants, and a few members of the E88, had busted into school to loot and plunder. I couldn’t guess at the ages of everyone, even with bugs flying around giving me an impression of some general details.

Except, I could tell at least a cluster of them were students from our school that were part of the Merchants. I recognized them, at least vaguely, through the senses of the bugs.

Contrary to hopes, it took a long time to really build up a picture with bugs, because of how much ground there was to cover, and how limited their senses were, but by the time we were half a block away, in sight of the school, I knew where they are were, and I had figured out which of them were drunk or high, and which were armed.

I wondered if any of them were drowning their pain, the way Dad might have been. I had no idea either way, except that some of them were... having intercourse, and that I was keeping my bugs away from these fine examples of future teen pregnancies.

“Rachel,” I said, as we got closer. “There are some Merchants in there. We should take them out.”

“Yeah,” she said. If only I could send them a message from here? But I could attack them, and as I gathered together wasps and bees and fire ants, and stinging flies, I thought of something I could do.

I tried to find the biggest clump of them, ten people, and then I carefully positioned the bugs all around the room, while they were too busy talking.

“Man, this fucking place,” a man said, balding, pale skinned. “How the fuck’d you survive being here all day?”

“Hell if I know,” a girl about my age said with a shrug. I knew her, she was in my math class, actually. She had sat in the back and glowered at the wall, clearly here only because she was made to be.

Little conversations, fragments of people’s lives. I tried to arrange the bugs on the wall, slowly but surely, to form the words ‘Get Out’ but they noticed them too soon, and it was hard to drag all the bugs into the right perspective, because I couldn’t look at them from a distance. All of their senses didn’t tell me anything about how well the bugs were forming the words on the wall, but I hoped it at least looked like words were forming--

“The fuck!” one guy yelled, drawing his gun. The wasps were on him in a moment, and then on all the rest a moment later.

“Taylor?” Rachel asked.

“Sorry, I’m in a fight,” I said. “We should be able to just stroll in, the front door’s been forced open.”
“In a fight?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah, driving them out.”

Not just that group. I started my bugs to biting and swarming all over people, wishing I could somehow communicate with my victims, to tell them what they could do to make it stop. I wasn’t going to kill anyone, I just needed them out of there. So I let the flies stop biting when one of them ran out of the room. Any of the rooms, including the gym, which doubled as the auditorium.

I took a breath, and then once all of them were out of the room, I had the flies buzz over the entrance back in, and then began to bite and sting them again. It was like herding sheep, I thought, as we walked up to the front doors. I could feel some of the groups approach them.

I rewarded going towards the exit, and not just the front exit, with less stinging, but then if they turned back to help their friends, then I punished them for it. It was all so automatic and easy, just total control without even trying. It wasn’t a fight, really.

They couldn’t shoot at the bugs, and even as a small group of them headed for the front entrance, I said, “Rachel, get your dogs in hand. Some people are going to be running out the…”

I glanced, with my actual eyes, rather than with my bugs, and saw four or five men racing for the front entrance, barely noticing us as they hurled out, bees all on them.

They’d long since dropped their weapons, and now they were surrounded by two villains and over a dozen dogs.

I tried to ignore the smell, and said. “Alright, you’re Merchants?”

They were a motley bunch, but one of them nodded. “Uh… yeah,” he added.

“Find your own place,” I said. “And tell Skidmark that he can get bent if he thinks he’s going to get away with taking advantage of the chaos--”

“Bent?” one of the younger of the men asked, as his fellows tried to shush him.

“That he can fuck himself,” Rachel translated.

Well, not exactly, but who was I to correct her on linguistic history?

“Oh.” The one who was taking charge said, “If you try to oppose us, we’ll…”

He trailed off, and Rachel said, her voice hard, and yet strangely curious, “Piss yourself?”

She was staring right at him, and even without the power of her eyes, she was a villain at the head of a group of attack dogs, staring down sodden druggies who’d been stung all over their body, including in places I’d rather not remember.

Just more bad memories to add to the pile. “Leave,” I said, trying to sound forbidding. “Anyone who tries to come back will get stung everywhere.”

They hurried off, and I watched them run, watched other groups see them, and felt all of the movements. I was clearing out the entire school, and because there were no capes, it wasn’t really a problem. My power wasn’t something that could really be fought if you weren’t ready for it, if you weren’t a cape.

It was that simple. Even with capes, I’d fought and done some real damage to them before without
ever directly showing my face. It was only lucky that Rachel didn’t view it as cowardice: it wasn’t as if I hadn’t also fought face to face, when it was needed.

I’d commanded her dogs to murder someone, knowing they wouldn’t succeed, but knowing that’s all it was.

Lung was dead now. He’d been dead for over an hour, probably. Or something.

******

We stepped in, and Rachel went towards the gym as I went to gather things. The lights were on, but dim. The generator wasn’t powerful enough to quite do a very good job, and so there were flickers, as if the power was straining to fill even the rooms that it did. But still, there were lights on, at least for the moment, and Winslow had nice big windows to let more light in, if it failed.

I went from room to room.

Needles, pills, bedding… I took that. Money? They weren’t going to get it back, and it wasn’t much, just quarters and dollar bills, fit to be added to the pile of money we had, maybe enough for a few more lunches than we’d otherwise get. A few thousand dollars went a long way, but it wouldn’t last forever.

But while I was gathering things, or pushing them aside, I ran across alcohol. Beer, Vodka, bottles of wine.

I hesitated, and then not entirely sure why I was doing it, I grabbed a few at random to take into the gym. There, I saw that Rachel was taking the dogs out to poop.

The gym was run-down enough that if they pooped in it, it wouldn’t be out of place. It was a small gym, and as an auditorium it was entirely a failure, unable to fit the whole school body, and the bleachers were broken at places, so that if someone sat in the wrong place, they’d feel the whole thing groaning and creaking, threatening to give way entirely.

It wasn’t even wrong, in a way, I thought, as I began to set things down. When she finally got back in with the last dog, she nodded. The dogs were fanning out, but we had all of the doors closed, including to the locker rooms. There were things to steal down there too, no doubt, but… that’d be stealing from actual students. As it was, I threw down the bedding and also the alcohol.

“What’s that for?” Rachel asked.

I bit my lip, and then realized that maybe I should get out of my costume. “I was thinking, if we needed anything tonight. It’s supposed to be a nightcap, or something?”

“Eh,” Rachel said, which seemed to be her opinion.

I was amused, though of course I didn’t smile. I’d need to keep in that mindset for a while, wouldn’t I? Still, I doubted she’d object if I tried a little bit of each. I was just curious what this was all about, and when I closed my eyes at night, maybe if I was just a little tipsy I wouldn’t think of Endbringers and battles. It seemed worth a try, and so I nodded, and gestured to the locker room. “I’m going to get changed, first, and then we can raid the kitchen.”

“Sounds good.”

Two changes of clothes, both of them jeans and T-shirts. That’s all I had. I’d have to fix that soon enough, but for the moment I got dressed in the locker room.
The locker room hadn’t been destroyed, but it had been altered. There were clothes still in the locker, and open lockers where all of the contents of it had spilled out on the ground, but the floor was concrete, and the lockers were too hardy to be too shaken up. So I found somewhere and I changed, only realizing at the last moment that I hadn’t actually grabbed any spare bras or panties in the desperate race to get out of there.

Well, this was going to be a little gross if I didn’t find some more. But surely someone would… I didn’t know. I gave a mental shrug as I glanced at around, now fully dressed. No socks either, actually, so I knew that in a few days, even if I had clean changes of clothes for everything else, I was going to feel pretty gross.

I’d deal with it, I decided, going back up to see Rachel.

She was sitting on the bleachers, checking over the dogs, one by one, calling them up. A lot of them needed her care, though her powers could do it. Just some water to pour on their paws to get the glass out, and then a little bit of her power restored them. I knew she was going to be busy for quite a while to get through all of them, but that would be that.

“Gonna go grab the food!” I yelled. “It’ll take a while to make it. Do you know where the cafeteria is?”

“No,” Rachel said.

“Ah, well how about I lead you there?” Ladybugs weren’t good for much, but they were pretty, and I had one buzz up to land on her shoulder, and then fly a little way away. “When you’re ready to go, say it to the open air, and then follow that lady.”

“Is it female?” she asked, frowning at it.

Of course she wouldn’t be able to tell. “Male. Female ladybugs are bigger.”

“Huh,” Rachel said, a little confused, from what I could tell of her tone. “Got it.”

I jogged down the halls, and it all felt so empty. People had been here, people had left, and some of them might be injured, though unless the shelter was far away from here, none of them were dead.

The cafeteria was as it always was. Cavernous, huge, and set down. In fact, food was still on some of the tables. There were mealtimes staggered throughout the day, I remembered. Of course there were. If you got all the students in at the same time, there’d be no room for them.

I’d have to be pretty desperate to want to eat four hour old cafeteria food, and so I glanced over at the lunch lines. It was a pretty simple system, really, and a very poor one at that. You had two or three possible orders for the main dish, and then you had sides, and you asked for them and the cafeteria ladies put it all together on a tray and shoved it at you and then went onto the next person.

It was an assembly line, and I knew for sure that all of the food was frozen. Today there had been a turkey or PB&J sandwich, a pot pie, meatloaf, or salad in a plastic tin, where it was probably shipped in. The salads were always chilled, right next to the juices and the milk, down below for kids to pick them up, to add to their meal or… well, in most cases, to not add to their meal, I thought.

The juice should be okay, I decided, reaching down and grabbing a small paper juice-box and opening it up, before taking a sip.

Ah, that hit the spot.
And there was a freezer that had still been powered by the backup generator, that had a bunch of ice-cream in it. They double or tripled the cost it’d be if you bought them at a store, but kids ate that stuff up long before they would have touched one of the iceberg salads that Emma had complained about all the way through Middle School, and which were still the only types of salads they seemed to know existed.

We’d have plenty, at least as long as the generator kept this place powered up.

But I had other game. I made my way into the back. There were places to prepare the food. Some things, even though they were mostly frozen, apparently did take prep work, even if it was mixing together frozen ingredients or the like. And I knew that some things were made fresh, and some of that might be left.

What was the back like? There was a huge freezer, a walk-in model, and there was a large refrigerator, and there were ovens after ovens after ovens, and a few microwaves, though fewer than I thought. I suppose that for safety’s sake, reheating things elsewise would be smarter. And there were boilers and burners, and washing machines, and everything was a little worn down, but because it was all in gun-metal, even a little worn down didn’t look that bad.

In the fridge was fruit, for a fruit salad, and a few other desserts. I needed something to carry all of it, I thought, as I looked around to see if there was any of that turkey. It hadn’t been packaged slices, or at least it’d looked a little more lively than that… more something gotten from a very cheap deli. There was probably one nearby.

And there it was.

And they didn’t use frozen bread, and there was no point freezing peanut butter and jelly, so there was some Jif, some Wonder Bread, and some Welsh’s grape jelly. So I could make sandwiches for us too, given time.

Not a lot of time, at that, I thought, trying to get it all together in my head. The turkey for the dogs. We didn’t need much, though my stomach ached as if I’d run a marathon. Stress had burned through a lot.

So, I made myself a PB&J, and ate it, as I laid out the meat, more and more of it, on a big baking tray, the better to carry it. And then I made a few more sandwiches, and got a bowl for the fruit, and by then it was all but full. That’d do for then, I decided, glancing at the freezer. If this were some real disaster, if we had to make do with what there was, we could go weeks and weeks, the two of us, on the things squirreled away here.

But we didn’t need much. I carried the tray, piled with turkey and sandwiches, trying not to tilt it at all. I stopped at the cooler, and grabbed two milks, and another juice, and then grabbed two ice-cream sandwiches.

My bugs were buzzing and moving around on the outside of the school, the whole place was under my observation, and so a ladybug lifted off to let her know she was needed.

And then, just to be safe, I piled another tray up with slices of turkey, with more juices, more ice-cream sandwiches. Just a secondary tray.

Rachel arrived just as I was finishing the second tray, having gotten out of her costume, or at least the mask. She looked at the meat, and I could see the hunger there.

“It’s mostly for the dogs,” I said. “We have enough for everyone, but… be sparing. It needs to last, at
least a little.”

She nodded, pulling off the gloves, and grabbing some of the turkey with her fingers. It probably wasn’t very hygienic, but she at least made sure not to get her fingers over the whole thing. Instead she brought it up to her mouth and gobbled it down.

“Try the milk, to wash it down,” I said, leaning in. I pressed my lips against hers. She tasted like turkey, and she returned the kiss, wrapping her arms around my head for the few moments we were kissing.

Then I pulled away, and gestured at all of that. “Plenty for you and me?”

“Should be enough.”

*****  

The dogs were glad for the food, but even gladder for the attention. Now wasn’t the evening to read a book together, not when we had so many other things to do. If I needed, I could always shower, so I didn’t hesitate to play around with the dogs, once they’d eaten. I tried to check in on all of them.

First because it’d make Rachel happy, and second because I cared. I went down the mental checklist, dog by dog, each with their own personality. Sure, there were a lot of elements in common, but dogs were smart enough, and unique enough, to be really distinctive.

But running down the list left two names not there, and I winced at that feeling of loss, which would only be doubled and trebled if a person died. But it was very real, that leaden feeling.

More lost, more lost, and those lives, so very--

I went and looked at the open bottle of wine. At least they’d opened it. It was red, and I had put it up on the bleachers, out of the way of dogs, who couldn’t drink alcohol.

I climbed up. “Rachel,” I asked, looking down on her from above, “What’s wine like? Any good?”

“Eh.”

That was enough of an endorsement, I decided. “Do you want to drink with me? We have blankets now, and I can grab some pillows, and we can make an evening of it. It’s… not really that time yet. But it’s past noon.”

It stuck to me, that saying, ‘It’s past noon somewhere.’ Was noon important to alcohol? If it was, then I couldn’t be said to be doing that much wrong. Just a sip, or maybe a gulp. Maybe two, with company.

I wondered what it had done for Dad, or what it could do. I was curious, and I was almost sixteen, and it wasn’t as if I hadn’t seen plenty of other people drink at around my age. Sure, some of them were Merchants… but plenty of them weren’t. I wasn’t exactly law abiding and…

The truth was, I knew these were excuses, but I wanted to try it, and so I was going to, and I was hoping that it’d help me sleep.

“Sure,” she said, clambering up to the bleachers, but then pulling some of them out, so that a few dogs could, if they were a little adventurous, get up to us.

“We can eat with it, so that it’s not as bad,” I said, glancing around. The clock had fallen down, and
so I couldn’t know what time it was. Sometime after five? That was my guess, but that left a lot of hours in the day it could be.

“Sounds good,” Rachel said.

She reached over, grabbing a bottle of what looked to be… lemonade, maybe? Hard lemonade. She gave it a sip, and made an adorable face, before passing it to me. I took bigger sip, and wrinkled my nose. This tasted like lemonade, but worse, which was a bad thing. But I gave it a second, bigger sip, and it tasted a little better once I was used to it. “Huh,” I said. “This isn’t such a big deal. Rachel… we’re still alive.”

“Yes,” Rachel said, as if she understood what I meant.

“I… we lost two dogs, but we could have lost far more, if we hadn’t gotten them. And we’re all still here. Do you still want to be a hero with me? We could fight the Merchants, make sure they don’t fuck things up?”

“I do,” she said, leaning in.

She was warm, I thought, as I leaned into her. Though so was I. It was a sort of floaty warmness, and I grabbed a PB&J to eat while I passed the bottle back to her.

She took another small sip, and while I was eating I gestured over to my backpack. “We could play games, or we could… talk, you know? I mean, I watched someone die.”

It was hard to swallow the peanut butter, it was like there was a lump in my throat. “I don’t want to…”

“I didn’t run, immediately. I looked at her. The step mom.” Rachel gave an expansive shrug, letting me picture just how horribly dead the woman would have been. She looked away, but there I was, right next to her, and I pressed myself into her. Her body into mine. There wasn’t that much soft about her, but there was still something comforting about just being next to her. Something firm about her, and yet I knew that there was softness to her. Gentleness. I knew her body well enough to know its weaknesses, the places I could touch that would drive her wild, and its comforts in more than just some general sense. I knew her… intimately. And stuff. I took a long chug and then set it down to grab for the wine.

I was already tipsy.

“Oh. I… my Dad. I ran away from him. I shouldn’t fucking run, should I?”

“We ran from Behemoth,” she said, and for a moment I was sure it was an accusation.

“We had to.”

“Did you have to run from your Dad?” Rachel asked. Not as if she had made a decision, but as if she wanted to know. She looked at me with those dark eyes, and combined with the slight haze over me, already, it was helping.

“I dunno. Maybe. It just happened, and I’d do it again. But if he’s dead… fuck. That’s my plan. Tomorrow. I’ve thought about it.” My words were coming quick. The wine didn’t taste that good either, but it was nice and sweet in its own way. “We look for my Dad, and if we can’t find him, then the next thing we gotta do is find… I remember seeing that there was this one dog shelter near Merchant territory, right?”
“Yes,” Rachel said, talking far slower than I was, as she grabbed the bottle and took another one of those baby sips. She really should have a bit more. It was pretty good, once you got used to the dreamy, drifting feeling. It felt like, if I kept up the drinking, I’d finally be able to talk to her. It was that sensation of being loosed from my bonds. Like I wasn’t trapped, and couldn’t ever be trapped.

“Well, we go there. We offer to protect them, in exchange for letting us keep the dogs there, and then we find somewhere nearby, or maybe find somewhere in the shelter to hole up in. It’s big, right?”

“Yeah, pretty big,” Rachel said with a note.

“There we go!” I said, cheerfully. “Once we’re there, we keep the Merchants out and figure out what we do next. How’s that sound? Together.”

“What if you find your Dad?”

“I make up with him, then shelter,” I said. I wasn’t going to go back with him, no matter what he said. Not anytime soon. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Oh, good,” Rachel said, sounding a little drowsy. Maybe alcohol put her to sleep?

Certainly, she was probably less of a lightweight than I bet I was, already tipsy. I reached for the bottle. Maybe a little more.

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“Huh, I…” I chuckled, “Really suck at this game drunk.”

“Taylor,” Rachel said. “Duh.” She looked so amused, looking at me smugly and at most slightly tipsy. Me, on the other hand? The room wasn’t spinning, that’d be a bad sign, but the world did feel like it was wobbling under me. Brutus was sniffing at the food, but Rachel kept him away, other than feeding him a little bit of the meat left.

“Am I that drunk?”

“Kinda, yeah,” Rachel said. She leaned in, having parted ways with me. That wasn’t a good thing. I frowned, and took another drink. It wasn’t a good thing at all.


“What?”

“I mean, I’m me, and I’m all… me-like.” I paused, and took a breath, feeling both happy and sad at the same time, the two emotions warring in me, occasionally broken up by the dim intercessions of the dead and the living who might be dead.

“Huh?”

“I talk a lot. And really fast. And I like video games and books and science fiction and stuff, and you don’t. I don’t know what you like, besides me and the dogs, really. You like meat, and you like the books I read, but…”

“I like you.”

“Good,” I said. “I really… really love you. I want to be your girlfriend but--”

I paused, startled that I’d just said it. Then I giggled. It was easy to just blame it on the alcohol. I
could blame it on that, and just not have to think about how long I’d been trying to say it.

“Huh?” Rachel asked.

“You know… like. Official and all. I mean, I know if you wouldn’t want me, but I like you a lot, and I like… being with you. And *fucking you.*”

Rachel’s eyes widened, and I realized with amusement that I barely kept from ending in a smile, that she had thought that ‘being with you’ was the sex. Because I usually danced around saying it outright.

But I did. I liked fucking Rachel Lindt. News at eleven! I giggled a little more, trying to cover my mouth as I did, crawling over towards her.

“Huh,” she said, more thoughtfully now. “I thought we were already--”

“What? Dating? I mean, why would you think that?”

I frowned, annoyed, and reached a hand out to stroke her upper thigh a little. “But we haven’t really, like…”

“What’s dating?” Rachel asked. She was frowning at me.

“Giving each other gifts and going out together and… just.”

“We go out for dinner all the time.”

I felt thwarted, and it was annoying. She had a point, but it couldn’t be that simple. Dating was a big deal, there was supposed to be some… some feeling or something when you were dating that you didn’t feel when you weren’t.

It wasn’t fair that it was so easy for her. That she didn’t get this.

I puffed out my cheeks, “Really?”

“We do,” Rachel said, and now she was baffled.

“I mean, you don’t want to…”

“What?”

The dogs were down there, and I suddenly wished I could just leap off the seating and be among them and not have to answer the question. “Date?”

“Uh, sure.”

She just… ugh. I felt a little sick, I thought. I’d better eat some more ice-cream before I drink anything else. Something to get on my stomach, that was… good right?

“Do you wanna… right now?” I asked, trailing off, looking at her. Then I added, because maybe she didn’t get it. Right? Maybe? Sure. “Fuck?”

She looked back at me, right in my eyes. Maybe it’d help a little, with forgetting. I could be very good at forgetting if only I had some practice.

“Taylor. You’re drunk.”
“And?” I asked. “It’s not like we haven’t…” I began.

Rachel shook her head, and I looked at her and wanted to know what I could say. I was starting to regret the alcohol, and how it made me feel. It wasn’t making anything better, though for a time it’d seemed like it had.

Fuck, I thought, savoring the coarse word.

“No. Maybe tomorrow. I don’t feel like it.”

“Oh,” I said.

I leaned against her, and took another small sip of the wine and put it down. Then I hugged her tight, having somehow wound up on the bleacher, laying on top of her, and tried not to let go.

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At eight o’clock, she held my hair. I vomited, miserable and sick and far too unused to alcohol to have even tried this. This was stupid, and I shouldn’t have...

Yet somehow, when I went to sleep that night, I didn’t have the deaths in my mind. I was exhausted and out of it and humiliated and still slightly tipsy, but I did eventually drag myself off into sleep.

******

The next morning, I longed to have taken back the last few hours. How did Dad ever do something like this and not hate himself in the morning?

I’m grouchy and exhausted and I suppose I’ve learned a lesson, somehow, because I dump the alcohol out. It didn’t work as well as I hoped. Not even close.

“You wanna chill this morning?” Rachel asked. She’d been quiet, and surprisingly understanding, or at least… she hadn’t said that I should have known better, even though I should have.

“No…” I said, trying not to dry heave again. All of the aspirin in the world wasn’t enough. “I’m... we have to find Dad.”

“Ok,” she said.

“Just... give me a little bit.”

“You want breakfast?” Rachel asked.

I consulted my stomach.

“No... maybe not.”

Ugh.

Chapter End Notes

In which Taylor tries, and rejects, an unhealthy coping mechanism.
Sorry for the pause! I just got busy and tired and there's life nonsense that I know none of you are interested in, but here it is.
When I was drunk, my bugs tended to find walls to hunker down. It was because they conveyed sensations, they did things, and when I was drunk I couldn’t deal with it, I didn’t want to. They’d kept watch, if I had wanted to pay attention to that, but they’d been as sluggish as I was.

I remembered giggling, I remembered being in a good mood at some point, but the morning after, when I suited up clumsily and went out on an empty stomach, I could not remember the details, I could not imagine them either. It was all a bit of a blur, in ways that were mostly bad.

Being drunk hadn’t been all bad, I remembered the talk we’d had, and that was something. I just needed to nail it down, to make it official. Maybe I’d do so when I didn’t feel that bad?

My head felt like someone had beaten it about for a full hour, and I was aching, tired, crabby. I knew that I wasn’t much of a friend or girlfriend that morning as we went out, but I was active at least.

For now I wanted my bugs agitated, going everywhere and doing everything, so that I could slowly divorce myself from my own body, so that I could ignore the sickness. It was a surprisingly effective tactic. I wondered how much I could throw away, cast aside in focusing on other things. It helped calm my mind, and it helped ease pain, if only in the same way reading a book eased boredom. It allowed me to devour the pain, the stress, the uncertainty, in a way that I realized was effective in its own way.

A little distance could change a lot, I thought, though thinking was still hard through the headache.

But I could still feel for blocks and blocks around. The dogs were coming with us, and that in itself called us out. Rachel didn’t have any leashes, and that itself was a problem, though with as many dogs as there were, the leashes would have gotten tangled before too long. It slowed us down, though, having to call them back and call them around.

It really was going to be hard work, getting them all to one place, but once we all settled down, it’d be better.

The city looked new, but not in a good way. It was just as transformed today as it was before, but now the lack of activity was obvious. We saw people, or rather my bugs did, but they moved carefully. There were no cars on the road, and so we walked at the side, or right in the center, because my bugs were spread out in case someone hurried through.

There were parts of the city that were still intact enough that people still had to drive, but there was no work after all of this, I bet.

The people moving through and around were Merchants, some of them, but plenty of them were just survivors. I knew that eventually the city would have to come back to life, but at the moment it was hung over like me, tired and annoyed and trying to get through the day. We went towards the docks, because it was a work-day, so if we were going to find Dad, he’d be that way.

It was a long walk, so we were going to be spending a lot of time out in the sun. At least it wasn’t raining, and at least we could count on plenty of time to look. Even though I’d been hung over, my body had forced me to wake up at only a little after five. So even after all of that time trying to get ready and to ignore the gross way I felt, it still wasn’t much past seven.
It was going to be real summer soon, summer on the Bay. It was a lovely time, and I’d loved it even more because it was always respite from the trio. I supposed that in theory I could have to see them again. Sophia, Emma, Madison, they were like bad pennies, of course they’d turn up, and then I’d have to turn up for school if I didn’t want to be a bad person.

Except I’d get a GED. I’d leave no marks, no tracks for them to sniff out. I’d disappear, and reappear, if I could afford it—probably not, but we’ll see—in college, when the time came. It would be that simple, a vanishing act, and they’d be left to oppress someone else.

I knew that Emma would find someone, she was always like that, and I’d never met a person more inclined to bully and hurt and hound someone than Sophia. She’d chase someone down if kicking them gave her sport, and so I was clear, and yet not clear. I wondered if the book of deeds was still there, the one I’d been writing. Perhaps I could still try to go against them: but then, would the Principal care?

I wondered, had Sophia been pressed side by side with Greg, in whatever shelter they had hurried off to? It couldn’t be far, and yet we’d passed an empty shelter or two.

Shelters were going to give way to camps for a while, I knew, to camps where people would crowd together and try to figure out what next. And then one by one they’d leave, once the insurance came in, if it came in, and if it didn’t they’d either move out or find somewhere small and new, with cheap rent.

I didn’t know how many people that Brockton Bay would bleed, just from people moving away, but I knew it was more than the city would be able to afford. People were dead whose skills were needed, and money didn’t come from nowhere. But what else was there to do? People had to make a living, they had to have a job, or if not, they needed help. And how long could the city afford to help people, with all of the money that was going to be pouring out?

I didn’t know.

I understood what was going to happen, and it was a strange feeling, because I felt a little like my Dad. Helpless and resigned. But I wasn’t Dad. I couldn’t stop the… what would one of his impact papers (or restoring the Ferry have called it?) I couldn’t stop the “Macroeconomic factors” but I could fight the Merchants. I could protect the city from the gangs that would spring up to take advantage of Brockton Bay’s state.

I hoped I could.

So as I was going along, eventually I started noticing scenes. People running away from other people. People threatening others, not even aware I could see them. I sent my bugs after the attackers, unless I could make out details that indicated it was a bad idea. Both the attackers and the people attacked ran away in terror when a swarm of wasps, or bees, went after someone. It was only natural.

At some point, I was going to have a fight that didn’t feel like no effort at all, but compared to the impossibility of doing anything with Behemoth, fights that were over before I’d gotten within two blocks of them were just fine with me.

A shout, a scream, the smell of desperation and fear (they smelled a little like urine), and then the fight was done, and onto the next one. I felt powerful, in control, as if I was making a difference, and if I hadn’t had as much practice, it might have been hard to keep a smile from my face. We were looking for Dad, but it felt like the more we saved people, the more likely we’d run across him.
Which didn’t make sense, but there it was.

Instead, I found someone else.

“Uhh,” the voice said, as my bugs swarmed around the area discreetly. He was backed up against a wall, and three people were currently glaring at him, each of them dressed in a ratty sort of way that had probably been part of their costume even before the city had been hit by an Endbringer. They weren’t Merchants, though, not unless Merchants were white men covered in tattoos that I couldn’t make out well with my bugs—except for, on one shoulder, what vaguely looked like an 88.

Which kinda settled it.

“You fucking crossed us,” one of them said, and I realized that he’d been at school too. In fact, he’d been at school the day before. He still had the bug bites on him, from when we’d driven him out of the trailer and away and further away.

“Rachel,” I said, three blocks away. “We need to rescue someone.”

“Huh?”


Why was Greg there? I was trying to sound breezy, when honestly my heart was racing and I was already starting to sweat.

“Oh, him?” Rachel didn’t ask what he was doing there, which was a good thing, because I had no idea why. Shouldn’t he be at a camp?

In fact, shouldn’t he be out of the city by now? Because his Mom was the sort of person with the money and the mindset to drag him out of Brockton Bay at the first sign of trouble, even if she’d eventually have to come back because of her job.

The thought spread slowly, a sort of clamminess in my hands at first, as my body and my subconscious seemed to realize it before I’d made the connection.

Greg’s Mom, who worked in the business district. Maybe she was okay, but maybe she was dead, and even if she was okay, she was probably in no state to pick him up. She could be hurt, or she could be herded up into one of the disaster camps, but either way he was probably something like on his own.

But that didn’t explain why he was here, rather than huddling in some shelter or temporary camp and wishing he had brought his cards with him.

If he had risked harm and danger just to get a bunch of trading cards, then I was going to be very angry with him. As it was, I was more angry at the skinheads who were about to beat up my friend. One of my only friends, which meant that it was especially heinous.

A part of me wanted to gather the bugs in front of him. The boy that I’d stung before would realize what was going on, and then he’d probably run away, and it’d save everyone a lot of pain and suffering.

But as we began to fast walk along towards the scene, and as Greg began to blubber and beg, clearly desperate and out of sense:

“Uh please! Please don’t! Uh! P-ple… I am defenseless!”
Wait.

He seemed afraid, but not afraid enough, his voice not quavering enough. I’d watched scary movies
with him this one time, when we’d gone together to see a new movie. As friends.

Plus, he was a really bad actor.

So I wasn’t surprised when he didn’t react to a sudden swarm of wasps I’d been moving into
position, as they went straight for the E88. They screamed, but I was headed towards them, so I
knew they weren’t going to escape.

I grit my teeth, baring them to the world, thinking that they deserved it. They deserved it, for crossing
me twice in as many days. I didn’t stop stinging them just because they huddled on the ground,
smelling even more of… desperation. I didn’t stop until they’d either run away or passed out, and
Greg just watched it all, trembling more now than he’d been when he was faking like he was a
damsel in distress, when the truth was that he had to have noticed the bugs and made a guess that I
was here to save him.

Though not here anytime soon. The whole ‘fight’ took a few dozen seconds, and it’d still probably
be quite a few more minutes until I reached him. I saw him give a vague thumbs up in the direction
of my wasps. One of the people was still there, unconscious, but the other two had run.

My bugs stuck around, buzzing, because I didn’t want him to leave. I wanted to talk to him. He
wasn’t safe on his own, that much was pretty obvious after what had just happened.

Rachel didn’t question it, didn’t say anything about Greg. She’d never met him before, and I
wondered what she’d think of him. Or what he’d think of her. Certainly, neither of them was
exactly… well, they weren’t each other’s sort of people, as far as it went. Then again, I was a girl
who read books and talked about sci-fi and played video games, so it wasn’t as if she wasn’t used to
dealing with those sort of people.

Or at least one of them.

As for Greg? I knew he meant well, but I could imagine him blurt out stupid things, or smiling
way too much, even if I found a way to explain to him why it was a really bad idea. That was just
how Greg was, and maybe it should change, but it wasn’t going to do so anytime soon.

People changed, but rarely in the simple, easy way that I might have wanted. I’d changed, Dad had
changed, Emma had changed. I’d seen far more negative change than positive change, in my life.

“Rachel, I’m sorry for dragging us out of the way, but he can’t be left alone, anymore than you’d
leave one of your dogs to fend for himself on these streets,” I said.

“Yeah,” she agreed, as if she understood that logic, or maybe just how I’d presented it.

So we walked along, the dogs having to be herded the whole way, and I tried to calm down, to not
feel like it was the moment before a trap sprung. But how could I not feel that, at least a little.

The dogs were hard to keep all together, but I left that to Rachel, and when I finally saw Greg with
my own eyes, he perked up. “T--!” he threw his hands over his mouth. “Arachne!”
That was better, I thought. “What are you doing here, Greg?” I asked.

Rachel stepped in just behind me, and with her, the dogs. Sirius, who was always excitable, started barking at Greg.

Greg flinched, as if it were an attack. It wasn’t, really. He’d know what an attack was like. But once Sirius started barking, a few of the other dogs decided they needed to get in on it.

“I… uh. My Mom. I was going to try to look for her. She was… working. When the Endbringer came. I don’t know if she was able to evacuate or anything.” He bit his lip, looking terrified. “I heard that the whole area got destroyed.”

“We saved the shelters in that direction,” I said. “I’m sure she’s fine.” I had to say that, of course, because the alternative was to tell a boy that his mother might be dead. But I believed it, sort of. She and her whole office weren’t dead, that much was obvious, but it was always possible for something to go wrong.

The death toll, for the civilians, was less than it might have been with some of the other Endbringers, when we had time to evacuate people, but… it existed, and it was far too many. I looked at Greg for a moment. His clothes were ruffled and worn in, and he stank as bad as both of us probably did.

“I… I hope so! Um, is this… Bitch?”

“Yeah,” Rachel said, crossing her arms as the dogs kept up the racket. They weren’t moving, they’d been trained when and when not to attack, even the ones that weren’t ready to fight with her yet.

“Uh.” He cleared his throat. “Thank you for saving me. And… uh. Thanks for being nice to my friend.” Greg flushed, looking down, shuffling his feet a little. “She’s really happy because of--”

“Greg,” I said, glad that my face was covered, since I knew that I lit up like a stop light whenever I was really blushing.

“Oh, sorry.” He waved his hands in front of him like he was about to fly off, and looked away.

“Oh,” Rachel said, then shook her head.

“Oh, so, you two have met. Now, Greg, we can’t exactly…” I had to pause, as the barking got too loud for us to talk over it, and Rachel turned to shush the dogs. “Where were you going?”

“I thought, maybe, if I could find my Mom’s house, then I could grab stuff and then… maybe she’d.” He stopped, and I realized what he’d been about to say, before he realized how dumb it was. Maybe she’d be there? Even if she was completely okay, she wasn’t going to be able to make it back to her house today. But he’d just been hoping that if he showed up, she’d be there, the same way she’d always been, sooner or later.

Pity twisted at my stomach, tugged at my forebrain, though it was dulled by the fact that my father was under the same kinds of risks. I didn’t know what I’d do, but now I had someone else to look after, on top of Dad.

Greg looked like someone who needed the help, and I was driven in part by pity when I said. “Come with us. Temporarily. Rachel, can we swing by his house? And mine? Just so we can… no. We need some way to carry it.”

I sighed, annoyed. With enough time, I could make some sort of saddle or pack so that a dog amped up by Rachel could serve as a pack mule. I knew that it might be a little undignified, but considering
how the roads and the city as a whole was not going to be seeing a ton of car traffic anytime soon…

It made sense. But it was yet another thing that I couldn’t begin now. I wanted to go and check on the house, I wanted to do a lot of things.

“No?” Greg asked.

I looked over at Rachel. “Well, the next step would be to go to the dog shelter. If you want to tag along, I promise we’ll find somewhere safe for you to stay.”

“Oh?” Greg asked.

“Rachel,” I said. “I’m sure we can find something, and it’s not safe for him out here.”

She shrugged, and I wondered at her thoughts, behind that mask. But at the least, she seemed to be agreeing, because I knew that in this case a shrug was enough.

“Great! I promise I won’t be too loud and won’t talk too much, though I have a few questions.”

“Such as?”

“What was it like? What happened? What did you do? I was so worried about you, you know. Um, uh… oh! The shelter. It was pretty bad. All of the people were stuffed in there, including Emma and her hanger ons… actually, I didn’t see Sophia.”

Greg frowned, looking baffled, and I tried to think about why he hadn’t seen her.

“Did you look for her?”

“Heck no! I was sorta glad, but Taylor, I think they guessed at some of it.”

“Some of what?” I asked.

“Um, they kept on guessing, and I might have reacted to what they said when Emma started…”

I took a deep breath, trying not to be too frustrated with him, and said, “Please explain while we walk. We’re going to a dog shelter to see if we can get help for our dogs. Maybe find somewhere to stay temporarily. Anything you know will be really important.”

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So he told me what happened. I stuck close to Rachel, who was leaning against me as we continued our endless quest to keep the dogs from sniffing everything or running off in the wrong direction. I didn’t feel comfortable doing more than being close to her, as long as there was company.

I should have been continuing on down to the docks, but now that I’d found Greg, I didn’t want to force him to march around in our wake. Surely if nothing else, the shelter would agree to let Greg just sit in their office for a little while, safe and sound, while I figured out what to do next. There was still plenty of day left, though because we were walking with so many dogs, and on foot, the morning was really starting to wear down.

It was silent, other than his talking, and then babbling. I occasionally saw capes passing overhead, but without cars to go on the road, there was an odd sort of peace and quiet. I wasn’t used to it, and I didn’t like it.

The sky seemed broken, the city humbled and humiliated, and yet Greg kept talking as if nothing had
We picked our way around broken glass and shook up intersections, and I kept on noting who was there and who wasn’t. Anyone fighting someone else, I tried to see who they were. If they weren’t gang-bangers, I always sided with them. It wasn’t hard, really. Most people, though, were huddled up, either in shelters or in their homes, which were very run down in this area, just about shading into the apartments and tenements that were this area’s main architectural contribution.

We passed liquor stores and convenience stores, their windows smashed, their stock already looted by the time we reached them. They looked a little sad, the neon light halfway broken, or all the way broken, but advertising alcohol, or sales, or… all sorts of things.

The buildings were sad, small things, overshadowed by the apartments in the distance, and I tried not to pay too much attention to the people cowering in some of the buildings, some of the small houses. There was someone in what looked like a very, very small approximation of an apartment in the back of one of the small, local stores, the door locked, holing up fearfully.

There were so many people, and a lot of them were in a bad way, and it wasn’t likely to get much better soon.

But we couldn’t do anything. Even if we had a way to carry it, all of the food and supplies we’d found at Winslow wouldn’t do more than tide them over. They’d have to kick their own way out of their problems, at least until the Protectorate get involved. I wondered where they were, what they were doing. The people flying overhead seemed to imply that there were non-local capes still hanging about, but for how long?

I knew that in the aftermath of an Endbringer, there was help provided by out of town people… but I also knew there were limits. Most people had their own homes to protect, so I didn’t know how long a bunch of flying capes would be around to help out. Certainly their mobility would have been really nice right about now.

But the ability to monitor everything within three blocks was certainly worth a lot, so it wasn’t as if I was being robbed, just because I couldn’t sail through the air majestically.

When we got closer to the shelter, that’s when I noticed that yet again, things were wrong. More people were brandishing weapons and talking to a closed door. Yelling at it in fact.

The shelter, seen through the eyes of bugs, was this huge, blocky thing, square and squat and ugly, with a chain-link fence around back and plenty of ground for dogs to run and romp. But from the people who were trying to force their way in around the back, it was pretty clear that the people of the shelter had basically locked themselves in when trouble came.

The windows had all broken, and at places so too had the concrete, but against expectations, that square, squat building had mostly stood up to the aftershocks. At least enough that I didn’t think it’d be coming down, even if it’d was even uglier now.

The dogs were all howling and barking, almost drowning up the demands.

“Open up! It’s tax time!” a young man yelled, pounding on the door. “Just a dozen, and we’ll go for now.”

For now.

“Rachel,” I said, having realized that I’d stopped paying attention to Greg’s stream of words, which had switched at some point to talking about video games with Rachel. Or rather, talking about video
games at Rachel. “There are Merchants at the gates of the dog shelter. I’m going to try to work on clearing them out.”

“Got it.” Rachel glanced over at her dogs, and called out, “Brutus. Come.”

The other dogs turned, but it wasn’t their name, and so Brutus approached her. She was going to charge up some of her dogs anyways, just in case this became a real fight. I knew I could take them out before I even arrived, though it was still a little way before I’d even be able to see them. That was one of the weird parts of my powers.

The flies got there first, as I tried to get the wasps and the bees into the area. I was spread thin, and that meant that they had time to reaction.

I bit and stung at them, while they shouted and gunshots filled the air, one after another, as if I was anywhere nearby.

We marched forward, three people and a lot of dogs, towards a fight that was going to be finished before we even arrived.

The details were boring, and rather typical, honestly. It bored me so much I almost wanted to be more directly involved in the fight.

To summarize: dozens of stinging insects, including bees, vs a few gangbangers who had absolutely nobody to attack, and nothing they could do. It was entirely one sided and of no consequence one way or the other.

Except that at about the end of the fight, when they started to run, one of them collapsed.

My bugs had seen something coming towards him, and a moment later, she entered my range.

It was Pelter, the cape I’d saved from before. She advanced steadily on them, still in her costume from what the bugs could tell, and they scattered. They’d already been going to be getting out of there as fast as possible, but her presence probably helped.

What was she doing here? I began to speed up, because I wasn’t sure if she wouldn’t just run away, when I really wanted to talk to her. I assumed she was trying to fight crime, and the Merchants, but was there somewhere nearby that she was staying?

There was only so fast I could go, but luckily she moved towards the door. She knocked on it once, twice, and the door slowly opened to reveal a thin, almost skeletal woman holding a handgun up as if she was still learning how to use it.

She had thin, blonde hair, and watery blue eyes, and she shuffled forward. If she’d had any sleep in the last day, I’d be surprised. “Are you…”

“Pelter,” the girl said. “A hero. I’m… thinking we’re going to have company soon.”

The other woman tensed, but didn’t slam the door. “Who?”

“Those bugs,” Pelter said. “There’s a hero called Arachne who has to be pretty close, if her bugs are here. I think? She can control them.” She turned around. “If you’re here, come out!”

I shook my head. Of course Pelter didn’t know how far away I could be and still attack. She only knew I controlled bugs because that was common knowledge, and she’d seen me do so.
“What?” Greg asked.

“Nothing. We need to get there in a hurry.”

The bugs gathered together, flying in the air, those that could, and Pelter shrugged. “I… I don’t know where she is. But… I don’t think she’s hostile. Tell me what happened.”

“I was at the shelter, trying to help the dogs. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do, if Behemoth hit, but--”

“You wanted to help the dogs that much?” Pelter asked, sounding incredulous, her intonation rising. “You could have died. But..”

Pelter’s voice sounded a little more thoughtful. “If Arachne’s with who I think, you might have friends.” She let out a sigh. “So, you have dogs in there, what else?”

“Uh, well, it’s just me and two other assistants. And a lot of dogs. I… they wanted the dogs.”

“Why?”

“Dog fighting,” the woman said. “I’m, I’m Shelley.”

“Dog fighting? Isn’t that the E88’s…”

“Okay, there’s another cape there,” I said, as I listened to them talking.

“Who?” Rachel asked.

“Pelter. And there’s a girl, Shelley, there with herself and two others and a bunch of dogs,” I said.

“Pelter?” Greg asked, sounding confused.

“Cape we met and saved,” I said, absently. “Apparently the Merchants were trying to muscle in on E88 territory.”

Rachel tensed, and I could almost hear her growling as she considered that. “But they’ve been run off for now. And now they’re talking about the E88 and the Merchants.”

“So, I guess so…” Shelley admitted. “Maybe I should leave, but then what happens to the dogs? And all of us agree, it’s too important to just leave up to the kinds of people here…”

“I know you feel that way, but…” Pelter began.

I had my bugs begin to make a little more noise as we got within a quarter block of them, and when we rounded the corner, Pelter turned in that direction and saw us.

She was still dressed in her rough, clearly homemade, costume, though compared to Shelley, she looked positively all-together.

Behind me came Rachel, Greg, and the dogs. I’d taken the lead, by a little bit, and I strode forward, my bugs sweeping around to hover in the air above me as I advanced.

“Pelter,” I said. “Good to see you. Sorry, it takes time to get here.” I glanced over at where the unconscious Merchant was lying. “But we had them well in hand.”

“Arachne! It’s good to see you,” Pelter said. I could almost imagine the smile, though luckily her
costume hid it, so perhaps she wouldn’t accidentally unnerve Rachel. “And you too, Bitch.”

“Bitch?” Shelly asked, and then saw the dogs. “What’s going on?”

“We were headed this way,” I said. “To ask if we could keep our dogs here for a while.” I gestured towards them, and then towards Bitch. “We had to evacuate them after Behemoth came our way, and we have something that you need.”

“What?” Shelly asked.

“Muscle,” I said, a little dramatically. “If we’re staying here, or our dogs are, then it gets a lot harder for people like that to attack you.” I listened to the dogs barking and added. “Plus, Bitch is pretty good with dogs, she could probably help out at the shelter.”

“Oh,” Shelly said. “Well, maybe. We’d have to talk about it, but we have room for more dogs. At least for now. If we go out to rescue some of them, we’re going to wind up overcrowded, but we have plenty of room. This was meant to be… well, the idea is that we were going to take on more dogs once we busted up the E88’s dog-fighting ring, but… it didn’t happen.”

“That’s these dogs,” I said, gesturing backwards. “We took care of that last month.”

“Yeah, well, the Protectorate hinted to the mayor that they were going to crack down on the E88 a year and a half ago, and this was meant to be one of the bene-whatever.” She shrugged, rubbing her eyes, her voice dragging itself downward with every phrase, as if she was struggling to stay awake. “Benefits?” Pelter offered.

“Uh, yeah.” Shelly sighed. “So, you want to stay here?”

“For a little bit, at least,” I said. “If it’d be possible without causing too many problems. We don’t need much, just some pillows and a blanket or two. Or a couch.” I shook my head. “Either way, we need somewhere for our dogs.”

“Well,” Pelter said. “If you want somewhere to stay, about… three blocks away, there’s a camp. Sort of. It’s not official, but Legend did come around and give us a communication device. They might evacuate us later, but I had to help them out. Who else is going to?” Pelter shifted a little, uncomfortably.

“Not official?” I asked.

“There’s no camps near here, but… a lot of the old buildings were messed up,” Pelter said, shaking her head. “And, uh. There’s this camping supply store that this old guy owned. He just took all the stuff off his shelf and took it home with him, because…”

She shrugged, and I read a story in that. “Uh, and he agreed to share it out?”

“Yes,” Pelter said, firmly. “He agreed. So, I’m looking after a sorta-camp for the moment, and…”

“What?” Rachel asked, clearly tired of all of the talking, and wanting us to get to the point.

“If you could visit, we might let you stay there. Or… well, you can keep some stuff there, and nobody will take it, and then you could live a little lighter here.” Pelter looked nervous, at least what I could see of her face, but I guessed that it wasn’t a trap.

If she were a Merchant, she wouldn’t have been out and about trying to save the day when it was so
clearly useless. Or rather, it was very clearly the kind of heroic senselessness that was honored, but not among gang-bangers.

I could imagine exactly why having two other capes to protect the camp could help.

“Maybe,” I said. “What do you think, Bitch?”

“Couldn’t hurt to look. Once we have the dogs hunkered down,” Rachel said, firmly, because of course those took priority. It’d be bizarre if they didn’t. Even if I didn’t know her, and didn’t agree, I’d understand that.

“Ah, of course. I mean…” Pelter trailed off. “Should I wait here? It’s about four blocks away.”

Which was a little annoying. If it was somewhat closer, I’d be more able to see it from the shelter even on the days when my range was worst. It seemed to be hovering somewhere between two and three blocks, roughly speaking. Today? Today it felt like I was almost there, almost stretched out far enough that I should be able to see the camp.

With my bugs, that is. I began to spread them out in that direction, as carefully as I could, because I didn’t want to spook anyone.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s just slightly outside my range, right now.” I shrugged, and added, “My range varies, some days. Sometimes it’s even less than this, sometimes it’s more. I’m not sure what causes it.”

I wasn’t, though I had started to realize that whenever I was feeling bad, my range increased. Not just bad, whenever I was trapped, whenever I was scared and… alone, I guessed?

That was just a feeling, just something you noticed if you started to spend time thinking about when your range was good and when it was bad.

Honestly, considering the Endbringer, my range should still have been as high as it was back then, but Rachel being there… it helped. Even when it didn’t help. Typical.

“I understand,” Pelter said. “I think? But anything you could do to help would be appreciated.”

I nodded, glancing over at Rachel. “So, Pelter, if you stick around for a while, we’ll try to hurry. Though… we’ll be needing lunch. Is there food at the camp?”

“We have some. Just stuff from apartments that we’re pooling, and we think that they might drop us some rations and supplies while they try to figure out what to do with us. The streets aren’t good, but they probably want to evacuate us, eventually, because we’re right in Merchant territory,” Pelter said, sounding as if she was reciting from a list. She shifted on her feet, nervous and clearly wanting to make a good impression on me.

I let out a breath, and nodded in her direction. And then I glanced over at Shelly, to see if she was still following along with this. The woman looked overwhelmed, but she wasn’t objecting to any of this, and hopefully she understood that as long as we were that close, we could probably help out with the shelter as well.

Plus, knowing Rachel, she’d spend as much time as she possibly could with her dogs. So would I, for that matter, both because I liked caring for them, and was too used to it by now, and because I wanted to be by Rachel.

So we just needed to get settled in.
The shelter was a spartan place, all cold angles and lines, at least when it came to human living, though there was a hard tile center room filled with barking dogs and more than that, dog toys of all descriptions, and it seemed like the dogs had a decent run of things. They were locked in their crates at night, which wasn’t going to do for Rachel’s sensibilities, but she didn’t start a fight over it.

The smell of dogs was so overpowering that it made Rachel’s own former home seem like it was nothing at all, and the dogs were enthusiastic, if a little scared.

“Any of them hurt?” Rachel asked.

“N… not that we can tell,” said a gangly, nineteen year old boy--Frank something-- whose Adam’s Apple bobbed up and down with every word. “But they’ve been agitated, and--”

“How’s their shits?” Rachel asked.

Which threw Frank for a loop, certainly. But I’d heard her expound her ideas on this fact, so I just nodded, feeling amused as she began to roll right over him, and soon enough enter the area itself.

Watching her from a distance, with her mask off, leaning down to receive the attention of the dogs—almost twenty of them, plus the dogs that she was going to put into circulation as well—I wondered at her skill with them. She split her attention wonderfully, moving with an easy grace, rubbing bellies and scratching ears and throwing toys, firm and caring, and then I wondered whether Frank felt something like the same.

Shelly, Frank, and Cindi. Cindi was an older woman, clearly some sort of volunteer, and she liked dogs, if in the kind of way that Rachel probably suspected hid incompetence. A dog enthusiast, someone who thought dogs were cute and silly, rather than someone who saw dogs the way she did.

There’d be plenty of room for our dogs, that much was true. My bugs were spreading out, and luckily it seemed that none of the dogs had worms, or anything like it. Whether that meant they were in a decent condition was anyone’s guess, but I at least worked on clearing out the bugs and the fleas (those they had in abundance), and there were places to stay, sort of. There was a small office which had the medical records for the dogs, the extra medical supplies for emergencies, and all of those sorts of things.

And there were a few couches in the lounge, which seemed to exist mostly as a setting to meet a dog one on one. They were always trying for adoptions, Shelly explained, and so if someone saw a dog they liked, they could go and sit on the couch and the dog would be brought in and they’d see how the dog acted on their own.

I thought it was a good idea, though from the way Rachel was frowning, she realized exactly what the owners would be looking for. I wondered… but was I allowed to? Rachel had been a dog that was too vicious and wild to be adopted, and I knew she hated the kinds of policies that killed dogs just because nobody wanted them.

Still, she’d been planning to work at a shelter, so clearly she was at least aware of how things went. She’d even worked at the shelters for a short time, before Coil, as it turned out, had found her.

There was another thing I needed to do: he still had an innocent girl under his control, and I didn’t know what to do about Dinah, at least at the moment. If I was going to go up against him, I’d be going up against the Undersiders, too, and if he paid one group to work for him, why not others?

It made me suspect that he was going to be very hard to take down. It wasn’t as simple as finding his
base and then just using overwhelming force, and what if I told the Protectorate and they botched it?

It was true, though, that if I could get in the area, I could probably find the base. My bugs meant that it’d take being airtight to keep me from getting in, and anyplace that was air-tight and bug-proof was probably someone’s lair, because otherwise who would go through all of that work when most capes couldn’t do anything with bugs.

But for all of that, I’d need to know where to look, first.

It was something I could do, though, and as soon as we were settled in, perhaps it was something I would do.

It took an hour or two before Rachel was comfortable leaving most of her dogs behind, and she still took Angelica and Brutus with us.

I carried my backpack, but we left behind enough other things that it wouldn’t be so hard to lead them all around, so I stood over Rachel as she hunched over and pushed her power into the dogs. We’d ride in style, Greg on Rachel’s dog, Pelter on mine. Slightly crowded, but it should work.

I was already imagining saddles, and of course I’d need terrariums for the bugs, but surely it’d be possible to create saddles with attached bags for transporting things.

It’d cost some money, but I could at least make the bags and some sort of covering with the spiders and their silk. Of course, maybe it’d be easier to just find cloth and quickly sew something together.

Pelter watched all of this slightly uncertainly, glancing at me again and again. For some reason she seemed to believe that I was the authority here, and whenever she had questions, she directed them to me, as if she was afraid of Rachel. It couldn’t be that, though, she was a hero now, and besides that Rachel had saved her life.

Of course, I was also biased.

Greg, who had been quiet and retiring, had found a place to sit and then curled up into himself, looked nervously at the dogs, in their monstrous forms. “Is it okay?”

“Of course,” I said. “Buck up, Greg. It’s just like riding a Warg, or whatever it was.” There was this video game he liked to play that involved, like, riding a giant monster and doing races and jousts and mounted combat, basically no foot-fights at all, but with RPG style…

The name escaped me. Something Riders. It had numbered sequels. Tamer Riders? I knew it wasn’t Monster Riders.

“Yeah. Yeah,” he said, nodding to himself. Pelter seemed not to buy this line of reasoning, but what was she going to do.

I smiled and mounted my dog. “Kneel,” I ordered Angelica, leaning in to speak into her ear.

“Man,” Greg said when he got on. “It smells of…”

“Dog?” I asked. I’d long since gotten used to what her dogs smelled like in monster form. It was about the same as they smelled normally, but far bigger, because there was a lot more fur, and a lot more flesh. It was dog expanded until it was overpowering and omni-present.

“Well, yeah.”
“Them’s the breaks,” I said, turning to Greg. “I can’t make them smell like cat.”

“...True,” Greg admitted, biting his lip and gripping onto the dog harder, as if he was going to be shaken off at any moment.

Pelter held on tighter than that as she climbed on. Our dogs took off at roughly a slow jog, which was still enough that every time we turned or a corner or had to jump a little to get over some glass or fallen bit of debris, Greg squeaked. As if he was about to tip over.

Of course, with my bugs I saw the camp long before I saw it. They were spread out over the center green and the parking lot of a set of apartment buildings that at least hadn’t collapsed, but certainly did seem as if they were in bad repair.

Tents and tents and tents, one person and two person and three people tents, and all of them clustered in strange combinations. And there were people coming in and out of the apartments, so the camps were just the overflow, the people who couldn’t fit in one of the apartments that wasn’t ruined… but then, that was most of them.

The electricity was flickering at places, out at others. No phone lines, probably no internet, and I wondered if anything was going to happen with the water supply. My bugs couldn’t figure that out, but I had to assume that as a whole, the apartments had gone from run-down to basically hard to live in.

So the people, several hundred, clustered in the lower floors of the apartments where they were closer to the camps.

The above floors were basically empty… more than that, they were looted, the food taken out, the batteries, the alcohol. Everything, and my bugs viewed a pretty barren landscape up there. That’s of course, the places where the floors weren’t entirely unsafe to walk on. But the apartment here had stood up a little better than many of the others in the area.

Which was probably because the building as a whole seemed newer. Some of the older buildings, without the mandatory, government required work, were basically collapsed in on themselves: if people hadn’t been in shelters, there would have been dozens if not hundreds of deaths just from apartments that weren’t up to code or standard.

The camp as a whole was vibrant and filled with people, and bugs could only tell me so much. For instance, when I finally turned and saw it with my own eyes, I’d forgotten just how colorful the tents would have been to human eyes. And how clashing. Orange tents next to blue tents next to white tents, with no real pattern. It didn’t even make a flag at the distance, or from above. Just whatever tents worked, and people milling about, talking to other people or trading goods.

When the nearest set of people saw the giant dogs, they gaped and stared as I slipped off, Greg behind me, and then Pelter and Rachel.

“So, Pelter. Is there somewhere Greg can stay for now? Is he going to be safe?” I asked.

Pelter pointed to a corner, where there was a two-person tent. “That’s mine. They let capes get big ones. Bigger than they need. You can get a big one too from… Rick. I think it was. The outfitter.”

“What else do we have here?” I asked, as people continued to stare, though I saw the basic pattern. First, they were alarmed, and then they were relieved that if Pelter was there and talking, then clearly they weren’t enemies.

“Well, there’s food, there’s water. People barter and trade things. Josie, this old lady, can sew well,
and so she’s started to sew up everyone’s torn clothes, that kind of thing,” Pelter said, shaking her head.

I knew, given enough time with my bugs, I could figure this whole place out, listen to all of it, and get a pen and paper and write down quite a story.

“Well, I need to talk to Josie too, then.”

“Oh. And we have some sort of Tinker phone or something that lets us call the Protectorate. It only holds so much charge a day, and it’ll probably break down before too long…”

“Tinkers,” I said, glancing over at Rachel, who seemed to be paying us no mind as she led her two dogs around.

Greg, on the other hand, was hanging on every word.

“Exactly. I think?” Pelter said. “I’ve never really talked to one, but you know what they say online…” Pelter said.

“What?” Rachel asked.

“Uh, well. I mean…” Pelter trailed off. “Their tech breaks down. Doesn’t it?”

“I think so,” I said.

Pelter shifted a little on the balls of her feet, slowing down for a moment to look around the camp.

“So, can you stay here?”

“What do you think, Rachel?” I asked.

“Why not?”

*******

Josie had hands that anyone would envy. Long, thin fingers, and dark eyes. Her skin was the color of tree bark, wrinkled enough that you’d think that she’d not be good at what she did. But she was great at it, and she talked to me the whole time while I tried to explain what I wanted.

“So could you do that?”

“Honey, so it’s good that you got through all that. You know how it is with Endbringers, better than I do, and so getting through it is the Lord’s Blessing, and make no mistake about it, child, but I think of all the people that died and I pray for their soul, and I think about providence, ‘cause you’re here now and protecting us.”

“That a yes?” Rachel asked. Greg had found a place to stay, but it wasn’t with us. It was a small, one person red tent, and I knew he was going to regret the complete lack of modern amenities. But join the club. Still, if I had the phone, I could contact the Protectorate, maybe see if I could get it known that Arachne was at this camp.

Dad knew the truth, so surely he’d track me down if he was fine, sooner rather than later. I’d look for him if he didn’t, but that was at least a better strategy than wandering around. I thought so at least.

“Of course, dear…”

“Good.”
There are many joys in life, even life interrupted by disaster. I didn’t look too much into the camp, or rather I had other things to do than monitor their lives, but I wanted to get to know more about them, if I was going to devote my time to protecting this area.

But I also needed a tent up. We’d been given a big, six person tent. There were only two of us, but perhaps they counted the two dogs as two people each. Or maybe it was like Pelter said. Parahumans got more space. As it was, the joy was watching Rachel try to put it up.

A minute into her attempts, it was clear that she both hadn’t wanted to read the instructions, and had never camped even a day in her life. But she just kept on trying to do it without reading the instructions.

Pelter and I watched on, and if I were in other company, I would have started grinning, because she was really working at it. She was stubborn.

“She never knows when to quit,” I muttered to myself. Another minute, and I called out, “Hey, Rachel. Can I help out?”

Rachel almost growled at me, but then shrugged, and I walked over to pick up the instructions. “See, here. You need to put that, there, if you want to get this thing up.” I leaned in close to her, and said. “You can just let me do it. I’m very good with my hands, Rachel, and I’ve done it before.”

I had no mask, so I leaned in to say it to her low. “The sooner we get this set up, the sooner we can do other things.”

“Well,” Rachel said.

I smiled and held up the instructions. “Why don’t we read through these together? I’m sure you could do it on your own, if you just wanted me to help.” I leaned into her, and then tugged at her gloves. “We don’t have masks, nobody cares, so why don’t we get those gloves off, so you can really work with your hands.” I pulled them off, looking at her hands, and smiling with my eyes. “Can’t do anything except be clumsy with gloves, you know?”

“Maybe,” Rachel said, looking up at me.

“So…” Pelter said. “Uh, um, I should probably be going?”

“Why?” I asked, confused, as I looked at Rachel’s hands for a moment.

“Just feels like I’m intruding on something, or…”

“What?” I asked. “We’re just putting up a tent.”

“I’m not sure,” Pelter admitted, but she was looking away. “But, see you later.”

“What’s with her?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t even know,” I admitted.

Ever had instant mac heated up on a cheapo portable stove? After finishing that up and then hurrying back to the shelter to check on things, and then right back where we began, that’s what we had for dinner.
The dogs needed to eat too, and we were keeping the two of them with us, in case we needed to get into a fight.

The camp wasn’t really setup for group dinners, at least not without trying, so it’d been just the two of us, asking around until we got food, and then eating it.

I washed my face in a restroom, though most people were using this sort of pit that had been dug out in a corner, to add to the bathrooms around here, and hurried into the tent with Rachel by the time it got dark.

It was the first time we’d really had a moment to breathe since the Endbringer fight.

So we went to bed an hour or so later than we might have otherwise, and when I turned away from her I hid a smile.

I regretted that hour when we were woken up in the middle of the night by Pelter pounding on the ‘door’ of the tent.

“Guys! Merchants are attacking!”

“How many?” I asked, though my bugs were already moving to see.

“A lot. And they all seem to have powers.”

Oh. Well.

Great.

Chapter End Notes

And Fight!
It wasn’t just two or three capes. No, as my bugs began to spread out, it seemed like dozens and dozens of gang-bangers were moving through the camp, intent on plunder. At their head was Mush, and some of them were throwing around fireballs, while others were actually flying through the air.

I couldn’t even take in details, because if all of them had powers, that was forty-on-three odds, more or less.

Those were the kinds of odds that told me that we couldn’t win, unless their powers all ran out. Maybe it was less than that, but even twenty on three weren’t odds that we could win, especially since some of them were getting very close to our tent already.

I couldn’t hide as far away from them as possible and hope that the bugs could deal with them. I did have an advantage in that I could take the fight to them everywhere at once, if I had enough bugs, but even that?

“Pelter,” I said. “You know how you have a line to the Protectorate? Get someone to go tell them, and then stay with us. We’re gonna have to…” I thought about what we could do. “Defeat them in detail.”

“What?”

“In groups, but not all together. Try to knock them out before they can all work together.”

My bugs were swarming around a figure in cast-off clothes that was stomping towards our tent. He wasn’t any taller than normal, but his steps were actually making the ground shake and tremor, and when he closed in on our tent, he was surely going to attack.

“Ah, right. I can do that.”

“My bugs were swarming around a figure in cast-off clothes that was stomping towards our tent. He wasn’t any taller than normal, but his steps were actually making the ground shake and tremor, and when he closed in on our tent, he was surely going to attack.

“Ah, right. I can do that.”

“Rachel,” I said, glancing at her, but she was already moving to charge up her dogs. I took a breath, frowning as I realized I didn’t have time to put my costume on. Ah well, there wasn’t much I could do about that, short of running away.

The potential parahuman stopped about twenty feet away from us and started to stomp more. The earth rumbled, and I realized that his power must have had something to do with shockwaves… which was oddly reminiscent of Behemoth, actually. I wondered if that was on purpose.

I felt tents collapsing, as people continued to run away. My bugs swarmed him, wasps stinging, but his skin seemed tough enough that he just grunted in frustration and swatted at them. Now, I could use some of my more dangerous wasps to get through his skin, and then have the spiders bite there, once that was done… maybe that’d work.

But that’d take time.

Pelter frowned and pulled out a piece of scrap metal and said. “I need to confront him.”

Meanwhile, as I monitored him, I was trying out the bugs on others. Some of them were, hurt, and one fell out of the air, screaming loud enough that my human ears heard it, but others shrugged it off,
and more of them than I would have thought possible.

“Not until we make that call,” I said, glancing at Rachel. “Are they ready?”

They were almost big enough to ride, and that was probably enough for the moment.

Rachel nodded. She was clearly in need of more sleep, her short, but slightly shaggy--she needed to get it cut--hair messed up and disarrayed. But her eyes were hard, and I knew that she couldn’t wait to get into attacking them.

And this time, I couldn’t deal with them on my own, get them out of the way before she even had a chance to get involved. I knew she’d like a little conflict, or at least a chance to stretch herself, so I tried to keep that in mind.

Myself, though? I was tired, worried, and trying to do too many things at once.

I continued moving to try to take down a few more capes, but the problem was that there were only so many bugs in the area. If I gathered them to act against one group, then another group was getting through, and some of them were going into tents, and dragging people out, and then back, towards the street...

Slaves. Captives.

My stomach turned, as Pelter opened the flap. The man turned, noticing us immediately, and he began to stomp towards us.”

“Brutus, hurt,” Rachel ordered.

The dog shot forward, faster than he’d expected, because he had time only to stomp his feet on the ground once before Brutus tackled him. The dog was almost thrown off, and as I stepped out, I gathered more bugs.

There was fire in the skies, and the smell of burning and alcohol was strong and present everywhere. As well as trash, coming from Mush, for whom this entire, refuse-filled camp, was a buffet to build up more and more mass.

The man shouted and tried to kick the ground even still, but once he was knocked off his feet, there was little he could do, and Rachel called, “Brutus, fetch!”

Brutus bit down on the guy’s arm, going right through whatever armor he had, and dragged him closer.

Oh, well, that was one down, though the man kept on trying to get his feet on the ground, which would have let him use his power.

“Pelter,” I said, trying to sound calmer than I was, “Now’s the time to go get backup.”

“Right,” she said, hurrying off as Brutus brought the criminal over here to examine. Angelica growled at the person, as I looked him over.

He was in his early thirties, grubby and grimy looking, and--oh.

Huh, that was interesting, I thought, uncertainly. On his arm was a patch. It was like a nicotine patch, but larger and in this case green and orange, and the skin around the patch seemed swollen, with veins that were oddly colored around it, even though… was this even the right area for veins to be
there?

“Oh,” I said, as I tried to peel it off. But it was stuck pretty tight, and it’d probably take water or something to get it off.

Certainly, I wasn’t going to be able to have bugs stick themselves to a corner and pull the superpower patches away like I’d briefly hoped.

He kept on kicking, but he couldn’t get let down, not unless Rachel ordered it, and he was in too much pain to do more than shout. “Shut up,” I said, a little annoyed. I had four capes down so far, counting him, which put the odds at still impossible.

But I was hurting a few others, and they were getting distracted dealing with my bugs playing kamikaze, trying to ram themselves in eyes, in ears, down throats. I’d thought about using disease-carrying bugs to make it worse, or to find exotic species to better hurt the enemy, but my regular bugs and wasps seemed to work just fine. The spiders weren’t going so well, if only because they had to travel quite a long way to actually bite anyone. I had a few of them crawl closer to me. If they rode on me, then they could be let off to actually do their jobs.

I definitely needed those containers for the bugs, so I could really gather it all together to protect the place. Nobody would begrudge me that, hopefully.

“So, you have powers from a patch,” I said. “How odd.”

“Fuck you you fucking lesbo c--”

I tuned him out, or rather I imagined punching him in the face so vividly that it removed all temptation to do it for real, as Brutus continued to keep his grip.

“We can’t throw him down,” I said. “His powers…”

Rachel grunted, and then slammed her hand into his head. He blinked, cut off mid-word. “Shut the fuck up,” Rachel said, testily, “about Arachne.”

I tried to even remember what he’d said. I assumed the lesbian thing came from some sort of rumor, or maybe he was just saying shit to say it. Rachel clearly didn’t see it that way.

“Oh, did I…”

“Brutus, shake.”

Brutus shook his head back and forth, and the man screamed, and then when it stopped, whimpered for a bit before going limp, clearly unconscious from the massive, unspeakable agony he must have been feeling.

Good. He kinda deserved it.

I couldn’t feel bad about whatever he’d suffered, as long as he lived and could be treated. Brutus dropped him down, and I saw that the wound was healing itself. Sort of. It wasn’t healing easily, and his arm was clearly broken, but it was scabbing over unnaturally fast, I thought, as my bugs took down a cape with laser vision, and another who seemed to be able to create copies of herself that could attack other people, but then vanished into choking dust when they were attacked.

Which seemed almost familiar, and I wondered whether some of the powers were based on real ones… or how it worked? It couldn’t last forever, or if it did, then that was a real problem.
Below me, the grotesque scars on the man served as the only proof, after a few seconds, that he’d ever been wounded. But he stayed unconscious. I reached down, and tugged the patch off as hard as I could. Hair and skin came with it, but he came off, and when it did, the veins receded.

Ah, so whatever else it did, if you did take one of them out, you could take off the patch to get rid of the power.

“Angelica! Come. Kneel!”

Angelica hurried up to me, panting and eager already, and licked at my face with her sandpaper tongue as spiders crawled up my legs, and on her back too, and I pulled myself up. Rachel was getting on Brutus in the same time, glancing down at the gang-banger but saying nothing.

“Thanks for that,” I said, my face blank, wishing I could show my gratitude, in a way that wasn’t just telling her. “But you didn’t have to…”

“Yes I did,” Rachel said, fiercely, glaring down at him. She glanced over at me, her thin lips almost turned up into a snarl, but not at me.

“Wh…” I began, but I decided to let it wait. It wasn’t important, not when we had to get out and go after them.

********

The fight wasn’t going well. Or rather, it was going as well as could be expected, when I reviewed the scene in my head as our dogs raced ahead.

There was fire and chaos all over, and groups of them were currently trying to drag people off, and goods too. I’d taken out the ones I could, and I was focusing on the ones who were hurting people or trying to capture slaves, but that wasn’t enough to really stop the assault. It was now clear that probably all of the people we were seeing were capes of one kind or another, so even my contributions weren’t saving this fight.

And we had far higher standards than the other side. If the patches were temporary, then they could lose every single loser here and have lost only forty gang members, which sounded like a lot, but the Merchants did quantity over quality as a way of life. Meanwhile, if even a few people got carted away for whatever sick twisted purpose the Merchants had in mind, then the community could fall apart.

Certainly, why would they have any reason to trust us, if we couldn’t keep them safe. We’d be failures, and I didn’t know what they’d do then. The camp had to help protect people from the Merchants.

As it was, nobody had been dragged off, but I yelled Rachel in the direction of a group of two or three of them at the edges of the bigger cluster. Mush had about nine pseudo-capes with him, and somewhere back there, I could feel, with my bugs, a closed cockpit helicopter and see a van. Yes, a copter.

Which meant that Squealer was here as well. The van, and the others like it, must have been how all of these goons had gotten here, and they were at the very edge of my vision. In fact, when my bugs gathered to try to make out details of the dark, plain vans, some of them reversed course, moving further out of range. Not like I could make out the license plate or any details anyways.

The good news was that my range was good enough that I could see that unless they were coming from the north, nobody was going after the shelter. If only it’d reach a little further, I’d be completely
sure of what was going on.

As it was, the combination of all of these powers and all of these capes meant that I could barely monitor all of them, let alone stop them.

And then there were the ones with fire. They were making it even harder to deal with. We raced through the camp, leaping over obstacles, no doubt knocking things down, and Rachel fell upon two of the three stragglers.

One of them was throwing around fire like it was going out of style, and we’d need to put it out, sooner rather than later, even if there wasn’t my bugs to consider. Angelica bowled into one of them, some sort of brute, who tried to fight back but was pushed down and held down, as I leaned over him and began to fill his airways with bugs.

The woman with the flame powers shot balls of fire at Angelica, but Brutus leapt in the way, taking the shot to its side and growling as it went straight for the girl. The third one, a guy with dreads and sandals, ran away, leaping into the air as if his legs were springs, and I just kept on harassing him with bugs.

Flies went down the first guy’s throat, and I kept it up, growling and waiting until he was unconscious, as the spring-heeled cape kept on retreating, now without the fire-power user to shield him from the bugs swarming him. I was pretty sure he’d be down before too long.

Down went fire-girl, and once she was done, I glanced over at Rachel, who was baring her teeth viciously as she pounded the fire girl with her fists, clearly aware of what having the dog bite her would do, considering she was no tougher than anyone else.

Or perhaps she just wanted to bruise her knuckles.

I nodded at her and said, “Alright, Mush is almost to a core area! We need to get going!”

Rachel grunted, and swung back onto Brutus, and we raced off again. Mush had a man with a strange flamethrower with him. The device, when I could actually get bugs to see it, seemed to be made out of scrap metal, and from the way the man kept on fiddling with it, I had to assume he’d somehow become a Tinker.

A… temporary Tinker power? How did that work? It could also be Squealers, or something adapted from hers, like someone taking the exhaust pipe…?

I had a lot more questions than answers, but I did know that nine on two odds weren’t great. They were pushing along and were almost towards a group of cowering people, and so as we raced off, jolted and bounced around by our dogs rapid movement, until I saw one of them raise a pistol, still out of sight from us… but pointing in our direction.

“She’s fired again, this time just barely in visual range of us, and the dogs swerved at our commands.

It was a motley group of people that were arrayed against us, but the one who really stood out was
Mush, who was ten feet tall now, some sort of horrible swamp monster in trash form, shambling forward as all of the rest hid behind his bulk and using their powers. One was flying, there was the flame user, the shooter, another seemed to be…

The world burst into light and sound, and I was tossed from Angelica as something exploded right in front of us. A… glowing mine?

Fuck, I thought, desperately seeing through my bugs. My bugs covered the eyes of the shooter, and a few of them rammed themselves into the mine-wielder’s ears. I couldn’t get enough bugs free to swarm them, not without the flamethrower getting rid of them, but the spiders sprang free when I hit the ground, rolling and trying to control all my bugs while my head ached as if it were split open.

I groaned and tried to get up. “Angelica! Guard!”

I needed her in front of me, I thought, gasping for breath and eating the dirt. One of my bugs tried to jam itself in the gears of the flamethrower as it poured over Angelica, who screamed in pain and fury but kept on shielding me.

The shooter was down, and my spiders were carefully advancing on Mr. Flamethrower.

Across the fight, those who were injured but not downed by my bugs were retreating for the vans, but as long as this core group was here, they’d win...

I just needed to stall them a little more.

Bitch was roaring, and I heard a crunch as one of the people was bitten hard by Brutus, followed by Bitch half-leaping off to kick at him, before whirling around, a furious dervish, to go after another of them. Mush, though, slammed his fist into Brutus, and the two of them went stumbling back.

Two down, seven to go. The flying one was headed my way, and I could see, out of the corner of my eye, glowing white mines forming all around me, as if they were trying to trap me in.

One of the enemy capes, on the other end of the camp, was getting away with a struggling teenage girl, and I couldn’t even stop it. He was moving fast, practically a blur, but swiping at the few bugs I could spare as he and a few of his allies were retreating. He seemed impossible to injure, the bugs bouncing right off of him, and a few wasp stings weren’t going to stop their headlong retreat.

The vans were out of my reach, and they all managed to stumble towards them. He flung his captive into a van and yelled, "It's fucked, run!

The vans, and the few injured gang-members that had managed to retreat, took off after another moment. I could hear it, but I couldn’t even do anything with my bugs. I was fighting for my life, and they left, peeling off in the dark of the night.

All the while, I was crouching down, getting my bearings. A wasp drove off the flying cape, but I couldn’t ignore the moving mines for much longer. My shoulder hurt, and the smell of singed fur and blood was heavy.

“Gah,” I groaned, getting up to my knees. Rachel was still charging at Mush and the rest, even though she needed to make her dogs a lot bigger than that if she was going to take him down. But it was distracting him, at least, and at the moment holding these nine in place mattered.

I’d taken down one or two more, and Pelter was headed this way, and she’d taken down another, so by now about a third of them, or a little more, had been taken out.
It was a start.

Only that, but considering how bad the odds were? I’d take it. There was still a good chance that they’d kill us in the next few minutes.

Pelter launched a rock at flamethrower guy, and like Goliath he collapsed.

I pulled myself up a little more. “Angelica! Attack!”

I had to race just behind her to get out of the way of the mines, and my legs ached as I did. The guy with the flamethrower was down, and right before I’d bitten him with my spiders, and so now I was able to throw bugs at my problem.

Before I knew it, all but the mine girl, the flying girl, and Mush were down, and Rachel was really keeping him busy, despite the pain it was causing Brutus, and for that matter, herself. There were bruises on her face where Mush’s swing had just barely whiffed, and if she was actually hit…

I needed to end him. But I had no way to actually do that.

Pelter was advancing forward, throwing her rocks at the flying girl, as Angelica slammed into Mush just as he was trying to recover from one attack. Still, I was in too much pain, and too aware of how bad the odds still were, to be at all sure of victory. I groaned, wondering how I’d gotten through an entire Endbringer fight with less pain than a bunch of gang-bangers were causing me.

I don’t know what would have happened if, at that very moment, a glowing figure appeared overhead, and then resolved itself into a handsome and very recognizable hero: Legend.

He stretched his hand out, and a laser slammed into Mush, shearing right through all of his garbage as if it were nothing, and then twisting and turning to glance off another enemy cape, who collapsed. Mush groaned, gathering together more garbage, but Bitch wasn’t going to stop, now, and once half of his mass was sheared away, he was facing two on one odds.

I gritted my teeth in a snarl and Mush began to try to retreat.

All over the camp, people were trying to run, but they weren’t going to, I realized.

Legend was here. That was the end of the fight. There were villains who would surrender or run rather than waste everyone’s time.

Damn, that was close. If this was just a day or two later, they’d have had to send…

Someone a lot slower. Would we have won? I don’t know, but we definitely would have lost more people than we did.

Even then, we failed. The Merchants had captured someone, and parts of the camp were burnt out, and there were about twenty people injured. None of them severely, but the point of us being here…

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“You did a good job holding out,” Legend said, looking at me. “Arachne, was it?”

He wasn’t commenting on the fact that I was out of costume. Or the fact that I was holding Rachel’s hand as if it were my only lifeline. Honestly, I wanted to just bury my head in her shoulder, because she could have died, I could have died, and I was glad to be alive, and I wasn’t sure if I actually cared that other people were seeing us like this.
“Yes.”

“We should evacuate all of these people. We were going to put it as a secondary priority, but that’s clearly not smart.” Legend frowned. “Though it might take several days unless we put all resources into an evacuation. I’m here tonight, but I won’t be here after tomorrow.”

I squeezed Rachel’s hand to keep from feeling frustrated. “We’re protecting the camp for now,” I said. “And we managed to get almost twenty of these pseudo-capes taken down. We can manage most threats on our own fine, but not that many.” I frowned, annoyed. “How were there so many of them, and…”

“Some of the people here won’t want to go. Most of them, actually. These are their homes, and if they leave, there’s nothing to come back to,” Pelter said. “I can try to convince some of them, but unless you’re forcing everyone to leave…”

“We can’t do that, or we don’t want to, but it’s not safe… pardon, I don’t think I’ve heard your name.”

“Pelter,” Pelter said, with a nod. “And I can send along those that want to leave, but for everyone else, we need to keep protecting this area.”

“Can you get people to patrol around here?” I asked. “Or something? They want slaves. In fact, they’ve captured one of our people already. Can you go out after them? She’s going to be a sex slave!” I was furious, but I realized that the anger was not at all directed at Legend. Not even at the Protectorate, though I wondered where they were.

“Maybe I can. We need to take these people back in, but... if you happen to know where their base is?”

"I don't," I admitted. "I know where some of them are, but they move around a lot."

"Do you know who was stolen? Did you manage to get their license plate?" Legend asked.

"No, though I can learn the first. They took off... a minute or two ago, they should still be close, unless they abandoned the van." I frowned, looking at the shredded camp, and the downed gang members who could be up any minute to continue the fight, or try to run. "I hope so, if we go now."

"I'm not sure it's advisable. This camp is in danger if they come back. And as for helping you? We're already stretched hard dealing with securing the official camps, and the E88, but we can try." Legend shook his head, frowning, clearly thinking of all of the things he had to do.

Well, the local Protectorate, that was. He was going to be leaving: Legend wouldn't save us if there was another such fight.

“Bitch and I are going to be handling as much as we can,” I said, squeezing her hand harder.

“Bitch? I haven’t heard of Bitch. Is she a new hero?” Legend asked, with a polite smile that only made Rachel tense.

“Shes a villain. But you can tell the people here, the Brockton Bay Protectorate, that she’s turned over a new leaf. We’re working together now, and this is where they can find us, at least until we figure this out.”

“That can work. Are you on a team with this Pelter?”
“N—” Pelter began, but I cut her off.

“Maybe, we’d need to talk about that,” I said, glancing over at her. A part of me felt like adding another person to the duo that we were would be a bad idea, but another part of me knew we needed all the help we could get, and also knew that having a team was just… cool. I was in pain, and so maybe a little loopy. We were both going to wind up with bruises from this, though hopefully they wouldn’t last too long.

“Well,” Legend said. “PRT Vans will be arriving within the hour to pick up all of these capes, and until they do, I’ll be staying here to make sure they don’t come back. It’s important not to leave the camp vulnerable, even if there is the urge to sally out and fight them again.”

We had an audience, I thought, tired, and so I nodded. Even though there was someone we’d failed. But they weren’t saying anything, they were too busy. The fires were put out, and now they were gathering their things, and bickering over who owned what, and putting their tents back up after they’d been stomped on.

I just leaned up against Rachel and nodded, allowing Pelter to take over the conversation and finish answering questions about the circumstances of the fight.

“Why were you so angry?” I asked Rachel, when Legend was gone.

“Cause he insulted you,” Rachel said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “And you’re my girlfriend.”

I squeezed her hand tighter, my face red. I was sweaty, tired, and in pain, and yet I wanted to kiss her right there. Heck, I wanted to do more than that, even though I knew that as banged up as I was, it wasn’t a good idea.

But doing it in front of…

What a slut, just a stupid--

I leaned in and kissed her full on the lips. It wasn’t as if it could hurt my reputation in camp, after someone had gotten dragged off. And then I kept the kiss up, even as Pelter made sounds somewhere between a gasp and a groan.

When I finally broke for air, Rachel asked, breathless, “Why?”

“Because you’re my girlfriend,” I said, and it was the most obvious thing in the world.

*****

In the end, I did get an hour more of sleep before it was time to wake up, and when I did, I had to get into my costume, so that I wouldn’t further destroy my secret identity. After all, the point was that Taylor Hebert was nowhere to be seen. I left a message with Legend to tell people where Arachne was, without hinting that it was so that Dad would know where I was, and that I was okay.

The camp seemed to have pulled itself together, as much as could be done, and so the morning felt almost normal, though people huddled in larger groups, and when Rachel and I passed, they started whispering--just talking about the fight--or grew more quiet.

I waited for the moment when they started pointing out that I’d failed them. But it didn’t come, at least not immediately, so I went to check on Greg. Rachel was headed back to the shelter, and under any other circumstances I would have gone with her. But I needed to talk to Greg, and then Pelter
The grass was now strewn with even more debris, and so I had to walk carefully, gathering any bugs that got into range, because I’d need to do that too. I had a full day ahead of me, and it was hard to imagine that it’d been only the day before last that we’d gone after Behemoth.

Greg was in a small tent towards the apartment side, looking miserable and yet also excited. I hadn’t known that he could be both at the same time. “That fight was… one of them almost got to me! But you stopped them! And that’s good. But I don’t know, it’s just so miserable…” he paused, taking a breath, as he looked around his almost entirely empty tent. “No games, no books, nothing.”

“We can get those,” I said, feeling like he should know better.

“I know, it’s just…” Greg shrugged, slumping down a little, looking as if he were trying to win my sympathy. “I feel so useless. Because I am useless. I should be doing something to help you. I could be like a sidekick or something!”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I said.

“…maybe not,” he admitted, as if I’d just kicked his puppy. He looked down into his lap, and then slumped a little further. “Sorry for…”

“Listen, don’t worry. I’m sure we’ll find something for you to do. There’s a lot around the camp, and I’m sure you could find something.”

Greg didn’t seem like he’d be up and hurtling ahead anytime soon, but I knew that he was irrepressible. Press him down, or knock him over and he sprang back up sooner or later. At least, most of the time.

“Are you okay, Taylor?! I didn’t even ask! Did you get hurt? I couldn’t see the fight, and--”

“I’m fine,” I said, holding my hand out. “I also have to get going, Greg. I’ll see you a little later. If you need anything…”

“Of course.”

******

Pelter was out of costume when I came to her, not that the costume did much. She was sitting down, cleaning something in a tub of water. Smoke and soot had gotten on what looked like some toys and other household oddities, and so she’d clean them and then set them down in the pile, dividing them out by owner.

People were already coping and trying to move beyond the issue.

Camp life was… fractious. I’d passed a few people getting into arguments, though the moment I approached they denied that there was an argument at all, even when I knew what they were arguing about. Everyone was tense, if given common cause, and the sanitation was… less than ideal.

There were restrooms, and make-shift pits and the like, but it still smelled a little like an open sewer. Combine that with all of these sweat, tired bodies all together and the stench was something nearly unbearable… but which I knew I’d get used to if I stuck around here long enough.

Heck, I’d even probably stop noticing it, which was not a good thing. Something had to be done for the camp in that respect, though I wasn’t sure what. There were showers in the apartments, of course,
but the water was messed up. Restoring that would probably go a long way, but I had no idea how to do that, other than ask around to see if anyone was a plumber.

And maybe we could do that? Just because it hadn’t been done yet didn’t mean that it wasn’t possible. Nobody had exactly had much time.

“Hey, Pelter,” I said when I approached.

Pelter leaned in, gesturing for me to get closer, looking a little bit nervous, but with a steady voice. “You should call me Pelter, but just so you know, my name’s Stefanie.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding and committing it to memory. “What are you doing?”

“Helping out. Dad said we need to get to work, if we’re going to get this camp together and ready for the next wave.”

“The next wave?” I asked, then paused. “Dad?”

“Yes. Dad and Mom are here. Cape identities are something of an open secret,” Pelter admitted with a shrug. “There’s no way to keep it hidden, I don’t think.”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure if I agreed, but I understood that. “So, the next wave. Most people want to stay, then?”

“Yes. And there’s already plans to start fixing things up. I can’t do much to help, but it’s better than just standing around. You control bugs, right? So no disease-bearing insects should be troubling us?”

“No, they shouldn’t,” I said. I liked how practical she was being, running down the issues.

“So, we need better plumbing, more food, and more water first. We have all the space we need if we can get the water and the like flowing.”

“Amen to that,” I said, a little absently. The pain in my body was a dull pain, but one which definitely was going to get annoying. “So, we have this whole large set of chores? How can we help. What about the girl that was stolen away?”

“Ahh,” Stefanie said, frowning a little. “We need to talk to them. But… do you want to?”

“I should, shouldn’t I?” I let out a long sigh. What was I supposed to say? I’d failed to save her, and now I didn’t want to face up to what I’d done… or not done. “Could… could you?” It was cowardice, again, the refusal to drive forward like I knew Rachel would have done. Maybe? Or at least, a Rachel of emotional and social conflict. She had problems, but I admitted that being straightforward and blunt had its uses.

“No. I need to talk to them. Who are they?”

“No, first you need to talk a breath and try to think about what you want to say,” Stefanie said, gesturing to the toys. “Can you help me?”

I bit my lip, and then shrugged, standing next to her and checking the toys as she cleaned them for any spots she missed.

“So you tried to recruit me,” Stefanie said, casually, looking up for a moment.

“Well… we’re going to have to work together, so why not work together? We’re all heroes, but at least, Bitch is one now.”
“What does Rachel think about this?” Stefanie asked. “Her opinion clearly matters to you."

I flushed and looked away, shuffling my feet. “Um, sorry for the PDA…”

“Please don’t apologize for it,” Stefanie said, though she sounded a little uncomfortable, like someone trying to keep from thinking about it too much. “I’m one of the last people to disapprove. It raises questions, but they’re not my business."

“Last ones to disapprove?” I asked.

“My father is white, my mother is black. Actually, my father was even a prominent local businessman, and the E88 took it personally,” Stefanie said. She shook her head, clearly wanting me to take far less meaning from this than I did.

“I’m not sure how much I can really answer. I met her, she’s attractive to me, she’s… warm in her own way,” I said. “So, I’m going to have to ask her, yes, but I’m sure she’ll trust me enough to agree. Or else she…”

Wouldn’t be my girlfriend. I didn’t even have to say it to feel this giddy thrill. I wanted to keep on saying it, or hinting at it, just for the warm butterflies it invoked. I was in the middle of a refugee camp, tired and discussing gang wars and Parahuman factions, and I still felt as if I wanted to go off someone to smile and sigh.

“Okay,” Pelter said.

It was making a fool of me, I knew that. But I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. If anything, I was getting more infatuated with her, not less. At least, not so far. So I refocused myself, and remembered the girl being dragged off, and remembered just what I was fighting before.

“So, tell me about--”

I blinked, and saw that an eleven year old was coming towards me with a big box.

“Hey,” the kid said. He was pale, and grungy. “You control bugs and stuff, right?”

“Yes,” I said, a little confused. It was pretty effective in getting my attention.

“Could you use this fish bowl?” He set the box down and opened it. There was a fish-bowl, and he had what looked like plastic wrap in next to it. “Me and my friends were thinking, if you poked air holes you could keep a bunch of bees or something and throw the bowl at people.”

Or use it, I thought, staring at the bowl for a moment, to hold bugs in general. It wasn’t a great option, since my bugs would probably fight and cause problems if all trapped together, but I at least could hold some of them. It was better than nothing.

“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate it.”

“You saved a bunch of people,” the boy said, rubbing his nose and looking up at me for a moment. “M’sister was about to be dragged off before you had a bunch of bugs and stuff sting them.”

“Oh,” I said. “It was just… what I’m supposed to do.” And hadn’t quite done well enough, in fact.

“Nah, I mean, the Merchants didn’t do what they was supposed to.” The boy shrugged, and added. “So, see ya!”

And then ran off, leaving me with one fish bowl.
The older brother, a brown-skinned and rather handsome young man in clothes that he’d clearly been wearing for multiple days, stared at me. My mask hid my features, but I swore I could see accusation on his face.

His parents, both in their late forties, short and dressed in nicer clothes that also hadn’t been changed at all.

“Our daughter,” Amanda Henderson said without preamble, “Are you going to…”

“I’ll try to find her and get her back,” I said. “I’ll need a description or a photo, but the Merchants aren’t subtle.” I thought about Dinah, for the first time since before Behemoth. She was in the clutches of a devious supervillain. She’d probably be very well hidden. The Merchants? The problem would be finding the specific captive girl, rather than one of the many other people that they were probably exploiting in the aftermath of a crisis.

“Good,” the brother said. Franky Henderson. “I wanna go along with you, if you find her.”

I thought about how I’d be doing it. I’d have to sneak around with my bugs, from a distance, and then find where she was. It’d take time, especially if they kept moving her, and my bugs might struggle to remember who she is. Plus, even if I found her, I’d have to go back and get backup before I started such a large fight, unless she was…

It was disgusting and unsettling to think through the details of what the Merchants had to have been doing. Their raid had led to losing Mush and almost forty of their goons, and all for just one captive, but there were probably other raids, on targets that didn’t wind up being as well defended.

It was a stupid move in some ways, but if they could have blitzed fast enough to stop any contact with the outside, they could have gotten hundreds and hundreds of slaves, and even if the Protectorate was called, they would have gotten away with dozens.

Seen that way, the whole camp was one giant target, and three capes along didn’t seem like enough to hold it down.

The pseudo-parahumans had all lost their powers over time, and they seemed to be somewhat unsteady and unpracticed with them, but it was a force multiplier, as Greg might have said.

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.”

“Listen to her,” his mother said, her tone scolding.

“Maybe it’s not, but I’m going to do it.”

I blinked, glad that he couldn’t see my face. I frowned, considering it for a moment. I knew what I’d want if someone I loved was stolen away. I knew what I’d do, and could I blame him? Yes, actually, I probably could because it was foolish.

“Okay. If your parents agree, if you can talk them around, and if the circumstance doesn’t just suddenly arrive out of nowhere, then yes.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” Franky said. He smiled at me and everything, and I wondered if maybe he didn’t blame me. Or at least, not enough to say it outright, not enough to make it known in the kind of way that would have had me on the backfoot and even more guilty.
“Good,” I said. Then I added, “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to save her.”

Franky waved his hand. “You were fighting the big guys.”

“I had bugs following him, but the one who stole her away wasn’t affected by them, and I couldn’t get any of the wasps or spiders to them in time,” I said, shaking my head.

The father was staring at me, eyes going wide. “H-how?”

“My range is several blocks,” I pointed out. “I was trying to monitor the whole camp.”

Franky frowned, appreciatively. “So, you could look for my sister block by block?”

“That’s what I’m going to do, once the camp’s more established,” I said. “We need to make sure they don’t come back and kidnap anyone else.”

“I… get that,” he admitted.

“Yes. We’re going to be doing our best,” I said, trying to reassure him. “If there’s anything at all you need, come to us.” I turned to face all of them, feeling like some sort of sweet-talking liar. I was not that kind of person. Yet I was implying that I could help them, could help the camp. But how? I could deal with bugs, sure. And…

The thought started to occur to me. I’d had it before. My bugs could monitor the whole camp. Couldn’t I… write down problems and arguments? Learn more about what they wanted and needed? It’d be invasive, but I could do it, I thought.

“We will,” Amanda said. “Thank you for coming.”

“It’s the least I could do.”

******

I sat down with a pen and a notebook and waited for Rachel to return. And surprisingly, people came to me. One brought the notebook, while another found another fishbowl, the word having somehow spread that I was using them. Then someone came in with a bunch of cloth.

The young woman, pretty and yet disheveled, said that it was if I needed material for anything. Anything at all.

I mentioned, off-hand, that I didn’t have any clothes.

…and that started a flood. By the time Rachel was back, coming straight for my tent, I had a pile of clothes I needed to look through, and several children’s books that I’d been given.

It was like tribute, and I knew that I shouldn’t accept all of it. But if anyone blamed or resented me, they weren’t indicating it anywhere, and a dozen pages of the notebook were full with observations. Names of people, and problems. I didn’t know how much I was going to be able to do with it, but maybe I could show it to Pelter, and she could resolve the problems?

“What’s all this?” Rachel asked when she stepped in, taking off her mask. She was looking at the pile of loot.

I pulled my own mask off, shaking my head, and running my fingers through it. I needed another shower. It was pretty warm today, and my hair had been suffering a little from lack of conditioner.
But she still stared at me as she stepped forward, leaning down, kneeling down a little and kissing me hard.

I blinked, but returned the kiss. Her mouth was warm, and I found myself pushed back a little. The world fell away so fast I might have reeled at it. I couldn’t breath, my heart was racing, and I wrapped my hands around her, pulling her close. It was as if I’d been without her for days, rather than an hour or two, and I would have cursed my madness if I wasn’t too busy kissing her. One kiss followed another, my tongue clumsily trying its best, until finally she pulled away.

I stared at her face, flushed now. She was breathing heavily, and so was I. My thoughts strung out like cobwebs after a person had come through with a duster. Disconnected, confused. And what few of them I could get a grip on wanted to start pulling off my costume.

And why shouldn’t I, it was… oh.

“Rachel,” I said, holding up a hand. “I have bruises.”

“Oh. Right,” Rachel said, sounding annoyed, and even disappointed.

I added, “Oh, and I wanted to talk to you. We can get some lunch after we talk, and maybe we could read a little together?”

“Talk about what?”

“Well, I asked if Pelter wanted to maybe join our team?”

“What team?” Rachel asked, looking puzzled.

“I mean… we were going to go out and fight crime together. And it’d just mean that sometimes she’d come along with us,” I said. I reached out to stroke her face, gently, my eyes on her, unable to look away. “That’s all.”

“Like, some New Wave shit?”

“…not quite like that,” I said. “But she’s not a bad person?”

“She’s alright,” Rachel said, without enthusiasm. “Doesn’t bare her teeth that much.”

That probably had a lot more to do with her serious demeanor than any awareness of Rachel’s own unique circumstances, I thought, leaning into her. She wrapped her arms tighter around me, her strong arms pressing into my side as she listened to what I was saying.

It was a little hard to focus when she was around, but I needed to make sure she really agreed. I hadn’t been like this before, either. Or not entirely? How could just saying one word change things, make them slightly more awkward, or rather, more… engrossed.

I didn’t have a watch, but once we finished this talk, we’d have a little time, I thought. “So, Rachel. People would be saying we were a hero team with her, because that’s what it’d basically be.”

Rachel frowned, considering this. “With some sorta team name or something?”

“No. It’s not that formal,” I said, leaning into her. I pressed my head into her shoulder, wondering if doing this to her while asking her for something was cheating. “But… it’s something. But you’re used to having a team, and one you get to choose is better than one that you wind up put on.”

Rachel considered that, and nodded, nuzzling against me. “Fine. Teammates.”
She’d left her last team, I thought. But as long as she didn’t leave me, that’s all that mattered. And I’d hold her here, I’d help her, and we’d beat back the Merchants, we’d save people together. I knew we would.

“How were the dogs?”

“How were the dogs?” Rachel said, frowning. “It’s a new home, and they’re not used to it yet. Plus, got a few more dogs.”

I knew that much, but I let her talk, about feeding them and getting to know them, about working with the shelter people to clean them up. Somehow, she just took charge and ownership of the whole shelter and how it worked despite everything. Or at least, when she was around, they did what she wanted them to do.

I almost smiled at the thought, because someone else might not have imagined she’d have any skill at it at all. But she knew how to keep a schedule, at least, even if it was just for taking care of dogs, and of course she was a Parahuman, and imposing, so they’d fallen in line.

It wasn’t like she’d have ever made them do anything to help dogs, and if one thing was clear to me, it was that the people at the dog shelter had to be a little like Rachel to still be there.

Finally, when she was done talking, she asked. “You?”

How was my morning? I told her.

There’s lunch, and it’s a communal affair, to some extent. People cook stuff in several kitchens, but there’s also a few campfires, more or less, with logs from a Walmart nearby, and everyone eventually brought it together, ingredients and what they could find, or to put it in another way, loot. There was a lot of food, and if this was what was being eaten each day, we’d need to get more, or have shipments come in… I didn’t know how to do it, but I gave my notes to Pelter, who read them with wide eyes.

Not all of it was pleasant. Some people were sick, coughing up phlegm, and I had to shy away from noticing at least one… sex act. My bugs could see everywhere, and people were supposed to have some privacy.

So we ate sandwiches and stew, and canned soup briefly heated up before poured out. We ate a lot, honestly. Rachel always had a big appetite, and I wondered what the rest of Brockton Bay was doing.

At least in some parts, businesses might be opening again already, or at least, there were people for whom life had to go on. If there weren’t any supermarkets, people would go hungry.

We ate, and I answered questions people gave to me, keeping my mask near me.

I was aware that all eyes were on me, but at least I could be pretty sure that none of them knew who I was. I was Arachne, and nobody else.

It was about two when the first patrol arrived.

They came straight on towards the camp as I moved out to meet them, baffled by who I was.
noticing. There was some sort of metal man, and then there was Flechette, and then with them, Velocity.

Which by the standards of the Protectorate, meant they were coming out in force. What was Flechette doing there, though?

Pelter came with Rachel and I, so that all three of us were there, watching when they rounded a corner.

The new arrival was a strange, silver-eyed metal man that I’d noticed before, unnerving as he walked forward. He had notable muscles, and was reasonable handsome, in the way of some strange grey statue. Flechette was looking tired, but no worse than before, while Velocity was strolling along, carefully looking left and right, ready for a fight.

“Hey,” I said, raising a hand.

“Arachne,” Flechette said. “Good that you’re still alright.”

“Greetings, Arachne, Hellhound… and Pelter,” the boy said.

Rachel tensed, annoyed at that fucking name, as she had the right to be.

“It’s Bitch,” I said. “And who are you?”

“Weld,” he said. “I’m the new leader of the Wards, and we’re here to establish our patrol schedule so you know what’s going on.” He said it all formally, but with a slightly toothy smile on his face, which was another strike against him.

“Well, then,” I said. “So you’re here on patrol?”

“We’ll be patrolling once a day at different times, and we’ll check in then,” Flechette explained.

“You’ve been transferred?” I asked.

“I thought… a change could be nice.”

“So, patrols once a day. At differing times so that they can’t predict it?” I asked, to clarify.

“If you’re stopping here, you or someone needs to help bring supplies. Or repair the roads so that we can have things driven in. We need more bread, more vegetables,” Pelter said, listing it on her fingers. “More meat of some kind, or at least, protein, if we’re going to keep going."

“Yes, that all seems sensible,” Weld said, smiling at Pelter. “We can ask about that, and there is disaster relief coming from the city. We’ll also escort at least a few people who want to leave if they put in a request."

“This can’t last forever,” Velocity said.

“Oh? Are there problems?” I asked. “Not going to be able to support us?”

“The E88 is pressing hard,” Velocity explained, “and there are signs that a villain named Accord has moved into Brockton Bay.”

“Accord?” I asked.

“He’s a gang leader from Boston,” Flechette said. “I’ve heard about him a little, but I’m going to be
hearing a lot more. And there are signs that other gangs might be moving in to fill the vacuum.”

“Then there’s the Merchants,” I said.

“Our analysis is still pending on the drugged Merchants,” Weld said. “They’re looking into how he could have done it.”

That really was something that it was important to figure out. After all, it was completely unfair. Greg would have called hax.

“Good. So,” I asked, “Want to stop by for a little? There’s not much, but I’m sure Pelter would be happy to show you around the camp.”

“Ah, right. I can do that,” Pelter said, sounding flustered. She’d officially been on the team for all of a few hours. “If you’d like to come this way. Just as a brief stop, I’m sure, just…”

Velocity and Weld allowed themselves to be led along, but Flechette held back.

Her lips slipped into a smile. “It’s good to see that you’re alright,” Flechette said.

“Yeah. I’m surprised to see you still here.”

“I requested a transfer,” she admitted, without hesitation. “And they needed it enough that they accepted.”

I noticed she didn’t say anything about her parents, though I didn’t know whether that was just discretion or whether they hadn’t had a say at all in what she chose to do.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because the city needs it. There’s the Merchants, Coil, the E88, probably Accord, and there’s hints of other groups popping up. There’s unofficial refugee camps all over the city, though this one seems a lot more vulnerable and badly placed than the one that Parian had set up.”

“Parian set up a camp?” I asked.

“I’m… not sure of the specifics, but she apparently went back to her shop, and around it there’s this camp, and she made this deal, I’m not sure what, but anyone who follows her rules and helps to provide her with food and water is safe, and she saved a bunch of people from the E88, when they ran.” Flechette was smiling in a way that felt oddly familiar. Luckily for her, there were no teeth in it.

“Already?” I asked, imagining Pelter for a moment. She’d done that too. Shown up and become a protector of a bunch of people on her own, though if only she’d be there, the camp would have fallen to the Merchants.

“She kinda took charge. It was really impressive, or so I’m told. The Protectorate is letting it stand for the moment, because the area is lower priority.” Flechette shook her head, annoyed. “It’s out of the way of some of the fighting, though close enough that without her the Merchants and E88 would probably both roll in. Even with her, it’s… I’m not sure how long it’ll last before things become settled.”

Her admiration was open, her voice sounded oddly… like someone had hit her upside the head. I frowned. “Oh? Parian sounds pretty impressive.”

“Yes. I’m not sure how much you’ll see of me, specifically. They’re going to have me going
everywhere to get settled in,” Flechette said.

“It’s fine. I’m glad you survived Behemoth,” I said. “We both are,” I said.

I glanced over at Rachel, who begrudgingly nodded.

“Thank you,” the cape said, sounding amused. She added, “But I will try to stop in for a longer visit at some point. I don’t see any reason why we couldn’t work together more, your team and the Protectorate, just like the Wards do.”

I stiffened, “Is there talk that we can’t?”

“A… few people are saying things. But the Director seems to be taking it wait-and-see. I can’t tell you much else about the internal processes of… you know how it is,” she said, not even finishing the ‘I can’t tell you’ speech.

I nervously glanced over at Rachel. “Thank you for telling us.”

“You know… I can see it.”

Oh.

My face was red as she left.

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We patrolled the whole area two or three blocks from the camp. No farther than that, and we drove out any Merchants we found, and spread word that if anyone wanted a safe camp, free from the Merchant’s grasp, there was a camp within a few blocks.

It was long, tiring work, and all of the information I’d put together involving the Merchants was not only outdated, it was probably destroyed, looted, or… or actually, Dad probably took them and read them.

I wondered what he thought about the pseudo-Merchant clothes.

I wondered a lot of things, and eventually after an evening of no fights other than driving off a lot of Merchant gang-bangers hanging around the area, we went to our tents, too tired to do anything but fall asleep.

*******

There was no attack that night.

But Lisa did show up the next day, with news.

Chapter End Notes

In which I yet again apologize for getting so distracted with life and my writing that I didn’t release another chapter. I really have no good excuses other than being busy and reading too much other fiction, and neither of those is a good excuse.
Morning started slowly. We still had a lot to do. I had the bugs all laid out, and I’d put some of bees in one of the fishbowls, and I’d talked to someone working on the saddles that I thought could help with the dogs, at least for the long-term. We could really use it, especially if we were going to go on food runs.

But mostly, we had to stick close to the camp. That was the effect of the Merchants, and as long as they were out in force, we couldn’t leave camp for too long, for any reason at all.

So we had our morning. Juice pulled from a fridge, eggs, lots of eggs, most of which would have gone bad if they’d waited another day or two.

Everything could be used, I realized, as people argued and went about and somehow, it all added up to getting things done.

My bugs were everywhere, watching the tide and flow of humanity, and against my general experience tracking the gangs and the high school, watching people like this honestly made them feel…

Let me phrase it like so. The more I learned about Winslow by monitoring everything and everyone around me, the more I grew certain that the whole school was a miserable pit. Drug use, threats, arguments, spray-painting, the gangs, the way that other kids treated each other. It had made me feel trapped and oppressed at the best of times, and of course, going after gangs meant that I got to see even more of that.

Most of the people in the camp were poor. They lived amid the Merchants all of the time. Maybe some of them had even been connected to the Merchants. Maybe some of them had been Merchants. But if so, they’d run and cowered and generally acted as innocents.

Even the little things I found about the camp just seemed to reinforce my pity, at worst. There were people jonesing for a fix, there were people getting angry at their kids, or arguing with their wives or husbands. But there was also bartering, and everyone seemed to share and share alike, and everyone at least tried to keep relatively together.

Perhaps it was just a crisis situation, but it felt so open that I could get lost in watching the people, in detailing everything about them, in writing it all down for Pelter, even though I knew that there was only so much I could do.

And I was among them. And Rachel was among them, every so often, stalking through the camp. A few more refugees came in the morning, and they came with dogs. It was starting to really fill out. If it kept this up, there wouldn’t be enough room for everyone.

“Gotta check on ‘em,” Rachel said, bluntly. I followed her with my bugs as I continued to watch, letting breakfast settle.

*******

“Like this?” Greg asked with a huge grin. “And this?” He was trying to mend clothing, which had turned out to be a service that everyone needed. He was staring at the old woman, who, if money
was involved, would have been getting rich off of her skill with the needle and thread.

There weren’t clothes enough to go around that someone could afford to throw out a shirt just because it had holes, but why not fix that?

People were exchanging things like that all the time.

“No, not quite. You’re close, but if you stitch like that it’ll tear out in no time,” the woman said, sternly.

“Oh,” Greg said, slumping. “I’m hopeless!”

“It’s not that bad…” the woman shook her head. “You’re fast, at least, if you can get good. How about one more try…”

Well, I hoped he learned something by going around and asking everyone if he could help them with their jobs. This was the second person he’d badgered today, and honestly that was the word for it. He didn’t take no for an answer, and he got encouraged and discouraged far too easily. It wasn’t like some of his hobbies, where he stuck to it, this was just… almost playing around, I felt.

Not entirely bad, but he was just trying to distract himself.

Word hadn’t come back from his Mom at all. Or my father, for that matter, which meant there was still a chance he was dead.

I was worried, sure. But I was more surprised at how little it came up in my mind, and how contented I actually was. If the Merchants just fucked off and left all of us alone, I felt like things were only getting better between me and Rachel, and my powers were really coming into their own.

I wondered at myself. I was happy, despite the Merchants, despite the ruined city, despite the deaths. They hadn’t even been that long ago. Was I pushing it all into a locker to be forgotten? Or was I just… trying to move on, and succeeding, for once?

Either way, if Dad didn’t show up by tonight, I was going to have to leave Rachel behind to watch the camp and look for him.

That was in my plan for tomorrow.

In the meantime, I still had to heal. That meant eating plenty, drinking plenty, and taking it easy as far as fighting went.

The water wasn’t that hard of an issue, though it’d be even better once the plumbing and electricity were fixed up. Then we could have people squat in the apartments, or live in them, depending on circumstances.

That’d be the end of the camp, more or less, or perhaps just its transformation, though at the rate people were streaming into the camp, in ones and twos, and in families as well, it wasn’t going to be enough.

“Pelter,” I said, to her, “Tell me the names of everyone who shows up, okay?”

“Why?”

“I wrote down a bunch of names for Merchants. I can’t remember all of them… maybe not even most of them, but it’s just safe. And can someone talk to them to make sure that they’re not a trojan
horse?"

"I’m not sure if it’s necessary," Pelter said primly. "But I can do it."

"You want to believe the best of people,” I said. “I get it.” Giving people a chance was a good thing, I thought. But I wanted to be safe.

"Yeah, maybe I do,” Pelter admitted. She shook her head, looking at me for a moment, and said. "You know, sometime we should just hang out, try to get to know each other, if we’re going to be on a team."

"Maybe in a few days… if everything dies down a little?"

Pelter’s face said it all. It was pretty likely that something would keep on coming up if we kept on putting it off until there was time. I’d gotten into a rather large handful of fights in the relatively short time I was a cape, barely having time to start to settle back into a routine before another came up to upend it.

It was frustrating, really. Though of course, the largest upending I’d done myself. I didn’t know what would have happened if Behemoth hadn’t come. I wondered a little what I would have done, in that case. We’d have money, and we’d have a mission, and I was almost about to go after the Merchants anyways. Would I have run into the giant army of pseudo-parahumans (that’s what I was calling it and I was going to keep it up) and been swamped?

That seemed to make the most sense, though I wondered at the timing. It was so odd, had they been saving it for some reason?

Because if they could easily given forty people powers, then why weren’t there dozens of attacks every day? Word came in that the Merchants, as in, the regular Merchants, with one or two new members, had raided a few locations, and so they weren’t sitting on their ass. But they weren’t deploying armies of hundreds of superpowered goons.

It didn’t fit. So did that mean they’d been saving them all up for this day? If so, that was a good thing.

But what if it was just a temporary bottleneck, or the tinker would get even better at it?

I didn’t know too much about Tinkers, but I did know that they improved their powers a lot more than the average cape did. I might be getting a longer range, I wasn’t sure, and I was starting to get used to using my bugs and multi-tasking, but tinkers?

They were apparently crazy-powerful, given time or inspiration. Though I had no idea what about this tragedy, an Endbringer, could have inspired anything.

Had we hurt them a little? A lot?

I couldn’t even know, and it’d take time to figure out the truth.

Well, I’d manage, I told myself.

******

To my shame, I didn’t see Lisa coming. I was a lot better at seeing through my bugs than I was at smelling through them. Not that I couldn’t smell obvious things, and bugs had a very good sense of smell in certain respects, but I just didn’t have the experience with it. People were very visual, and I
was a person, army of bugs aside.

And Lisa came to the camp in a hoodie, with a rucksack on her back and blankets wrapped around
her, as if she were trying to take as much as she could carry. She came up to Pelter, and leaned in, a
stumble-and-bump that I didn’t pay enough attention to. I didn’t have any bugs on her, because I was
busy watching two kids playing from a distance (on the one hand) and Rachel coming back from a
shelter visit on the other hand.

It ended in Pelter racing to see me, throwing open the tent as she did. That, I noticed. I got up,
tossing down the book I’d been reading over--multi-tasking was easier the more you did it,after all--
and pulled on my mask.

Pelter knocked, politely, on the tent, even though she could have just unzipped it. I stood up, and
opened the tent. “Yes?” I asked.

“Someone said she had to talk to you, that it was very urgent,” Pelter said, taking a breath. “She said
her name was Lisa.”

Oh.

I hadn’t thought of Lisa at all in the days since Behemoth. I hadn’t even really thought about the
Undersiders. As far as I knew, they’d all lived, and I had assumed they were involved in this mess
somehow, one way or another.

I felt like her arrival had to be bad news. Maybe even very bad news.

I tried to compose myself.

*******

She came in and began to unwrap herself, began to unravel herself before me, throwing down the
bag and pulling away the hood to smile at me for a moment before apparently thinking better of it.
“Arachne. Taylor… which would you rather I call you?”

“Arachne,” I said, aware that I was being a little cold. I liked her, which was just the problem. I
shouldn’t like her as much as I did, and I shouldn’t trust her. Plus, Rachel clearly didn’t like her, and
that should count for something. Maybe even a whole lot with me.

So I tried to keep up my guard.

She looked… tired. There were dark circles under her eyes, but a gleam above the circles that
seemed to deny that it mattered. Her hair, though, was a complete mess. Her clothes were baggy
things, the kind of clothes I would have worn to try to hide my hideous body.

I knew I wasn’t pretty, and that I’d never been, but I was a little less self-conscious about it now.

I wondered, was it a defensive thing for Lisa, or part of her disguise, or did she even think to try to
dress in a way that put me at ease, that told me unconsciously that she was like me, and that,
therefore, I should like her.

I tried not to overthink it, though considering her powers, that was pretty hard.

“Oh, alright,” she said, and she sat herself down next to me, pulling away her hoodie. Underneath it she
wore a baggy white T-shirt. “So, Taylor. I’m coming here for several reasons. I can’t do all that
much for you, and I can’t tell you everything, but I did want to know: is Bitch out of the
Undersiders? For certain?"

I nodded, looking over at her. She was leaning in a little, looking me over, clearly reading the answer already.

“Yes. We’re going to fight crime together.”

“Congratulations,” Lisa said.

I looked at her, trying to figure out if she was making fun of me.

“I… hope she makes you happy. I can tell you realized just what you two were.”

Realized?

Did everybody know it before me? Maybe.

I took a deep breath, looking across at Lisa. “So, you knew.”

“Of course. I hope it goes well. You don’t share as much as… well. I’ve only read books, however, on such topics.”

Now there was a concern that wormed its way into my stomach the moment she spoke it. It was true that we didn’t have a ton of likes in common. Rachel was still learning how to read, and it’d take time before she reached an adult level, meanwhile I read a lot, though not as much lately. I liked science fiction and fantasy, and Rachel… I don’t know if she’d like it or not, but it was clear she hadn’t watched it.

Well, we both exercised! She lifted weights, and I… ran. Okay, that wasn’t much. I liked dogs, and she loved dogs, so that was again almost something.

There were the video games she’d been playing, and that was something too, wasn’t it? Still, it would have been better if I could have thought of a whole list of things we shared together.

Instead we just liked each other’s company. At least, I hoped she wasn’t annoyed when I dominated the conversation. What if she was annoyed by how I always made it about my interests? Though what were her interests, other than the dogs? I’d asked questions, so I knew some about her likes and dislikes, but really they came back to two things, at least at the moment.

Her dogs. Me.

“I’m sorry if I’ve made you worry,” Lisa said. “I was just making small talk. You’re good for each other, I think.”

“I’m not worried,” I lied.

“Oh yes. That look on your face sells it. Anyways, I’m here for news. Bitch is quitting the Undersiders, and the Undersiders… we’re getting our own territory.”

“Territory?”

“Protecting people,” Lisa said. “Controlling ground. It’s wanted by those in charge.”

Coil. Coil who had Dinah kidnapped, I thought, gritting my teeth into what even a normal person wouldn’t call a smile.
“Ah.”

“There’s more. I think he has a larger plan.”

“What kind of plan?” I asked.

Lisa smiled softly. “If I knew, I couldn’t tell you. He probably knows I came here. I can’t tell you anything, can’t say anything. But he needs more than just us, you know that. He has fingers in every pie, and with Accord coming?”

“Is that a bad thing?” I asked.

“Accord is a very methodical person,” Lisa said. “Dangerous. And there are signs that the new gang arriving are the Teeth.”

I frowned, trying to remember where…

“The gang led by the Butcher?” I asked. Everyone had heard of her.

She’d fought Legend once, and managed to get away. Her Teeth had gone on a spree in New York, and she had also been seen in Boston, and a number of other cities in the area. Cells of them came in, caused trouble for a few weeks, and then left with the loot to start it all over somewhere else. That made it hard to pin them down in time. If Legend had had weeks or months to go after the Butcher and the Teeth, he would have probably taken them all out (being a Legend and all) but they hadn’t let him do that, and he hadn’t followed them when they wound up in Buffalo for a week or two, and then…

I frowned, not remembering what the news story had said then. I’d read about it a few years ago.

“Yes,” Lisa said. “If the Butcher is here, that’s…”

“Bad. No evidence yet, just your hunches?”

“Yes,” Lisa said.

“Great, just what we need. The Butcher showing up for three weeks, in the aftermath of all of this.” I thought about it, trying to consider just what Rachel and I could do if the Butcher came calling.

I didn’t even know what all of her powers were, which was a bad sign considering she had dozens of them. I just knew that if even Legend could have trouble taking her down (though of course, she hadn’t beaten him) then…

So, I had bugs. And we had dogs. And we had Pelter.

Well, I’d better hope that she didn’t show up anytime soon.

“Yes. I hope it’s just for a few weeks.”

“That’s their MO,” I said, sure of that part.

“Hopefully so,” Lisa said, which didn’t inspire good feelings. “So, we might not meet again under the best circumstances. If so, I’m sorry for that ahead of time. I also can’t help you with expenses. Bitch isn’t an Undersider, so you’re not going to be getting any money to… live on your own. Once this camp is no longer needed.”

“We have thousands of dollars,” I pointed out, gesturing to where I kept the cash box, buried in the
ground, but easy to dig up.

“Well, that’ll get you by for a while. Neither of you exactly has expensive habits, but I wish I could do more. So you could afford more.”

It was true that we were homeless, like a goodly number of the people at this camp. But I was sure that we’d find somewhere to stay. I was still committed to that. I was going to live with Rachel for… however long I wanted to live with her.

It’d worked, the few days we had had to try it, and it could work again. “I get that. We’ll figure it out. Together.”

Lisa smiled. “I like it,” she said, absently. “But I wish I could do more than just hope it worked out. Unfortunately there’s not much to do. Rachel’s out of the Undersiders, and you no doubt have far too many targets for me to be much help in directing you towards them.”

“Yes,” I said, biting my lip. “Are you okay?”

“I suppose I am. I don’t want to take territory, it seems almost suicidal, but we should be able to hold it, if all goes well. And if it doesn’t? Perhaps I’ll visit you again.”

“How is… have you seen her?” I asked, carefully. “The lost girl?”

“Yes. She’s still alive, at least. Being used by him, the same way he uses everyone.” Lisa shook her head, and then asked, “Can I stay here a little longer?”

“Want to meet Rachel? It might be a little bit before she’s back.”

“I just want to sit down, maybe do a little bit of reading,” Lisa said. “I’ve had to walk all this way, and so…”

“Sure, what are you reading?” I glanced at the book she picked up.

“It’s on business strategies. I’m thinking of branching out,” Lisa said. “I know you don’t get a lot of books in a camp like this, now that I think of it. You want it? It has a section on budgeting that you might like.” Lisa smiled, as if she didn’t know how condescending she was being.

I could almost hear the pity, as if she thought I was stupid and couldn’t balance a budget without the help of a book.

I tensed, and opened my mouth.

“Please. I do want to feel like I’m helping you, okay?” Lisa asked, pushing the book on me. “It’s a good read.”

I frowned, and then gave a shrug. “Okay, then. Anything else you need while you’re here?”

“Give me a minute or two. Talk to me about something, please. Your day so far.”

“Well, we are starting to work on the plumbing and electricity, because we need all of those to work, and that’s the big worry. We’re also getting saddles made, which will help with the dog situation.”

“Oh, right,” Lisa said, sounding amused. “We should have gotten those made way earlier.”

“Yeah. Dogs aren’t always the most comfortable,” I admitted, with a shrug. “Besides that, though… it’s a really busy camp. There’s something going on everywhere, all the time.”
“And your powers let you see all of it,” Lisa said. She frowned a little, but in a thoughtful way. “Tell Rachel I wish her the best.”

“She’s not going to care,” I pointed out.

That was another thing about her: she didn’t give a shit about the opinion of people who didn’t matter. Whereas me? I’d cared too much about what people like Emma and Sophia thought. I didn’t know when school was coming back, except I wasn’t going.

Sophia could get her athletic scholarship and sneer at me from afar, Emma could live her whatever life: I’d say I wished both of them the best, but no, I didn’t.

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean I can’t ask.”

“I suppose so,” I said, watching as she began gathering her things up, and talking about what she’d seen.

Fire and arguments and fighting, and the Undersiders having to try to manage all of it, try to do the best they could by the people flocking for some port in the storm, when, if things got better, they’d want to get from out under their thumbs.

I couldn’t really say I pitied her all that much, but I listened, and I waved when she left.

It was only a dozen minutes later that I finally opened the book.

Money slid out. A benjamin looked straight at me, so I searched the rest of the book, and there were nineteen more of his friends waiting for me.

Couldn’t do anything… ha!

And, to complete the picture that perhaps Lisa wasn’t so bad, midway through the book, there was a note:

‘Coil and Accord=In Accord. IE: Allies. New Tinker has ties, as well. Probably has people in the E88 too, and definitely has slipped in some sort of agent in this camp. I’m not sure if I’ll get a chance to search for them. I’ll decide it when I talk to you. Which has already happened if you’re reading this.

Love--TT.’

Well, that was good information to know, if also ominous enough that I’d need to be very careful about who I told, since I knew Lisa was going out on a limb. For me? Or for herself? I didn’t know, and at the moment it didn’t matter.

I appreciated it anyways.

******

The Merchants were only gathering strength, and there was nothing I could do to easily reverse the trend. But we patrolled anyways, only occasionally reaching beyond the range of the camp, and only then reluctantly. My range seemed to fluctuate wildly, so I could never be completely sure what a day would bring, but today it was somewhat towards the lower end of things.

Which I think was a good sign, psychologically, but did mean I could look only so far.

I saw no signs of the sex slaves and the victims, though there were drugs awash in the area, and we
had to keep on pushing Merchants out.

But with Pelter going along on one trip just after noon, and us going on another after that, we were at least starting to clear out space.

The Merchants were fighting back, but not with powers. Were they gathering forces for another push? Fighting someone else?

Either way, it was starting to get into the late afternoon when we turned back towards the camp.

But when I got in range, I saw someone else.

Wearing dark cargo pants and a button-down shirt, tall and exhausted, talking to Pelter.

Dad.

“When will she be back?” Dad asked.

“I’m not sure,” Pelter said. “She’s on patrol with Bitch. Who are you again?”

“I’m… I.” Dad hesitated, and I saw him through my bugs, adjusting his glasses like he did when he was stalling for time. “I need to talk to her.”

Pelter was looking at him, trying to figure out how to tell him to go away. She wasn’t our secretary, she didn’t have to take appointments for us, or deal with our problems… but she probably didn’t want to burden us with some random crank.

I let my bugs begin to buzz and swarm around the two of them.

“What’s?” Dad asked, his eyes wide. He smelled sober, or at least not of beer, as far as I could tell, and while he looked exhausted, he didn’t look defeated, at least not to me.

I tried to focus on the bugs. If I could gather enough of them together, I could write a message.

Could I talk through them, too?

The bugs managed to fly into something vaguely like an S.

“S?” Pelter asked.

Then I worked at making a ‘T’ out of them. It was harder than it looked, since from the inside of the letters, the bugs wouldn’t be aware of how it looked, so I had to keep some of them hovering outside to serve as a perspective on the work.

“T,” Dad said.

“Stay?” Pelter asked, frowning.

The bugs buzzed louder.

“Oh,” Dad said, and I heard the relief in his voice.

********

“Rachel,” I said, glancing over at her. We were both on the same dog, my arms wrapped around her carefully, since the bruises were still a little sore.
“Yes?” she asked, turning.

“My Dad’s in camp,” I said.

“Wanna leave?” she asked. I couldn’t see her face, so I didn’t know how she meant it. But I knew she did mean it. If I said, ‘Let’s abandon this camp rather than facing my Dad’ then she would at least go along with it.

“No. I have to face him. Head on.”

Rachel’s voice sounded approving. “Okay. What do I need to do?”

“Ah,” I said. “Are you sure you wanna get involved?”

“Yes.” She didn’t even hesitate.

“Okay, then, uh… um.”

I thought about it for a moment, a long moment, as we ran along with the dogs. My throat felt dry, and my legs were twinging with a sort of mental distress. As if they were closed in, and wanted to kick out.

“Alright, you know the family dinner?” I asked. “Well, it’s tonight.”

“Oh, right,” Rachel said. “Can do.”

*******

We came in on the dogs, bringing up a cloud of debris. Dad was standing there waiting, with Pelter.

I swung off of Angelica, Brutus sniffing in behind us, and then watched as Rachel did as well.

I turned, wondering how it looked to Dad. Did he like my costume? Did he like Rachel’s?

Wait… why did I care about his opinion on that?

“Hey,” I said, stepping forward. My bugs swirled around, and a few people hurried off when it was clear they were making a wall of sorts between us and the world. They buzzed as they did, warning everyone off, thousands of insects all coming with me to create the wall.

“Dad,” I said.

Pelter startled, almost leaping up, and took a step back, though she didn’t say anything at all.

“Taylor,” he said. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to get to you earlier. The house has been looted. I got what I could out, but…”

I’d been born in that house. I’d grown up in it. It was like a nagging pain in my chest, the thought that it was gone. It wasn’t even a pain I could explain to Rachel. She’d lost her place too, but she’d never been as attached.

Two homes lost, though I’d abandoned both of them when the choice came down to Rachel or a mere place.

“Where are you living now?” I asked.
“With Kurt and Lacey. You remember them, right?”

“I do,” I said, reaching over and taking off my mask. There was no point in hiding. They were old
friends of Dad, who were Dockworkers just like him.

“There’s room for you, if you want—”

He sounded desperate, and hopeful. Maybe he thought I was desperate too, willing to throw it all
away now that I’d wound up in a camp. After all, Kurt had an actual house, with running water and
electricity, most likely.

Meanwhile, we were still working on fixing up the plumbing in a lot of the houses, and for all he
knew, it was even worse than that.

“No,” I said, cutting him off. “If you’re here to just try to bring me back, you can leave. If you want
to talk to me, though, you can. But first… you should meet my girlfriend.”

I tried to make it all sound normal. There was the family dinner still to have, and I had thoughts,
ideas. I wanted Pelter’s help and, for that matter, her presence.

Not that she was family, but she’d help smooth things over, and maybe work through it. I reached
over to pull off Rachel’s mask, and for the first time, Dad saw her.

He took a step back, mostly because she was glaring at him.

“Rachel,” I said, a little chidingly.

Rachel took a breath, and her glare became a stare. “Okay.”

“So this is Rachel Lindt, Dad.” I reached my hand out to grab his and pull it towards hers. “We’re
dating, and that’s not going to change. We’re living together too.”

“Taylor,” Dad said, dismay obvious in his eyes, “I…”

“Would be happy to eat dinner with my daughter?” I asked. “I’m glad you agree!”

I didn’t smile, because there was Rachel to consider, but I tried to channel something chipper and
unlikely to take a hint. I managed to push his hand into hers, and so he shook it, glancing down at the
gloves as he did.

“I suppose so, Taylor, but this is a lot to take in.”

“How do you think it feels for me?” I asked, reached up and giving him a quick hug, breaking away
before he could react and turning to Rachel. “That’s, you know, love.”

“Love?”

“Love,” I said.

Rachel seemed pleased, looking at me with this sort of possessive quirk of her lips, one that didn’t
quite turn into a smile.

“Hey, Pelter. Could you make sure we have food? And if you wouldn’t mind, could you sit in on the
meal? Let’s call it a team meal, on top of being a family dinner.”

“Team?” Dad asked, as Pelter frowned, clearly trying to think it through.
“Yes. Arachne, Bitch, and Pelter. Three heroes, trying to make Brockton Bay a better place.” I looked at him, willing him to remember when that was what he wanted, when he’d said that’s why he kept on working on the Ferry.

Dad seemed to shrink a bit. He was a little gawky, a little too awkward for me to be afraid of him. I was in control, I told myself. It was he who was eating in my house, metaphorically speaking, rather than the other way around. We were in charge, and he was the supplicant.

If he didn’t know how to bend to the facts, then he’d be the one leaving, not Rachel. I was safe, I wasn’t going to be hurt and broken down and then shoved into some small, dark space by some well-meaning fatherly intervention. I wondered what I’d have done if he had done that a little later…

Probably the same thing I did, but would it have gone differently?

After all, the Endbringer attack would have come, and I’d still be at home. Would I have gone with Rachel, or would she have not gone. What if the Endbringer attacked, would she have…

My hands were trembling, my word had for a brief moment shrunk, and then I pulled out of it, my heart still racing with something bizarre, the fear of what might have been, how easily both of us could have died in the fight.

What would I have done then? I didn’t know at all. “Okay?” I asked, aware that I’d trailed off for a moment.

“I… can do that, Taylor. A dinner.”

“If we did it, it’d have to be… maybe in one of the apartments? Or out of the way?” Pelter asked, frowning a little. She shifted, clearly trying to consider the logistics of it, whereas what I wanted was for all of us to sit together, and then we can work from there.

“If that’s what works,” I said, glancing over at Rachel. “We don’t need to wear our costumes, do we?”

“N-not if you don’t want to,” Pelter said.

“Good.” I looked at Dad and said, “Please excuse us for a while to get changed. We’ll be back in a little bit.”

“Okay, Taylor,” he said.

“Also, don’t use my name until we’re in private,” I added. “I mean, if you talk to anyone in camp.”

*******

I took Rachel’s clothes off, and then looked around. We didn’t have much to wear, formal wise. Clothes didn’t matter anyways, or at least that’s what I’d decided I was going to think. But I needed something a little nice. There was a dark green blouse that sort of fit her, though she had a stocky frame that didn’t quite work with the shirt. And then, well, jeans for her.

There was no point dressing her up pretty, because it didn’t matter, and it wasn’t her. This wasn’t some movie, she wasn’t going to wear a dress and suddenly fit into everyone’s beauty standards or whatever.

Me? I decided to put on shorts, and then… well, I supposed that I could wear a green shirt to match with her. I looked her over.
She needed a shower, just like I did, and there was some dirt on her ankle.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Chased a dog in the backyard. Didn’t want a shot,” Rachel said.

I smiled fondly, imagining her stomping in the dirt after the dog, trying to coax it to get in. So that’s what she’d been doing.

“Ah, well, no worries. He’s not looking at your ankles,” I said, running a hand through her hair. “Just… be as polite as you can. If he bares his teeth, I’ll tell him not to, but he doesn’t mean it.”

Rachel glanced around. “And afterwards?” she asked.

“We could read together, relax… I’m not going back with him, I already said that, and he’s not staying here. He can visit, that’s what I plan on telling him, but he’s not going to be determining our lives.” I swallowed a little. It felt so odd to say that about Dad, because, well, he was Dad. I’d run away, but now I was… well, making it official. “And the worst he can do is say things.”

“Words,” Rachel said, dismissively, with a snort.

“Yeah,” I said. I reached out, to run my hand briefly over Rachel’s face, as if reassuring myself that it was there. “So, we all ready?”

“Why not?”

******

The table was an old wooden one, and the apartment in general smelled like an old folk’s apartment. We were all seated around the round table, all four of us. The dishes had been brought up, and now they were spread over the tables.

Canned green beans, instant potatoes, boiled chicken, some sweet potatoes that had somehow been dragged up from somewhere, and then - tossed onto the table like they were for anyone to pick up - a number of candy bars. That was dessert, of course, I thought, leaning back a little. Pelter was on one side, next to Dad.

And then I was next to Rachel, who had her napkin bunched up in her lap, and was looking around suspiciously.

The apartment was in decent shape, but very old, the furniture cared for but shaken and rattled up. There hadn’t been anything more than old knick-knacks falling off the shelves, but the place still looked deserted in a way that I couldn’t quite describe.

“Sorry this is all we have. We can grab more if we need it,” Pelter said, apologetically.

“Don’t worry, it’s fine,” I said, glancing over at Rachel. “The meat’s the important part. There’s plenty here for everyone.”

“A grocery store is going to open up near Kurt and Lacey’s,” Dad said. “We’re going to go for a run there soon.”

“That’s interesting,” I said, blankly. I wondered whether he was trying to entice me with food. If so, it wasn’t going to work.
“If the roads get repaired well enough to get through, I bet that you could just order food and have it shipped in,” Dad said.

I nodded, thinking it was a good idea, but Pelter - out of costume, so I really should be thinking of her as Stefanie - shook her head. “It’s a good idea, but with what money? Feeding as many people as we have now, just by buying it, would cost hundreds of dollars every day. Donations, though… that’s the next step, I think.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Ask people for shit?” Rachel added, sounding a little skeptical.

“Yes,” Stefanie said. “It might not be enough, but people donating food can know it’s going to be used. And if we combine it with purchases, it’d go further.”

“Rachel, would it be possible to put any of that money towards paying for the camp?”

Rachel frowned, and I could imagine her doing the kind of mental calculations that the money wouldn’t last that long if spread out helping other people. Even with what Lisa had given us, running a camp was really expensive. It wasn’t something you did on spare money laying around.

And we weren’t going to be getting any more money, were we? I had no idea how we were going to get more. But I knew she had her own ambitions. Sort of, at least. There were a lot of homeless dogs around, and considering that at least some of them had been brought into the shelter… the shelter was going to be overflowing before too long.

Which meant they had to be treated well and then, what?

Given away?

Plus, I did need money to work on building confinement for all the bugs.

“Some, sure,” she said, after a long pause.

“Well, we’ll see,” I said. “It’s not necessary now. I’m not sure what else we can do.”

Dad, surprisingly helpfully, had more to say to that. “Fundraising.”

“How?” Stefanie asked, as Rachel began to load up on food. I did too. There was no use letting it go to waste.

“Well, I have some experience with it, and you need to go on the offensive. Or at least, send requests for food aid out. You can’t assume that everyone knows your plight, even if you have studies that show that the average person agrees with you.” Dad said it bitterly, though the fast way he was talking made me think that he was getting into it. “You have to get in contact with various groups, get a wide spread. Churches, union groups, police, firefighters, the government… everyone has something they can do, if you just… you have sway, and you have a cause. And it’s not even one that people can argue with politically.”

Dad leaned back with a sigh, and I knew he was thinking of his own failures, his own misery. But the fact that he was thinking at all, rather than grabbing for a beer--and this was, at least so far, an alcohol free family dinner--that was a good sign.

Maybe he needed a cause to work for, something to work towards.
We ate in between him talking with Stefanie, briefly distracted.

Hopefully he wouldn’t notice that Rachel’s table manners were pretty bad. She didn’t wipe her face when she should, and I wasn’t the moron who was going to wipe off some of the potato from her lip like she was a child.

Or lick it off, since that’d be a little… much.

Maybe. Probably. Right?

Finally, though, Dad wound down a little, and his attention once again went back to Rachel. “So, Rachel, you’re dating my daughter?”

“Yes,” Rachel said, annoyed that he was asking something so obvious, frowning a little bit as she grabbed another chicken breast with a fork. She ate a lot, but then she exercised a lot too, and I really had no ground to complain about the results.

At all.

“Well, can I know more about you?”

“Yes.”

I tried not to laugh. She might think I was laughing at her, when I wasn’t.

The look on my Dad’s face, though, was priceless.

“Um, what are your interests?”


“And…”

“Well, she has some games that are alright,” Rachel said, her face pinched. “Is that not enough, or something?”

“No. I just mean, it doesn’t seem like… Taylor's a very special--”

I wanted to hide somewhere.

“I know,” Rachel said. “That’s why I like her.”

Now my face was burning, and I wanted to hide somewhere, because it was probably the last thing he wanted to have in his head, especially combined with the glance she gave me.

“Oh,” Dad said faintly, cowed by his knowledge that she didn’t just mean in some platonic, nice, totally non-physical way. He wasn’t used to people being so direct with him, at least not off the job, and he was viewing this through the wrong lens.

“You were a villain, weren’t you? And you stopped?”

“Taylor asked me to,” Rachel said, darkly. “So I did.”

I had to fight not to smile, because it felt like something I’d done. And something that she’d listen to me, since she wouldn’t to just anyone.
Dad didn’t really have an answer to that, so he just gaped at us for a moment. “So, Taylor, how did you meet?”

It was like he was interviewing us for some couple’s profile, I thought. “We beat up nazis together,” I said bluntly. “Well, a dog fighting ring. I showed up, she showed up—”

“She didn’t get in the way. She helped,” Rachel said, glancing over at Stefanie as if to say ‘Learn from that.’

“Yeah. So we broke it up together, and after we talked for a little, I wound up going to help her with her dogs,” I said. “I should go and help you again, actually.” She’d been doing it on her own because I’d been watching the camp, but if things ever did settle down any, it’d be important for me to get back into doing it. Because she valued people who were willing to get their hands dirty, in a very literal way. I didn’t want to come off as if I thought I was too good to help her with her dogs.

“Sure,” Rachel said.

I glanced over at Dad. “And that’s how it went. Then… well, we got to know each other more. Helping with the dogs became reading to her, and going out to eat with her, and then… a girl can have her secrets, can’t she?” I wasn’t sure how to explain the offer of sex, and how I’d reacted and what I’d done. It hadn’t completely made sense to me, and I knew that, despite having no power, Dad wasn’t necessarily going to be willing to hear everything. “One thing led to another, and now we’re dating.”

“Oh,” Dad said, and his frown was almost thoughtful. As if he was actually hearing my words.

“Are you going to be alright, with Kurt and Lacey?” I asked.

“I… think so. I worry.”

Rachel frowned, perhaps taking it that he was worrying about leaving me with her.

“I can handle it,” I said. “I hope, at least. And I can handle it because of who I have with me, not in spite of it.”

Dad tensed, and I knew that in other circumstances, this would be an argument. It’d be something I had to win in order to have the right to continue to see Rachel. But he didn’t have control over the situation, and he hadn’t grabbed it with any of his questions, hadn’t found some way, without even meaning it, to tear me down.

“They work together quite well,” Stefanie added, seriously. “I… don’t want to intrude on your family dinner too much.” She’d been very quiet, very respectful. I knew she had plenty she could have said.

“I invited you for a reason,” I said. “Dad, what else are you worried about?”

“It’s a hard time in Brockton Bay. You’re… involved in the cape scene. And were for months, without telling me.”

I couldn’t say: what would you have done? Because it was a valid question, but not one that’d help anything. I wanted to say it, though, and I reached out to squeeze Rachel’s hand, something that made her look at me, confused.

I didn’t want to tear him down, either. “It’s not that easy. But we’re trying. S… Pelter here, she’s helping us. She’s working with us. We’re going to do the best we can. Yes, it’s dangerous, but that
just means you try harder.”

Rachel approved, and squeezed my hand. He had to know what she was doing, and he had to know my heart at least as well to tell just how much I loved her. Surely, he hadn’t raised someone only to not know them.

Not know them, as opposed to being confused by them: it was one thing to not approve, but not see? Surely he could see.

“I suppose so, Taylor,” Dad said. “You know, it’s just, there’s word about people dying, a lot of people, about the Merchants, and the E88, and--”

I don’t think he liked Rachel, but then she wasn’t exactly chatting politely with him, was she? But he saw that there was no way around it.

I gave her hand another squeeze, and Rachel chimed in. “I’ll protect her.”

Dad opened his mouth to say something to that.

“She’ll protect me,” she cut in, answering a question I wasn’t sure he had. “Everything else’s just words.”

The words died in his throat, and he choked on them.

A little nervously, but without smiling, Stefanie said, “The chicken is good, isn’t it?”

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“Taylor, I’m… not sure at all. But it’s your choice, now it is, and… I want to see you again.”

“Feel free to visit, and… do I have permission?”

“For what?”

“I’m going to get my GED. I’ve been through too much, and it’s best just to not look too far back. There’s a future to see to.”

Dad winced. “I deserve that, don’t I?”

“How am I to know who deserves what?” I asked, thinking about Behemoth. People had died, whether they deserved to or not. It wasn’t something you liked to think of.

Dad leaned down a little. “I love you.”

I didn’t say I was glad to hear it. Sometimes a little subtlety was appreciated. Or basic tact. Instead, I hugged him back, glancing at Rachel standing off to the side, waiting. My body still felt a little sore, but… we’d landed on our feet, in a sense. More than some had.

“I love you too, Dad.”

He left, and the night was ours, and the day after.
Thus ends Arc for, except for the Interludes.
Rabid 4-A

Chapter Notes

Please tell me if you can't read the link. A lot of the heavy lifting was done by my best friend, NemoMarx, without whom this chapter never would have happened.

Please check it out, it's very good, and it took a lot of work.

If anyone cannot read the link, I have a textual version as well... it's simply that it misses a lot of the cool nuances we managed to throw together.

http://alimar88.freehostia.com/rabid4a.html#boston
Rabid 4-B (Stefanie)

Chapter Notes

I, unfortunately, wasn't able to figure out how to transfer the plain text for 4-A, for those who weren't able to read the link. I mean, not without having to go through the whole thing to add bold and underline and etc.

Anyways, here's Stefanie.

Maybe Stefanie should be used to it by now. Her mother is a caterer, someone who deals with these kinds of problems, but that didn’t mean it was any more palatable. Or rather, she had all of the skills needed to take the lead, but Stefanie wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do with them.

Her mother and father had both known about her power for two months before she’d almost gotten enough courage to go out. It’d been in the plan, and Stefanie was a girl who liked plans. She’d step out Friday night, beat up a few Merchants, and then she’d see how she felt after that.

Then, Thursday, on had come Behemoth.

Her power wasn’t that impressive, she knew that there were a lot better powers out there. She could throw something with pretty good accuracy, and quite a bit of force. But the materials seemed to matter. The harder the material, the farther and faster she could throw it. And her arm somehow got tired if she did it for too long. It was literally throwing it: not some sort of weird launching mechanic, but as if she were holding a dart and trying to hit a bullseye.

Of course, when her father had, as a joke, taken her to a bar and grille to play darts with all of his old friends, she’d won every single time, right up until she’d been unable to hold back enough and had broken the dartboard.

It was the kind of power that was very good at beating up mundane criminals, but didn’t seem like much use against, say, giant dogs.

She wondered if they were just letting her on the team because of pity, or because they had to since it was her camp they were protecting.

Certainly, she didn’t have to wonder whether or not she was a third wheel, because Rachel and Taylor were so wrapped up in each other, they were like two halves of a pretzel.

...okay, not the best metaphor, but she’d been hungry when she’d thought of it.

At least the two weren’t so wrapped up in each other that they were unable to do things. Rachel cared for her dogs all the same, and if she was careful she could lure Taylor out into helping with things. Her bug powers and the ability it gave her to play Big Brother meant that she had a lot to contribute.

Sometimes, though, this power led to situations like this. Situations where she stood right next to Taylor as the girl sat and read a book.

“What are you doing?” Stefanie asked. “Besides reading.”
“Watching Bitch. To make sure that she’s alright.” Taylor was slightly older than her, and once she’d started to relax her paranoia, she’d been a lot more willing not to wear her costume everywhere. Of course, once she’d thought about her costume she’d had a thousand suggestions for Pelter’s.

“I’m sure she’s…” Stefanie began, and then she realized it was pointless. She needed to focus on battles she could win. “So, when is the first patrol? Searching for Kayla? And pushing the Merchants back?”

“Soon,” Taylor said, and then she frowned. “Tomorrow.” She sounded as if she were making up her mind, or maybe pushing the issue. She looked up at Stefanie with those eyes of hers, as if she expected Stefanie to read something in them, and said, “How’s the camp doing?”

“We’re working on the plumbing right now. Plumbing, and then power. But we may need to see whether any of that stuff is in Merchant territory. The grid itself is pretty fragile if the Merchants want to mess with it.” She frowned. She could totally believe that the Merchants would do that, just like she could believe anything of the E88, but she hoped that they wouldn’t have to fight that too much.

The sooner that the apartments started to get toilets, sewer systems, and consistent running water, the sooner the camp could move inward a little bit. It’d be safer, at least, though at the rate the camp was expanding, there’d still be plenty of people camped out.

It was becoming its own little town, and that cost a lot… if they operated on money, then it’d already be doom and gloom. As it was, Stefanie was just barely able to get by.

“We can do that,” Taylor said, intensely. “We’ll see how well they can block it once they’re mauled.”

Stefanie tried not to wince. Taylor Hebert seemed to have no problem with violence as a first resort. For that matter, Stefanie didn’t… much? But Taylor seemed like the kind of person who might almost go too far.

She must have winced despite herself, because Taylor turned away from her book.

“What is it?” she asked, frowning.

“Sorry, just not used to violence.”

“Oh, right. I’m just… I’ve been in a lot of it.”

“I know,” Stefanie said. “I followed that kind of thing online, because I wanted to see what it was like, being an independent hero. I don’t think I really learned anything that would prepare me, though.”

“Well…” Taylor considered it for a moment, and then patted down next to her. Up close, she looked even thinner, and pretty tall, all things considered. “You just learn as you go. You figure out better ways to use your powers.”

Stefanie nodded. “And you make friends? Or at least, you did.”

“Well, I met Rachel, and I met Lisa, and I already had Greg… there isn’t really anyone else, is there?” Taylor shrugged.

“Nobody at school?”

“Just Greg,” she said.
Stefanie didn’t know how much to push. She’d never been like that at all: she’d always been at the center of a wide group of people. Not the heart, no, nothing like that. She’d been at the center in the same way that an axle was the center of a wheel.

Stefanie made things happen, but… mostly that could look a little boring from the inside. Who wanted to be indispensable and still ignored? Taylor had been different, though.

She’d become an actual hero. But she’d also apparently had it worse. That just made Stefanie think more of the strange, lovestruck girl. It’s easy to succeed when things were going well. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s fine,” Taylor said. “What about you?”

“I know a lot of people, but I’m not sure how many would be friends, let alone BFFs.”

“BFFs?” Taylor asked. Taylor looked at Stefanie, and the question was obviously in her head.

“Y-yeah,” Stefanie said. Were BFFs something that people who were in High School didn’t have anymore? She wouldn’t know. “Anyways, so what do you like to do? I still want to hang out sometime, if we can find time between all of this work.”

“I like to read, and I like science-fiction.”

“Neat. I like science,” Stefanie said, trying to find a connection. She’d always found sci-fi to be a little odd, in its own way.

Taylor didn’t smile back at her, but then the other girl didn’t seem to smile much, if at all. At least, not so far.

“Well, if we ever get any books…”

“We could start a club?” Stefanie asked, and then fidgeted, aware that her inclination to start clubs, or at least to always join things, was probably not shared by Taylor. Or maybe it was, if this whole… team thing was going to last. She knew she had only a little bit to contribute, but she was going to try her best.

“I was thinking we could talk about what we’d read,” Taylor said, a little absently.

“That makes sense. And… what else?”

“I read fantasy as well, and literature in general… and then there’s video games.”

“Oh, right, you and Greg,” Stefanie said. Did Taylor know that he was sweet on her? Or had been? It seemed pretty obvious, but then Stefanie might just be missing something.

“Yeah. Video games kinda bind us together,” Taylor said, casually. “You know, he has to know that it’d go badly.”

“What?” Stefanie asked, suddenly worried.

“Oh, he’s just trying to set up tents, and failing.” She sometimes talked like that, just switching out as if everyone had her power and could, therefore, monitor entire city blocks effortlessly.

“Is he…” Stefanie began.

“What?” Taylor asked.
“He seems very enthusiastic, but he hasn’t stuck to anything so far. It makes me worried about him.”

“Don’t be. That’s just how Greg is. He gets enthusiastic very easily. Obsessive, sometimes.” Taylor shook her head, though it sounded like she was fond of him. “Just don’t let him roll over you, and he’ll be fine.”

“Maybe,” Stefanie said. She’d known people who reminded her of Greg that she had really disliked, though he seemed so earnest that it was hard not to want to give him a chance. Though his bungling did make it seem as if he was a little long on legs and short on arms, as her father would say.

He was a big sports buff, though she’d never actually heard another living being use that phrase. It made her imagine Greg as a T-Rex. A very, very nerdy T-Rex. That was the kind of image that lightened her day, and helped her get through tough times.

“Do you have any concerns?”

“I… hope I can do well enough on patrol.”

“Listen, don’t worry about it,” Taylor said, moving forward slightly as if she were about to hug Stefanie, but then stopping, and almost looking startled. She grunted, in a way that reminded Stefanie of Rachel, and said. “Your power’s not bad, really, and it can be useful. Let’s get you diamonds to throw.”

“Diamonds?” Stefanie asked. “Isn’t that a little like…”

“What?”

“Bribery?” Stefanie asked.

Taylor let out a loud bark of laughter, and admitted, “Maybe. But imagine a little, tiny diamond that you flicked at someone. A sort of diamond bullet?”

“I could probably kill someone,” Stefanie said. She frowned. “I’d need to be careful.”

“We have a lot of money coming in… though not really enough for diamond bullets. But we could get you steel ball-bearings. That’d do wonders. I wonder if you could throw a handful of them? Or of anything? Like shotgun bullets.”

Stefanie had thought about that, actually. But only after a few weeks of tooling around with different materials. “Huh,” she said. “I’d thought of that, but maybe I really should test it? My power is throwing, not just throwing one thing.”

“That makes sense,” Taylor said. “Well, I think…”

And there it was. It was back to professional talk, but honestly Arachne seemed a lot more comfortable standing in that sort of area. Stefanie wasn’t sure why, but it was another thing that made her think. Taylor was practical, intelligent, vicious, blunt and through her powers, a bit of a know-it-all when it came to camp problems.

It was a rather startling combination, obviously. But very impressive. She could sort of see how two people who were that practical and… able to agree on methods would wind up partners. And despite being a little nicer up front, Taylor didn’t seem to really beat around the bush.

With Stefanie. Or with her father, for that matter. Though maybe that was new? Stefanie didn’t really know what to think about the family.
Patrolling was very task-oriented too. Bitch--she hated the name, but it’d be rude to point that out--had two dogs. Taylor had to be on the back of one, and Rachel the other, because they growled and didn’t obey her. When she’d tried to give them an order, Arachne had stopped her, and told her not to ever give the dogs any orders unless she had permission.

Stefanie had felt hurt, but had to assume that there was a good reason for it.

So, on the back of the dogs they moved in order to spread out Taylor’s range, and when they came across trouble, Taylor usually smoked them out with bugs.

That was when Pelter came in, really. She knew that for most of the criminals that were being beaten from afar. But for whatever reason, Taylor wanted Stefanie to show off, and so she did, with chunks of rock and even a paper wad or two.

It wasn’t hard, really, and far less stressful than she expected.

A team made everything easier, she thought. It meant that she could focus on her next move. The fight against Behemoth, and the night-fight against the fake capes had both been terrifying, and probably it’d be a lot more stressful when it came down to fighting real threats. But she’d been scared that even a few criminals with guns would be enough to threaten her.

Now, with three people working together, it was only really the dangerous capes that were a big threat.

Stefanie was smiling as she ended the patrol.

Of course, it was a good mood that would only last as long as it took before someone came to her with even more problems.

*****

Her father was a short-stout man, his hair greying and falling out, shorter than her mother, even, and he looked tired and worn out.

“Hey Dad, you okay?”

“Yeah. Fine. We’ve just been working on the plumbing. I’m gonna get it, don’t you worry. I know how to do that sort of thing.” Dad was a sort of amateur handi-man, a skill that had little with his own job, which had been, at least until Behemoth had come three, working with charities in the funding side of things.

He was the kind of person who wore a suit and argued for donations from rich people. That’s how he’d met Mom, actually. She was catering for a benefit dinner for kids who would have possibly killed to eat food that good, and he was there to smile and shake hands.

He shook her hand, and Stefanie knew, but didn’t like to think about, what came next. Marriage, eventually, and then her.

Her parents at least weren’t as public and obvious about it was Taylor and Rachel, that would have been horrible otherwise.

“Yeah, that’s good. But what am I supposed to do? Someone came to me, and they were like: ‘Hey, this one neighbor is making way too much noise.’ I talked to them, and apparently their kids were
homesick. I could... find toys for them. I have a few. But I’m not sure if it’d solve it, and it’s not like
my power helps.”

“You were always good at solving problems,” her Dad pointed out, stretching out a little.

“Maybe. But finding money to provide things to distract the kids would only help a little. Ultimately,
it’s people and friction. We can move tents, I guess, but what happens when everyone demands it?”

These were pressing logistical problems, ones that didn’t really have easy answers. She would do
what she could, but she wasn’t sure how much that actually was. It was constant work, and at least
she was good at it.

Okay at it.

...Not bad at it.

The money didn’t exist, but that was a problem that she’d just have to get used to. It wasn’t as if it
wasn’t one that her Dad hadn’t dealt with all the time. That was just how it went, and you learned to
deal.

So that’s where she was, and she thought it was okay. She had Arachne and Bitch as part of a team,
and as long as they tolerated her and she was able to do for them.

Things were fine.

Then came Hurricane Cassie.

******

She popped up bright and early, with a smile of approximately all of the wattage imaginable, and a
lot to say.

Cassie was a pretty striking person. It was the blue eyes that really caught you first, made you
wonder whether you’d missed something. Her skin was a slightly lighter shade of brown than
Stefanie’s, and her hair was dark brown, worn long and, if Stefanie didn’t miss her mark,
straightened. Compared to that, the eyes stood out.

She was dressed in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that read “In the Doghouse.”

“Hey. Um, I know you don’t know me. And neither does anyone else here. I went looking, but you
were busy... I suppose Arachne would know then? Anyways, I was just talking, I mean. I come
from the Bitch Zone.”

“The... what?” Stefanie asked. For a dorky moment she thought it had to do with the Twilight Zone,
only sexist. Or something.

“It’s this website, where we’re all fans of Bitch.”

Stefanie barely kept herself from asking why. She really didn’t see it, and looking at Cassie she tried
to find... something? What were you supposed to see when you met someone obsessed with Bitch,
of all capes. “Okay then.”

Actually, Stefanie could kind of see it, a little. The blunt practicality, the no-nonsense thing. Neither
Arachne nor Bitch seemed like sorts who took doo-doo or doubted themselves for more than three
seconds at a time. That’s what it seemed like, at least, and she hadn’t really seen much that
contradicted that.

So maybe?

“Anyways, so we were thinking, we know you need money. For the camp. And Bitch is on a team with you, right?”

“Yes… ?” Stefanie was unable to keep it from turning into a question.

“Good, good! So I had, um, some money here. I’m not sure whether you can use it directly until you can take a trip to a store. There are some stores, actually. I have some written down on a map here, because not everywhere is open yet. You could go, and then pick up stuff to haul back. Like, on dog-back?”

Stefanie almost wanted to laugh at the torrent of words. Cassie looked no older than her, but very different in some ways. Just so much energy, and focus. “So, you know, if you have… people ready to donate money, then why not also donate goods. Canned food would be great. Or if anyone knows how to rig up electrical wire, that’d be good too.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea,” Cassie said, with a nod. “Should I be writing it down?”

“I’m… not sure.” Stefanie frowned, and then admitted. “Maybe? How many people are wanting to donate?”

“I’m not sure yet. I wanted to check with you first. I sent the message out, but I’m not sure who else will say things. DarkValley said she’s giving her fic donations to--”

“Who?” Stefanie asked.

“You don’t know DarkValley? Oh, sorry,” Cassie admitted, with a smile that was still bright and a little startling.

“No. I apologize for not--”

“No, no, it’s my fault.” Cassie took a breath. “I get too excited. And online, it doesn’t really matter. So.” She cleared her throat, and held out a hand. “Good afternoon, my name is Cassie, and I have an offer for you.”

Stefanie had to keep a smile from her face as she held out her hand and took Cassie’s warm, worn hand in hers. “A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Cassie. I am Pelter.”

“You don’t know DarkValley? Oh, sorry,” Cassie admitted, with a smile that was still bright and a little startling.

“No. I apologize for not--”

“No, no, it’s my fault.” Cassie took a breath. “I get too excited. And online, it doesn’t really matter. So.” She cleared her throat, and held out a hand. “Good afternoon, my name is Cassie, and I have an offer for you.”

Stefanie had to keep a smile from her face as she held out her hand and took Cassie’s warm, worn hand in hers. “A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Cassie. I am Pelter.”

“That’s a nice name. So, I was thinking, if I had an escort, I could drop off money every week, with a receipt. And food obviously would come faster than that.”

“You have this all planned out, don’t you?” Stefanie said.

“Sorry. The idea sort of just came to me.” Cassie didn’t look dejected, though. If she said no, for some bizarre reason, it felt like Cassie would just try to find another way forward. Enthusiasm and a seeming willingness to see it through? That was pretty nifty.

“Please, don’t be. This… this could really help things. Thank you. We need to talk more, and you probably should talk to some of the other people in charge of this camp. And Arachne and Bitch.”

Cassie froze. “Maybe? I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Stefanie asked. “They’re nice, and I know you’re a fan of Bitch?”
Cassie fidgeted. “I mean, but if I meet her, and I say... nah. I can do this.” She nodded to herself, her brief moment of uncertainty pushed aside in a way that Stefanie couldn’t have ever managed.

So many people around her were so confident. Arachne, Bitch, and now this new girl. Sure of themselves. Or mostly sure. Most of the time.

“You’re right. So, we need to keep in touch, to organize this. Hmm... oh. Too bad this area doesn’t get cell-tower reception. We should fix that for communication. I was going to give you this old backup phone I had.” Cassie looked thoughtful. “If that’s not insulting?”

“Of course not. There’s a lot of things we have to get online before we worry about whether people will be able to text or not.”

“You’re right. Just trying to think of options. We should figure this all out.”

Cassie was very smart, very driven, and very, very... either hero-worshipy, smitten, or both with Bitch. It was an odd combination, to say the least. It kinda annoyed Stefanie to think that Bitch had an entire fanbase and hadn’t even known it.

Of course, she hadn’t brought that up at all when it came time for the interview, and how Cassie had managed to swing that, she didn’t know. But she was sure Cassie had done it, because the other girl had a smile on her face when she showed up right after it.

The reporter had interviewed everyone, and she’d been nervous and scared that she’d say something wrong and ruin it, but it’d all passed pretty well, and Arachne’s answers were all really good, while Bitch had grunted and answered questions meant to have long answers with: ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’

But somehow, it had all worked out, and the money that flowed in started to make Stefanie feel as if it was going to work. It’d only been a week and a little since Behemoth, and they were already starting to get the plumbing under control.

And Stefanie was starting to feel comfortable around Arachne/Taylor.

Bitch, on the other hand?

Cassie was there at the shelter, of course, when Stefanie dropped by. Caring for all the dogs, when she wasn’t fundraising and going across the city so fearlessly that Stefanie worried for her every time she showed up five minutes late.

She really needed an escort of something, but who was supposed to do that?

Not Stefanie.

Still, for the moment things were good, and she sometimes came with the patrols. Somehow picked up when they were going to be going, and went near them, so that there were people to bail her out.

Which was clever, Stefanie had to give her that.

On Saturday, they unveiled the monument, and Arachne didn’t go. So neither did Bitch. But what did come in were more donations. Some of them pretty weird, really. Or, not weird, but dog food
and collars and dog toys all seemed… well, didn’t Bitch already have them?

But Stefanie decided to tell Bitch that she had them anyways, in case she wanted to use them.

Which meant walking to the shelter. She wasn’t afraid, because Arachne had said, “My range is a little longer today.” Which Stefanie knew meant that she could actually see the shelter, and that meant that if she was attacked, she’d have backup soon.

The shelter looked bursting full, and Stefanie wondered if now was the time to bring up perhaps adopting some of the puppies and young dogs they’d found out. Surely, with Arachne and Bitch right there to watch them, nothing bad would happen?

The whole place smelled like dog, which wasn’t exactly the nicest thing. Stefanie tried to remind herself not to smile. Arachne had told her about that the other day, which explained… some things. Like how Arachne basically never smiled. Even when she wasn’t in Bitch’s presence. Though at least basically never wasn’t never. It was weird, that’s what it was.

She walked past dogs, running around her feet, chasing each other and playing, and saw Cassie in a short-sleeve shirt and a pair of shorts, leaning against a wall.

“Hey, things going alright?”

“Harder than I thought it’d be, but really fun, caring for the dogs.” Cassie smiled wide. “But there’s something weird about… stuff.”

“You know not to smile, right?” Stefanie said.

“I’ve heard about that from Arachne. She was here last night. Bitch acts so different around her.”

“Ah, too sappy for you?” Stefanie asked.

“No, it’s really cute and I fly that ship and all of that. But Bitch gets short with me, and orders me around more when Arachne’s here. Like she doesn’t like me. She also asked me about you.”

“What about me?”

“Just what I was like. What I’d said. She also practices reading, when Arachne’s not around. And when she is around, together.”

“Oh?” Stefanie asked. “She’s not a very good reader? I’d noticed them reading together, was that…”

“Yeah,” Cassie said. “Don’t talk to her about that either. But she’s still really cool. And… stuff.” Cassie looked away, blushing. Was she going to explain that? No, Stefanie would have to just work that out herself.

Was it some sort of crush? But then why would she approve of Arachne and Bitch being together. And if it was a crush, it was the most doomed one ever. But wait, maybe that was it? Was Bitch… nah. Couldn’t be.

“So, where is she?”

“She’s out back, playing with the dogs.”

******

One, or maybe two, people were very attracted to her… or maybe more than that. Stefanie looked at
Rachel as she knelt in the muck, petting one of the dogs when it’d retrieved the object for her, and didn’t even see it. Heck, except for one person, Rachel probably wouldn’t even care about that.

“Hey,” Stefanie said, making sure not to smile.

“What?”

“Some more donations came in. Dog toys, this one random shirt… two random shirts. All sorts of things,” Stefanie said. “I thought about asking Arachne whether you’d want any of them, but there’s dog food, toys, collars…”

“So?” she asked, standing up. The dog she was so lovingly rewarding was this big, ugly mutt that looked like it could bite someone in half without Bitch’s power to amp it up. She was a total mess, she needed a shower badly, and Stefanie wondered how someone as cool as Arachne… no, not the right sort of thought.

“Well, just wanted you to know. You have a lot of fans, you know that? I don’t know how many, but.”

“Where though?” Rachel asked, with a snort. “Online, mostly. Words, words, words.”

“And money, money, money,” Stefanie said. Bitch tensed, and she realized she’d given a grin without realizing it. “But anyways, I just wanted to check. The shirts are for you. They’re… interesting.”

Rachel didn’t say anything.

“Do you not like me?”

“You’re fine,” Rachel said. Dismissively. As if fine was a very low bar and Stefanie had just barely cleared it.

“Then what is it?” Stefanie asked, hurt. She didn’t really care about Bitch’s opinion of her that much, but she didn’t like the idea of being disliked, and Arachne cared a lot about what Bitch thought. They were both so wrapped up in each other.

“Why do you care?”

“Because I’m part of the team and I want to help.”

“Get a shovel. There’s shit that needs to be cleared out here,” Rachel said. It was a challenge, but Stefanie had no idea how you were just supposed to knuckle up and butt heads with someone like that.

“I… maybe later? I have a lot to do. It’s not like I don’t like getting my hands dirty when I need to. I helped with the plumbing and so on. And what’s with Cassie?”

“There’s nothing with Cassie,” Rachel said, so firmly that Stefanie blinked. What was going on?

“Okay, okay. I was thinking, could I… “

She thought of something. Some way to make a compromise and find out how to work with her.

“Well, if you ride them first, could I have some practice time on the back of your dogs?”

“Practicing what?”
“Aiming. So I can help out in a fight.”

Rachel seemed to be really considered it, her blocky face scrunched up in thought. “Okay.” She nodded at Stefanie, and then gave perhaps the worst attempt at a smile ever. Then, as if some adult was in the room forcing her to and gunpoint, she said, “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“Being gruff and shit,” she added.

Did Arachne talk to you about that? Stefanie didn’t ask.

“Apology accepted,” was what she went with instead. “Listen, I… well, I think you’re a hero, and I trust that you’re doing good, and we’re on a team. Alright?”

“Got it.” Rachel looked briefly thoughtful, and Stefanie wondered if maybe she’d estimated Rachel wrong. If so many other people saw something in her, maybe she was missing something. Maybe she was just being jealous or stupid, or something.

Either way, Stefanie just needed to do her job and focus.

*******

It was quite a monument. Behind it was a wall, a dark one filled with names, but in front, in marble, was the figure of a group of people raising their arms, striking furiously at what seemed, in the artist’s imagining, to be a mass of clouds. She had no idea how the sculptor had managed to make Behemoth seem abstract, had made stone into… something else. Into fire and light and shadow. Into heroes arrayed as one against it, costumes evidently all different, powers seeming to work in different ways from the poses they were in.

The monument meant: here, heroes had all worked together and given their lives to fight back Behemoth.

But it wasn’t the statue that Arachne and Bitch went to. Instead, they walked right up to the wall and began looking at it.

“So many,” Taylor said, shaking her head. She wasn’t in costume, and neither was Rachel, and it felt a little odd to be like that. Sunday, ten days later. And already a memorial. Already, it was the past. “So… what?”


Stefanie stared at her, wondering if she’d gone mad.

“What’s up?” Rachel asked, frowning, looking so worried and concerned that Stefanie knew… well. Could certainly see the care. “Are you okay?”

“It’s just… you know one of the trio?”

“Yes,” Rachel said just as Stefanie mouthed ‘No, I don’t.’

“They’re up on there. Sophia Hess, Shadow Stalker. And she’s been a Ward for a long time, and they never even noticed any of this. Or cared. What bullshit!” Taylor shook her head, angry and…

Stefanie almost stepped back at the black, hard rage on her face.
“I need something to punch,” Taylor said, which really was bad psychology and wouldn’t help at all. “Now I don’t feel bad about what we’re going to do. If she deserves to be on this wall of dead heroes, then so do the dogs.” Taylor looked like she was about to scream some more, or say something else. She was bottling it up, so well that Stefanie almost didn’t notice it. Was she just very good at not emoting too much? Or… what was it?

“The dogs?” Stefanie asked.

“I’ll keep watch. Pelter, can you help carve them in? We have a decent knife. It’ll take a little work, but this is a team thing. Her dogs died, and they deserve credit.”

Stefanie stared at the black wall of names. It’d take a long time, maybe hours, to carve anything into that.

It was against the law! Defacing an Endbringer Memorial! Surely someone would see them, or something?

Taylor held out a knife, and Stefanie wanted to say something about how this seemed almost like a gang initiation. She bit her cheeks, and looked at the two of them, pressing it on her. Wanting her to commit herself.

But she thought Arachne was cool, and that if so many people liked Bitch, she had to be alright too.

She grit her teeth and took the knife. “Tell me the names.”

“Stumpy and Kuro,” Rachel said firmly.

“I can spell them,” Taylor said.

“Sure, if you think that’d help,” Pelter said, as she leaned in and begun her work.
Art: Pelter (Stefanie)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

https://i.imgur.com/C1JgBzA.jpg

Chapter End Notes

Chapter's coming after this, but enjoy the art! It's by lonsheep.
‘Day 4--’ I’d written a few pages back. There were a lot of notes to make, and it wasn’t going to write itself. The apartment smelled bad, but the original owners weren’t anywhere around, and we’d moved stuff in there, made sure the lock worked, and otherwise made it the perfect place to serve as an observation station for Coil… and potentially for Accord as well.

At the moment, I had my head in my girlfriend’s lap. It was silly, but it felt warm and safe, just… relaxing with her. She was running her fingers through my hair, and I didn’t tell her to stop, even though it was distracting me. She was warm, and I was used to the way she smelled by now. She took a bath every day or two, but with the plumbing still in the works, it wasn’t something that was easy to take every day, let alone twice.

I didn’t need it. You got used to other people… and more than that, you grew to sort of…

Either way, I’d been more distracted before. The apartment was cozy, and there was a bed, and I felt way too safe.

I was two and a half blocks from Coil’s base, which meant that it’d be pretty safe, and so it was a lot like the tent, and the shelter. Another place that we could be together, in different contexts. This one the most private and the most personal.

“Huh,” I said.

“What?”

“More of Accord’s men.”

The base was actually pretty secure against bugs. It was as much as I could ask to get a few in, and Coil clearly did regular pest-disposal, one way or another. I could slip flies in, but in order to see the whole base at once, I’d need far too many bugs. He’d notice it, I knew he would, because he had to be sharp to get where he was. I mostly monitored the entrance, and occasionally listened into some of his men.

They were professional, well-trained, and knew nothing of his plans. But I had figured out the layout of the base, more or less, and I also knew that Coil was not the sort to confide in others.

Dinah was there too. Miserable and addicted to drugs, huddled, with nothing I could do to comfort her, not before I was ready to strike. I almost wanted to attack now, but… I had to think that Lisa knew something about what was going on, and until I was sure what the plan was, then attacking would just give me away.

But every time I watched her be hauled out to answer more questions--when she wasn’t asked in Coil’s office, which I’d never felt confident enough to bug--about capes and what would happen if thus and thus was done, I had to force myself to keep from acting.

“Fucker,” Rachel said.

I agreed with her, honestly. Accord’s men were creepy, and very insistent. They were talking about alliances, about trading answers from Dinah for unspecified goods and something called a traveler.
Or maybe someone who traveled? I wasn’t sure yet.

“Yeah. Another hour, then we go back and check up on stuff?” I asked.

We had a lot to do. Between this, and the patrols, and trying to run the camp, though Pelter really helped make it all easier… there was no free time that we didn’t make for ourselves.

But I wanted to make free time, eventually. Because I felt as if I was changing, and things looked a lot different now.

People knew of me, through their love of Bitch.

...their sometimes untowards love. I’d remembered the feeling of watching Cassie, when I’d went to visit Rachel last week, early on in her work. It was so obvious that she was eyeing Rachel. That she was looking at Rachel’s arms, strong and thick, or her stomach, which had meat on it besides the strong muscles when I pressed my fingers against it.

That she was looking at the strong legs, and perhaps imagining what it’d be like to…

Yes. Yes. It was jealousy. I could hardly blame her, since I shared that same fascination.

Despite that, and despite the discomfort I felt around Cassie, it seemed like I was finally getting somewhere, and not just with Rachel, like I’d felt before. It felt like I was finding my place in the world, and that this place came with something else.

I’d always asked my Mom why she wasn’t a writer, or a poet, because she understood books so well. And she’d said, “There’s never time.”

It was true.

But this city, and this situation, and this world, it felt like something that I could write about, or read about or… something.

*****

The press of flesh upon flesh as people went through the camps, brushing past each other, connected in ways that they couldn’t know otherwise. At some point you had to start ignoring certain things. At some point you got used to baths being a thing that happens a few times a week, rather than every day. Once plumbing came, people would bathe more often, of course.

The way you ignored things extended beyond that of course. Life went on, and as my own experiences told me, life included… well. Sex. Going to the bathroom. Painful rashes. People having arguments with their best friend over some petty nonsense that ends in the two not talking for four days straight until you finally get to watch them make up with each other.

Rather more sex than you expected from a refugee camp. Of course, at a certain point, ignoring it sort of lost its luster.

Besides, in its own way, without being too much of a voyeur (when I saw sex coming, my bugs got out of there as fast as possible… if I saw it coming) it was probably a good thing.

It gave me a different view of the world. You got used to it, you just learned to accept it just like I accepted that my bugs were sometimes gross, weird things. Bluebottle flies and black widows and creepy crawlies of all kinds had a sort of fascination, and so did people.
If I wanted to write a novel, or make a poem, the camp could make ready material for a hundreds of characters or feuds or situations… however novels were written. I didn’t really know how I’d even start, if I had the interest, but I felt like I could do it.

Of course, practicality was another thing that all of this drilled into you. Practicality and even more willingness to get dirty because that’s where your bugs were all the time anyways.

Rachel was right, for instance: unhappiness meant unhappy poop. Just not only in dogs. And you could tell a lot about someone by how they felt or when they groused or complained. We didn’t have medicine enough, but I tried to help people to deal with that.

But of course, whatever fascinating revelations of human character there were (like the people who tried to grow a garden in the corner of the camp, which seemed doomed to failure) there was also the landscape.

The business district, all shattered steel beams, grey at one end and black as a burnt steak on the other, twisted and ugly things. Glass littered the streets at the outskirts of the business area, where it hadn’t been totally leveled into a flat, black-grey hellscape, which still by the time two weeks had passed had begun to sprout green at places. Where all of the concrete was broken, a few strange people had actually planted soil and seeds, just out of… I didn’t even know what.

The camp and its environs, which had once perhaps been one of the dingier parts of town, but now in the face of the chaos, the camp as a place looked less hodge-podge and more… varied. More like something alive and breathing. If smelly at times.

There were the territories under the Merchants, who seemed to be going for something so post-apocalyptic that some of their capes had leveled buildings that got in their way, and so the whole thing was crumbling, a warzone that we could only pierce carefully, because they had the numbers and force to at least make it tough.

But we’d find her, and we’d beat them back.

*****

Of course, honestly, all of this visceral stuff also included the overwhelming desire to try to find something sappy or erotic to write. To fill pages with Rachel’s scent, and the feel of her body beneath mine, or on top of mine, of her legs splayed out, or wrapped around me, of her lips on my lips, her hands in my hands. Her throat in my mouth as I bit and plied it with kisses, the feel of her in the palm of my hands and the rough, thoughtless way that happened: it was only afterwards that it seemed…

Worthy of poems was the wrong word. It was only afterwards that poems were worthy of it. A thought that, when I had it, made me realize I was absolutely, insanely smitten to a degree that probably disgusted everyone around me, slightly.

They’d never say it, though, or comment on us holding hands, because I was Arachne and she was Bitch, saviors of the camp.

And what people from afar saw, especially those not from Brockton Bay, was a set of heroes. I sweated so much I had to take my costume off and clean it after the interview with that journalist. I sweated so much I had to take my costume off and clean it after the interview with that journalist. I was just… I hadn’t ever talked to someone before who would not only give a shit about what I said, but would convey it to a bunch of other people. Except Emma, and that as an insult.

But my mask hid all of that, and I tried to be like Rachel was… only a little more talkative. I think
I... okay. My instinct was that I clearly failed. My hope was that it worked out okay. Be cool, confident, and in control: it was how Coil managed his men, and Lung going after the Undersiders had turned out to be a giant mistake. Then he’d died.

And Rachel? Rachel didn’t seem as if she ever doubted anything, even though I’d seen it before.

They didn’t see the gross, visceral details. They didn’t see the imperfections, and they didn’t want me to see the imperfections.

Heck, they couldn’t even see the rage building inside.

By the fourth day, I’d decided a few things. First, Coil needed to die, not merely “face justice.” What justice would that be? The justice of a Protectorate that sends a person guilty of involuntary assault to prison for the rest of their life while making a fucking murderous psycho (and I’d decided that all of the bad stories about her online were probably true) into their hero, their symbol. She showed up in photo shoots, and if she’d not managed to die, she’d probably be on merch when she got older, as some sort of cool anti-hero. I’d been fooled by Shadow Stalker, if not by Sophia Hess.

I didn’t trust the Protectorate and the Wards. People in it? Sure. Flechette seemed alright, Legend was an ideal hero, and there were probably plenty of people. But I couldn’t trust it as a whole, as a body without its members, not after Canary and Shadow Stalker, two different shades of the same sorts of problems.

So, I was going to murder Coil. I wanted him to suffer. I wanted to lay maggots in his eyes, I wanted him to die slowly when I saw the way Dinah clearly needed the drugs, the way she was helpless and desperate and afraid, and couldn’t even know that I was there, that I cared. That I gave a shit about her. She was trapped in a goddamn locker, and there was no door.

When I thought about Dinah, it felt as if my range might as well be infinite.

Maggots in his eyes and spiders crawling down his throat. I wanted him to die screaming, and I wanted it to be known: I knew I wouldn’t get what I wanted. I knew that torture was wrong, especially just to work off the frustration that a man like that had ever been alive in the first place. Maybe I wouldn’t even get to kill him. But him, Skidmark and that weird tinker who made all of those pseudo-parahumans... they were on the list too.

Slavers and monsters who took people and chained them up, in different ways. People who collared what shouldn’t be collared, who trapped what shouldn’t be trapped, and thought they were taming it.

The bastards deserved a lot more than they’d get. Would Coil even be sent straight to the Birdcage, or Skidmark? As far as I knew, neither of them had ever been charged with anything, because they’d been too clever or lucky to get caught.

...not that the Birdcage was a good idea, but I understood it slightly more when I listened to the seething rage inside of me when I thought of some of the people out there. Just not the way it was being used.

******

That’s where I was, that Thursday, angry and frustrated in one sense, and yet happier and more content than I’d been in a long time. In three days, I would be sixteen. And sometime once the city was a little less broken, I’d get that GED and never look back. I had a plan, I had goals, I had ideas, and I had a future.

And I had a girlfriend.
All in all, I had an idea of where I was, where I was going, how I’d reach it, and what I’d find there. That was Thursday, ten A.M, on June 9th, 2011.

Take a snapshot.

******

“Well,” I said, looking at Greg. “You’re certainly inspired.”

“It’s a GameBox. Of course I am! Once I get it, we can play together again,” Greg said, firmly. One of the new families that had moved into the camp, what with the increasing prevalence of enough electricity to make sleeping in the apartments a little less of a chore, had a GameBox. And Greg wanted it.

I’d been watching him go from asking politely to begging to trying to gather enough things through hard work to trade them as if it were a video game.

Bartering was going to be hard, considering how rare a working one, with games, was in the camp. People got into big rows for less.

I wasn’t going to tell him that the kid had offered to let me play it for a few minutes a day, when he’d somehow heard from someone that I liked playing games. Because then Greg would probably think of the clever idea of convincing the kid to donate it to me and then hoping he could beg me more effectively.

He’d probably be right, too. As it was, I did hope he succeeded. He’d been somewhat inept at most of the tasks, but he was learning. Slowly, but surely. He was easy to get distracted, so I had to hope that once he had a task, it’d…

Yep.

I had my mask off—by this point somehow the two identities had blended together so thoroughly that despite the fact that almost nobody knew my name was Taylor, there was no point in keeping it on—and so I offered him my best attempt at a smile and a thumbs up like he would have given me.

“Sure, I’d be happy to do that. Not sure how much spare time I’d have, but.”

“You have tons,” Greg whined, looking at me. I frowned at him, because of course, it wasn’t free time. It was time with my girlfriend: it was freeing time, but not free time I could just change around the order on.

“Okay, no you don’t, maybe. Stefanie told me that there can’t be any compromises, or something like that. But I don’t even know what that means,” Greg said.

“I’m not sure either. Was it referring to Rachel?” I asked.

“Ehh, I think so.”

Greg had been… well, pining after Stefanie for a while now. A week. It was moderately uncomfortable to witness, but at least she seemed to be letting him down gently… or. Actually, she seemed to be ignoring his crush, like I’d done. I wasn’t sure if that was the smartest move, but what could I say.

“Well, then…” I began, only to pause. My bugs were spread out everywhere. Including large
numbers of them in those fishbowls. I had a ton of bowls now, and of course plenty of the bugs died
every time I went to sleep. Of course, they could also breed, given time and the right conditions, so I
didn’t think I’d have any limit on them.

Still, when you had three, three and a half blocks to cover, it did mean that you were…

There was this saying: strong everywhere, weak everywhere. I think Greg had quoted it at me once
in reference to this one video game he’d been playing. If it actually came down to a fight, it’d take
longer than expected to gather a huge swarm of bugs, and the greater my range, the harder it was to
monitor everything and everyone within it.

But I was getting better at it, and so I did notice the girl approaching at the same time I noticed that
two of the people in the camp were getting into a fight. I focused on these two events, as my bugs
buzzed between them, breaking them up by sheer startelement.

People were getting used to bugs being around. I was even practicing a little with talking through
them. I’d had this silly idea involving the dogs, Rachel, and my bugs. I did know that some sort of
box, if it could be attached to the dogs, could be interesting.

We had the harnesses now, and the saddlebags, but a bug box? A mobile bug carrier? A lot of ideas
occurred to me, far more than I had time to pursue.

But even though people were used to it, bugs getting in between a fist-fight meant that it was over.

I had to weaken my grid elsewhere, but it didn’t matter that much.

I was working on interpreting sounds and smells even better now, so here is what I saw. She was
white, with red dreadlocks down her neck, dressed in clothes that smelled as if they hadn’t been
washed in a week. She had no jewelry, and her purse and her clothing both spoke to, if not being
an adult, at least being very mature. It was the kind of purse you carried when you wanted something
practical, and her clothes too were somewhere between practical and stylish.

She was silent as she moved, but her movements were slightly jerky, and she favored one leg a little
bit. She was pretty, though not beautiful, and too thin. A little like me, and that wasn’t a compliment.

From the way she was moving, she was definitely headed right for the camp, and from the way she
wasn’t darting around or carrying a backpack, she clearly had a purpose. She was too well-dressed to
be a refugee in the sort where she fled without looking back or grabbing anything. We were seeing
more of them, from the Merchants, and, it was said by some of them, from the Teeth.

She didn’t look scared enough. If I could have somehow smelled through a dog, I could have
probably told whether or not she was scared from that too. But bugs weren’t designed to smell those
kinds of things, even if I could have interpreted it.

“What is it?” Greg asked.

The two men broke up, swearing at each other, backing away with yelled insults, ones that I could
just almost hear with my real ears. “Someone’s here for me. Or for Pelter or Bitch.”

“Oh! Uh, um, we can talk about this later? Can you figure out what he’d trade for it?”

“Maybe, sure. Hope things go well for you,” I said, calling back as I ran to grab my mask and pull it
on. I had a feeling that she wasn’t searching for Taylor, but someone confident, someone whose face
didn’t give anything at all away, because it was hidden.
“Thanks!”

********

I met her at the outskirts of the camp. Everyone saw me moving, and everyone had swollen over five hundred people, and looked to keep on heading upwards. As long as they stayed in range of my bugs, that was just fine. But nobody said anything, because they all assumed that I was cool and in control, rather than what was really going on, which was quite a bit of curiosity.

I wanted to see what she was here for.

The girl stopped in surprise when she saw me walking out to meet her. Girl? She was definitely older than me, now that I was looking at her eye to eye.

“Greetings, welcome to the Camp.” There was no clever name, and I hadn’t had the time or inclination to think of one.

“You’re Arachne, right?” the woman asked. “I came here to ask for your help. And the help of any of the other capes here. I’ve heard there were a few of them?”

“Help? With what?” I asked, suspicious.

“My brother was taken away by the Merchants. But that’s not what I thought you’d want to know.”

“What is it? Also, you seem to have the best of me,” I said. “What’s your name.”

“It’s Sierra. But I’ve been listening to the street, and they’ve planned for a big party, this huge event, on Friday. A slave auction and everything.” Sierra looked horrified and disgusted by that, and my own stomach churned. This was a chance. A chance to fulfill a promise and get someone back that the camp had lost.

This was a chance, and I nodded. “So, where is it?”

Already, an idea was forming, and it wasn’t one that would be easy… but I think it’d work.

“You’re going to help? You just met me.”

“I’m a hero. Plus… once you hear the idea, you might not like it quite so much.”

********

Step one, borrow spray paint and people who know how to use it.

Step two, go on an ad hoc patrol in which we came in force, and then found each and every group of Merchants within four blocks of us and beat them to all hell and then tossed each group, naked, above a spray-painted sign that said: ‘If you keep on coming here, you’ll keep on coming back naked.’

This was what was known as a trick, a way to explain away what we were actually doing, which was getting clothing to infiltrate them tomorrow. It would mean going through all of the clothes we got and mixing and matching until we had a few costumes.

********

“Really? This is what they wear?” Sierra asked, frowning at it.
“Yes. It is. So, tell me about your brother?” I said, glancing over at her, and then at Rachel, who was frowning even harder as she picked through it. I had to admit, none of it really fit her all that well.

Not merely physically, but as a style. I supposed she could go in the form of some greasy street punk who happened to be female, but--

“I’m not wearing any of this shit,” Rachel said. “Unless I have to.”

“You can… oh, that’d work. If you stuck close to where the big party was, you could burst in when we called you.” I nodded at Rachel, adopting my plan as quickly as possible to her needs. It was what should be done, I thought. Sometimes. Maybe. “But, Sierra?”

“Things were normal, just a few weeks ago. I was in college, Bryce was in High School, and things were just going along like they normally were. But then the attack happened. I went with my brother, and we tried to stick together. But the Merchants were grabbing up everyone… and not just girls.”

She frowned at that, not sure what it meant.

I had my suspicions, actually. It could be someone to use as a test-dummy for powers, or for the weird tinker things that were going down. It was as plausible as everything else. After all, they were restarting slavery and holding a huge party to celebrate how horrible they were. This was already crazy enough.

“Huh. Well, can you pretend well enough in this stuff?” I gestured to the pile of women’s clothes. “You, me, and Pelter are all going to have to be dressed like this.”

“And then who is… leading us?”

The plan was, some of us were going to be slaves for trade, that sort of thing, and some of us would be, uh. “Bitches” was the phrase a Merchant would probably use. Hanger-ons. One guy, three girls. We go in, find your brother, find Kayla and then get both of them out. And then we come back and attack them. Fuck them up. You can leave before that, with your brother and the girl. No need to get involved in a cape fight.”

“Sounds good,” Sierra said.

I just needed to tell Franky about it.

******

The teenager frowned at me. “Really? This is going to be rough…”

“Just, you know how to talk, right?” I asked, glad that he couldn’t see my face.

“I guess I do… but it’s sorta fucking disrespectful. But if it’s for a good cause.” Franky stretched a little. “And you’re sure they’ll buy it?”

“We have the bracelets. Pelter and I sexed in. But Sierra's going to be a slave you're going to sell off.”

"Sierra?"

"We're going to save her brother," I said. "And you? You fought in. Red bracelet."

“Oh…” he said, wincing. “Well, fuck it.” He gave an expansive shrug. “But please don’t tell my parents what this involves. They wouldn’t understand.”
“I get that,” I said. I wasn’t going to tell Dad that I was going to be pretending to be a drugged up gang groupie who’d made her way in through having sex with a bunch of guys.

I wasn’t going to tell him about any of that. Dad had actually showed up once more, to tell me about how things were going at the docks. We’d exchanged information as if we were both issuing reports to each other, and then we’d hugged, a little awkwardly. I’d invited him to dinner, and he’d told me ‘next time.’

It was better than we’d interacted before, but it wasn’t exactly the height of father-daughter relations. I was unsure about what to do to make it better, but maybe with more time apart we’d get more used to it and find ways around it.

“So, tomorrow…”

“Yes.”

*******

They’d set themselves up in an old mall, actually. It was a mall even closer to death than the one that I’d always gone to. That one still had life, this one? I didn’t know why it’d been made in the first place. It’d always been in a part of town that wasn’t great, but apparently once it’d seemed like a good idea.

It was a squat, ugly building, the mall, and yet it was perfect for their purposes. There were only so many bugs I could use, but I still got a decent picture of the inside.

Hundreds of people, and in the center, the food court, they’d set up this giant stage, and they’d taken over two of the nearby food courts as the storage space for the slaves. One could tell who was where by the stage. Anyone behind it was either a slave, a helper, or a member.

Dose was with Skidmark and Squealer. Mush had been captured, and they hadn’t gotten him back yet… no doubt it was a matter of time. But there were two others with them that seemed to be wearing costumes, and I couldn’t quite place who they were. One of them was a fat woman with red hair that I hadn’t seen around.

Maybe she was a new trigger? Either way, it was a packed crowd, and each store had been turned into a gallery of drugs, clothing, sex, weapons… anything you could possibly want if you were scum of the earth.

The place stank like an open privy, and the toilets were long since overflowing, as my bugs had determined.

So in a way, it was an open privy, though it had all the lights on, probably thanks to Squealer. There were car engines here and there, running off gas, that somehow, impossibly, hooked up to the electricity without any actual connection to anything. Which made no sense, but tinkers were bullshit.

I had no idea where Bryce was. Even after having heard him described, that didn’t help as much as it should have, because of how thick the crowd was. My bugs couldn’t get a good view at times, without being squashed or swatted away.

I was probably going right over him. But her description was… not bad at all. Just not enough that there weren’t about four or five people who would fit it, and more than that if they’d shaved his head or done any number of things to obscure who he was.
And they did seem to be shaving a lot of the men they’d captured back there, chained up like galley slaves. It was disgusting, absolutely vile, and there were people who had OD’d and died, right on the premises, though nobody noticed, or if they noticed… nobody cared.

And into that, we were going to walk in, and then walk out. Use stealth and cleverness to free at least some of the slaves, and any that weren’t freed? We’d hold them off while the innocents left and the guilty could get mauled for all I cared.

Rachel was waiting a way off, with three or four dogs. She was going to keep them ready for the attack. We weren’t going to take any risks. Because I’d noticed a lot of drug patches around. Even more than they’d had before: if they got all of them on people, then we’d lose. It was that simple.

So we had to stop that Drug Tinker from ever starting with this bullshit in the first place. It was the only way.

So there I was, swaggering forward in a top with a push-up bra, that also showed my flat stomach, and ratty cast-off jeans that showed off my legs… not that there was not much to show off. I’d been too busy to shave my legs, and so it wasn’t a pretty sight. But there was a lot of leg, and combined with the ratty faux-hippie jewelry and the look on my face that Stefanie said I got when I was focusing too hard on my bugs, I’d pass.

Franky was dressed in a dirty, disgusting hoodie, with jeans almost falling off his butt, with a knife that he had no idea how to use. Sierra had tried for something a little different, stained and faded clothing that looked like it’d been dragged through the mud just a little while ago. She was glaring at everyone, clearly ready to escape at any moment, but too scared to do so.

And Stefanie, even more out of place than Frankie, had stepped up to the plate with this tattered skirt and tank-top combination which honestly impressed the hell out of me, when paired with the fishnet stockings and the high heels. Impressed me with how very trashy and tasteless it was, that is.

But she looked good in them, so there was that.

We looked like real Merchants, which was the smallest compliment you could ever give a person.

Franky swaggered ahead of us as we went to the mall door, where a burly man who had one of the drug patches on his sleeve. Ready to be taken off and slapped on.

“Yo. Got the bands?” he asked when he saw us.

Franky held up his, and I held up mine. Stefanie hesitated and held up hers.

The man leered at me for a moment, and then reached out to grab my chest. I had to force myself not to punch him or cover him in bees, as he started to--

“Hey, back off. That’s my bitch,” Franky said. He didn’t sound all that convincing, but the man stopped.

And now my chest hurt, because he’d basically just pawed at me. And I wanted to find somewhere and hide. God. Was this going to be a repeat theme when I was dressed like this?

“And what about the white bitch in the middle?”

“Slave. Thought I’d get in the market, y’know. Fuckers taste their own medicine and shit.” Franky was slurring his words horribly. It sounded like something out of a stereotype of a gangster rap video, and that’s probably where he’d gotten that accent. Though he wasn’t exactly peppering the
conversation with slang, which probably meant that he was too worried about using something the wrong way.

“Well, fair enough. Get in before I change my mind and fuck that tall white whore’s mouth for payment t’let her in.”

… when it came time to attack, I’d break my usual rule and make sure to sting him everywhere. I would replace his hopes and dreams with spiders.

“Nah, she’d…” Franky began, trying to think of something good, or rather bad, to say. But he took one look at me, and I realized I was baring my teeth and had to stop. After that one look, he just shook his head, and I tried to go back to faking being out of it as we stepped inside.

Stefanie coughed as smoke wafted over from a booth, and there were people just lying on the ground, high as heck. Everyone was badly dressed, whether on purpose or because of what had happened with Behemoth, and it was loud. Very, very loud.

“My sister here?” Franky asked.

“Is Bryce?” Sierra said at the same time.

“Don’t know if I’ve found Bryce yet,” I whispered, as we began to make our way through the mall. We needed to get behind that stage, and then maybe wrap around to that food court. I didn’t know how we’d free them without drawing attention. None of us had hand-to-hand superpowers. “But your sister, Kayla, she’s naked, with a bunch of the other girls.”

Actually, the other girls were all comforting each other, trying to keep each other’s spirits up. I wanted to save them, of course I did. Not all of the girls were naked. It seemed like the ones that had fought back had been stripped… and worse, for that matter.

“Oh god,” Franky said, looking like he was going to be sick.

Hopefully everyone would think he was just overdoing it on the drugs, rather than that he was disgusted. Even though anyone and everyone should be.

“It’s okay,” one of them said, a tall white girl with blonde hair. “I’m sure…”

But the one they were all looking towards was a girl in the back, who wasn’t moving much now. She was just staring at her hands. She had dark hair, and even my bugs could see that she was… well, beautiful.

“Stop saying that,” Kayla said. “She said that, and look what they did to her.”

The dark-haired girl looked up slightly, something dead and cold in her eyes, and then stepped forward. “We…” she began, her voice sounding as if it were hoarse and unused to words. It sounded, in fact, as if she’d screamed her head off just the day before. I could guess how. She was naked like many of the others, but she didn’t seem to care. “We… we can do this together. We just have to wait for the right moment and.. and…”

Her words didn’t even seem to be convincing her, but she looked around, and I could see through the bugs the looks of a person trying to pull themselves together. I… I wanted to help her. Whoever she was. Because she was trying. She walked around, and she whispered nothings, almost literally nothings, to each of them. How they’d get out of this together, and they’d need to find their time, how when the time came, they needed to listen to each other--
“A, are you okay?” Sierra asked.

“Why?” I asked.

“You’re staring straight ahead, we’ve had to make you walk…”

“Just… distracted. So, do you see your brother?”

Stefanie was looking around. In her outfit, she’d made sure to put as many steel pellets as she could. Her goal was to clear the chaff in case they tried to rush us with such great numbers that I didn’t have enough bugs on hand to disable them.

“Not yet,” Sierra said.

The stage was ahead, and the girls were caged up and under watch to the right. People with clubs and guns were there, so they wouldn’t have a good time if they tried anything.

There was a microphone on the stage, and room for dozens of people to stand, but right now it was empty. There were musicians here and there in the crowd, singing off-tune, but none of them were going to be up there. No, that was for Skidmark.

“I… see him.”

I turned to see where she was pointing. A group of Merchants was stumbling out from around back, just where we’d been going to sneak. Now that I saw them, I knew which one it was, by her briefly pointing finger.

They’d shaved his head, but what was more important was that he was dressed in cast-offs, and… had a knife. And he was laughing, holding a bottle of alcohol in one hand, with a red bracelet on his arm.

“Oh,” Sierra said, disappointment and fury both warring with each other. Of course she was disappointed, who wouldn’t be?

I didn’t know what she would have done, but instead the boy froze. He looked so young, and when he saw his sister, he looked even guiltier. He waved off his new friends and stumbled towards us, and as soon as he was close, he hissed, “Sierra, what are you doing here!?”

“No. What are you doing drinking? And palling around with Merchants.”

“It was me or them,” Bryce said, and then realized what that told me. “They… gave me these patches, and had me fight this other guy. I… won. And so they let me live. And I have power. More power than I ever had before.”

“Power? Power? Joining the Merchants?” Sierra asked.

Franky looked like he wanted to punch the guy, but the young man bit his lip. “Maybe, but have you tried the power patches? It’s just… amazing. It’s like being a God. You don’t have to listen to anyone else, because you… I won’t turn you in if you leave now and don’t ruin this for me, Sierra.”

“No? Ruin it?” Stefanie asked. “Your sister came here to save you from raping murderers. She cared for you enough to risk a lot, and you’re going to throw it back in her face?”

“Hey! I didn’t ask her to come here, whoever you are. Yes, I was stolen away, and yes, some of the Merchants are assholes, but I’ve found friends, and I can leave whenever I want.”
“Then leave now,” I said, voice hard, aware that people were starting to glance at our group. “No…” he said, shaking his head, his eyes pleading. “Listen, you know, Sierra…”

“I know? I don’t know what the fuck I know,” Sierra said. Stefanie winced at the language, but she wasn’t going to correct it.

I was feeling betrayed, and wanted to just punch him in the stomach and drag him off to jail, or off to something other than standing here justifying what he was doing.

“You know what you should do instead?” I asked.

My bugs were starting to buzz, those that could. The fury gripped me so strong that I knew I had to either speak or punch. And if I bottled it up for even five seconds later, it wouldn’t be a choice. This place stank of drugs and booze, the air was filled with smoke, it was loud and frustrating and my senses were almost overloading from just how many people I was having to track, and just how nauseating all of it was.

But what made me most sick was this boy in front of me.

I leaned in, my lips sliding against his face, as if I were going to kiss him. “Turn Sierra in,” I whispered into his ear. “What?”

“She’s just some bitch, right? Like all of those other girls here that are going to be sold off and raped? She doesn’t matter. You could rape her yourself, because what the fuck are the limitations of society? Have you raped anyone yet? I bet if you went over and asked, they’d beat one of those girls until they stopped crying and resisting, and then you could--”

“What, no!” he insisted, trying to pull away. “Maybe strangle her once you’re done? Because why not? Then you can shoot up, or murder someone else. Who cares, what does it matter? Why do you care about your sister, she’s just holding you back. Isn’t that what power is about? To you, at least, you sick fuck.”

My lips went down to his throat, as if I were about to give him a hickey. But if I bit his throat, it’d be to try to tear it out with my bare teeth. “Now’s your chance. Now’s your chance to justify raping women and murdering people as power. And if you’re doing that, what does your sister matter? What does holding onto anything matter. You’re not a parahuman, and I’m glad of it, you’re just someone with a stupid little patch. So here’s your chance. If you want to actually make a choice. Then turn us in, or leave with us. Because if you just choose to glide along, I’ll count you the same as the rest of them.”

Bryce looked torn, the utter nobody, and I pulled back a little. If he did try to turn us in, I’d make sure he was the first one to go down in a shower of bugs. I knew that Sierra was glaring at me, but she was also glaring even harder at him.

Franky looked like he was just as close to the edge.

Stefanie, Stefanie looked horrified, as if Bryce were a maggot who had just crawled out of her nose. Bryce hesitated. “I--”

“Alright! Fuck-faces and snot-noses alike!” a voice yelled over a microphone. Everyone, not just us,
turned straight to look at the stage as Skidmark slithered onto it, flanked by Squealer and the drug tinker. “It’s your hosts! Skidmark, Squealer, and Dose! Stupid fucking name, but if you’ve been trying out some of the party favors, they’re his!” Squealer shot him a look of jealousy.

Skidmark was carrying a large briefcase, which he set down on the ground. “So! Welcome to the first ever MerchFest! All you pieces of shit want money, you want fame, you want power! Well we have it for you! We’re going to be starting out with a few… competitions. And the prizes are great. Some of Dose’s little power doses for those who do something fun… or who enter a fight to the death! Free access to those whores over there if you pay a fee… or ownership of one if you win one of the fights!”

The fight? I realized what he was going to do. Some sort of parahuman gladiator games, using the patches to give powers. At least that meant that many of them were out of the way, and not in the hands of everyone around.

We were still badly outnumbered.

The Drug Tinker, Dose, was a tall, willowy haired man. He was white, and his dreadlocks looked very, very greasy. His costume was a stereotypical doctor’s outfit, but with a strange pump attached to one of his arms, and a pocket almost spilling out with the power patches.

Him, Squealer, Skidmark, the two other Merchants, and anyone with a dose package. This was starting to seem like a bad idea. But… I had to save them.

“But there’s a bigger prize if you shit-stains can earn it! A few lucky winners will be getting!” Skidmark held up the briefcase and opened it. There were eleven metallic canisters there, to fill twelve slots. One of the slots was empty, and on the inside of the stainless steel briefcase, I could see a strange symbol that looked a little like a horseshoe. It was… what?

“Perma-powers!”

I stared in blank horror. How the hell had Dose managed to make something like that? Was it true? Was it not? If it was true, then Dose was one of the most powerful Tinkers I’d ever heard of.

If it was true, then within a very short time, there might be eleven more Merchants… and dozens and dozens of more addicts to the mix.

Unless he was lying… I needed to act. And fast.

Chapter End Notes

The Merchants are trash.
People swirled and buzzed with skepticism and awe, as Skidmark began to rant about the qualities it took to be a Merchant. I didn’t even listen to him, because I’d heard enough filth in my life. I just considered the options very carefully.

For a tiny amount of time, at least. I looked over at Sierra, and then at Franky… and then made sure to allow myself to meet Stef’s eyes. “Stefanie…” I said.

Bryce was still there, looking confused and put out, but I didn’t really care about him. We’d deal with him or not later. He was staring at the briefcase, which was now closed, with clear and evident desire. He wanted it. Just like he’d wanted the power, just like he’d been unwilling to admit that it had costs, that it had requirements. My fury was cold and controlled, this time, at least controlled enough that I could figure out what to do.

“When you see the chance, hit the briefcase with a rock. Something that’ll knock it around, but not break it.”

We needed to get those samples so that we could see just what Dose had invented. And what if they did work? I thought about that for a moment, and I had to admit that stealing a few of those seemed almost tempting. If they actually worked the way it was said they did.

So, step one, I buzzed my flies around Rachel’s face, to let her know that now was the time for her to come in with all she had.

The people were yelling and screaming their approval as Skidmark walked off the stage, no doubt going to go down among them and start picking out people for his little fights. I didn’t know what other sorts of tests he had planned, but he looked like he was about to hand off the large briefcase, and so I needed to act now.

My bugs were spreading out, especially the dangerous ones, to try to hit as many of the enforcers and people with unused power patches as I could. I needed to take down everyone as fast as possible…

My only real advantage was that with Mush gone, they didn’t necessarily have a lot of muscle… unless the new woman had some sort of power that’d replace him.

My flies formed together into a buzzing, confusing mass in front of him as he walked down the stage. I tried to get it to look vaguely human, and then tried to talk through it.

“Skiiiiidmark!” it said, though it was hard to interpret. But his name was clear enough.

“What the fuck?!” Skidmark yelled, leaping back. Some of the bugs were propelled back by whatever he was doing, but most of the bugs in that pile were flying bugs, flies especially, and so they just remained in place.

“Surrender,” I said, speaking through the swarm, my voice echoing anywhere there were enough bugs to roughly emulate it. It didn’t sound like a human voice, it didn’t sound like my voice, and honestly for that matter I didn’t know whether I’d be able to communicate that much.

“Give them back!”
“Fuck, it’s that Arachne-bitch,” Skidmark yelled, as gang-bangers began to unload onto the bug mass, only to find nothing at all.

He couldn’t see me, not yet, and now he was distracted, Dose, Squealer, and the other two capes all looking around as Skidmark swore up a storm of disgusting and absurd invectives.

Pelter drew out a chunk of gravel and tossed it, hard. It went through the air and slammed into briefcase, which tumbled out of his hands.

Alright, now was the time to act. No costume, but I could deal with that. Pelter was aiming another rock right at Skidmark as I ran to the left, trying to get to the girls he’d enslaved.

“Fuck!” one of the men yelled, turning to the girls. “Is she one of them?”

The guards were all big, dumb looking men, and all it took was one of them panicking. My heart was racing, and now the screams of people being stung rung through the mall. I was trying to take down as many people as fast as I could, but we were definitely outnumbered now. At least a few of them were able to slap on the patches, and now that I’d been seen running, the two new capes were headed my way. Skidmark was retreating, clutching the briefcase in his hands, while Dose begged him to give it up, and Squealer? She was in the back, getting additional firepower.

That’d take her at least a little bit of time, and as far as I knew, other than using his own product, Dose couldn’t really do much.

We needed to make sure that they didn’t get away with them, but Skidmark and the rest of the Merchants, as well as the people we came here to save, took priority.

One of the goons, despite the bugs, pulled out his gun and shot into the crowd of women at random. “She’s among us! She’s here! We gotta! We gotta!” He fired again, and the bang was even louder, almost deafening me.

One of the girls collapsed in a puddle of blood.

Kayla screamed, loud and long, and the girl who’d been the leader just looked at the body for a moment, staring at it.

The bleeding, perhaps dead girl was dark skinned, in her twenties. Clothed, not naked.

The world shrunk. Bryce was running towards Skidmark. Pelter was slamming shots into anyone who moved and seemed to have a gun or a power.

Rachel was still a dozen seconds or more away from reaching here, on the back of one of the four dogs that were going to tear into this place.

Everyone was running around and firing in a panic.

Sierra and Franky were sheltering behind Pelter.

The girl was staring at the body, “No, no, no. We’re going to… we’ll get out of this… together,” she whispered. But she sounded like not only did she not believe it, but that she’d never believed it.

I’d never heard someone sound so broken, so quick.

And then…

Something filled my vision. Huge creatures, moving things, brief and instant dreams of something
fleeting. Alien and bizarre and so inhuman as to defy the idea of ever being anything else except fractal patterns, except strange multi-dimensional things that slipped out of my mind and memory as fast as I thought of them.

The energy of the universe, harvested and used to send a simple message, between a pair. A whispered word, only shouted out loud. Conveyed proudly. They were saying something, doing something… together. Agreement. Concordance. These vast beings felt intimate at the same time that they were unknowable, like lovers paired…

“No!” she yelled, and I blinked, confused at what I’d seen, having almost fallen over. The memories slipped away just as fast. “Chrissie, you stand up!”

And the girl did. She stood up, the wound knitting itself closed as she stood. One of the goons, in a panic, shot her again… and the bullet hit the girl’s arm and left nothing more than a bad bruise, as if it was just a punch, and not a bullet at all.

Powers, I thought. She had powers.

“Girls!” she yelled. “Break out!”

And dozens of women all together surged forward, a tidal wave.

The Merchants were cowards, inherently so, and they proved it by retreating.

Then again, all of the women seemed a little faster than before, and the one shot that rang out, loud and horrible, just slammed into one of the girls and bounced off, leaving a nasty bruise, but… not doing what a bullet should do to a naked, unarmed person.

Skidmark yelled out “Fucking stupid shitcock fuckers!” which didn’t even make any sense, and waved a hand. A layer of blue something appeared on the floor, throwing the girls back that had almost reached him.

The large woman slammed a hand into one of the girls, and that actually hurt more, because the girl rocketed back into a wall. It was three on… one parahuman that could seemingly give people powers.

I had to change the odds. The dogs were howling, and the screams got louder as I raced right at Skidmark, who turned at the wrong moment. I tackled him clumsily as bees poured down his throat and the suitcase hit the ground and spilled out.

Pelter threw a hard chunk of metal right at the big woman, and it slammed into her chest as she kept on throwing. But the girl was spinning around now, picking up and spinning the shots around before they could hit, and I was struggling with the bastard, trying to keep him from getting away.

Fire flashed overhead and surrounded us, and more and more people were moving. Some of them flying, trying to go against Rachel as she slammed through the mall entrance, her dogs shoving people around.

Bones were being broken, and I looked up at the chaos, my bugs swirling and stinging en masse. It was almost hard to balance all of it, the knowledge and the violence and the--

Fire seared again, closer, and I sprung off Skidmark, who hauled himself up, still trying to escape or fight back.

The whirling girl made it hard to run, and one of the vials was being picked up by her undertow.
There Dose was, trying to sweep them all up, but someone was there first.

Bryce, eyes glowing as he screamed, grabbed one of the vials and kicked at Dose, stronger than he should be, his hands glowing. “Mine! Mine! Mine!”

Bees just bounced off of him, and I needed to take him down. What was he even doing, I thought, as Pelter kept on firing at the whirling girl, and the other girls, all listening to the orders of the person with the power, were currently beating the shit out of the big woman with the brute powers.

People were fleeing, or attacking each other, and the dogs helped shield Rachel from the attempts to take her down, at least for the moment.

...it was sensory overload. I could barely keep track of everything and attack everyone at the same time when there were so many things to do. Franky was running towards his sister. Sierra was staring at Bryce. In the back, Squealer had some sort of electric motorbike going, one that zapped any bugs that got too close, and she was revving it up.

Rachel was just a few dozen feet behind me, and I was racing as fast as I could towards Bryce and Dose, as Bryce took off the package and held a vial of something that he downed at once--

I shuddered, another bout of strange non-memories, and saw… no one. Bryce wasn’t there. And then he was, made out of pulsing, flickering stuff. Silvery-bright, his whole body one moment that, and the next physical.

Dose took the moment’s distraction to sweep up the vials and the briefcase and start sprinting towards the back. “Hold them off! I gotta save the paperwork!”

Yeah, like I was going to let that happen. “Pelter! Finish them off, we need to get Dose!” Then I kept on running, leaping over a glowing patch of Skidmark’s ground that I’d seen him prepare to make, as one of Rachel’s dogs caught up to me.

There were dozens of powers in play now, so many that it was hard to keep track, but none of them were beating Rachel, and they weren’t coordinating. Too many of the Merchants were running away while they still could, and so while one of the dogs went down, heavily injured, the person who did it paid by getting mauled.

Nobody was dead yet, besides the overdoses, but this was a situation that couldn’t stand.

“And what!” I yelled, grabbing onto the saddle on the dog and hauling myself up. “Chase!”

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It was a race, and one interrupted almost immediately by Squealer slamming right next to me on the way to rescue Skidmark.

A bike built for two, I thought, dazed, as Angelica screamed but, after a moment’s pain, obeyed my shouted order to continue on.

Behind the counter at a clothing store, long since looted, Dose raced to pick up some paperwork and begin to try to put all of the vials back in the suitcase as he yelled orders at a half-dozen Merchants. “Fuck, take these! Use them! Hold her off!”

Skidmark was climbing on the bicycle just as the fat woman was overwhelmed and the whirling girl finally swarmed by my bugs, and I knew that the two of them would probably get away. That bike was very fast, and the ability to phase out the bugs…
Pelter shot at them, but it failed, and Bryce? He seemed to be staring at Sierra in horror, when he actually existed, physically.

This was a mess, but we were winning the fight, somehow, even as things fell more and more apart.

With a roar, Angelica crashed through the door of the store, just as Dose was grabbing his sixth vial. He looked down at the four left to grab and said, “Fuck it!”

Then, after slapping a patch on his shoulder, he shoved his hands towards me. He instantly dispersed, disappearing and reappearing as my bugs were somehow destroyed at the same time.

He sprinted for the back door.

“I’ve got to…” I began, but one of the temporary capes he’d empowered, a drunk looking woman, flew right at me, slamming into Angelica so hard I was knocked off. I rolled, dazed and confused, trying to keep track of what was going on. I had to get to those vials. And the papers he’d scattered on the floor.

I had to figure out just what was going on here, and why he’d… had he really been that scared of me?

I also had to survive, and as the six capes advanced, two flying, one of them wielding lasers, and the other two with unknown powers, I wasn’t sure if I would.

One of the faux-capes was slipping around back with a gun, and Angelica couldn’t defend both sides at once. Not unless she just sat on me, and that wouldn’t help. She was snapping and lashing out, but the flying capes were too fast, and the ones on the ground were out of her range.

And there was another fact I hadn’t even realized: I was out of bugs. There had to be bugs to track every single person here. There had to be bugs to attack the Merchants still fighting, and the patch-power capes that were still holding up the rest of my team, which was making their way towards me, but slowly.

There had to be bugs to monitor the fleeing capes, and there had to be bugs to get in the corners and watch to make sure there were no tricks.

I had too many problems for too few bugs, for once, and that meant that other than a few bees, I didn’t have much I could do. A wasp or two, a spider here and there, but--

I was basically helpless as they approached. Except for the giant attack dog. Angelica was the size of a van, and very, very dangerous, but that just meant it’d take me a while to lose…

So. I was going to make it take as long as possible, because I knew Rachel would come. I had the bugs there buzz and try to annoy the groups, try to get them to understand I need help, but Rachel was right in the middle of beating up some asshole who seemed to have been selling attack dogs.

That was to say, a little distracted.

There was an odd dissonance here. I should have been terrified for my life, and a part of me was, but another part of me was so spread out, from so many different perspectives, doing so many things, that there wasn’t time for the same fear I would have expected.

I sat up, groaning, as Rachel finally looked up, across the way. Dose, at the edge of my range, tripped over nothing at all and fell down, the suitcase falling open for just a moment before he was able to get up. I huddled against the dog as I sat. “Stay back! You really should just run,” I said, in
my best Arachne voice.

“Fuck you! Ruining our fun!” A woman stepped forward, holding out a hand. There was energy crackling in it, but the energy was strange, or rather, looking at it made my head hurt. “You’re that Arachne-bitch, right?”

“Yes. And you’re going to be in a world of pain within a few seconds.”

“We’ve got you surrounded!” a man yelled from above, as he slammed into Angelica once again.

The woman shot the ball of electricity, and yet she missed, slamming into Angelica’s side.

...which meant she didn’t miss, and that was the target. Angelica didn’t yelp, or anything at all.

“What was that about?”

“That was about killing you. Now, you stupid bitch! As my owner… I command you to kill Arachne!”

Angelica turned on me, growling, and I saw that her eyes were white. Pure white. That power allowed her to control people… or animals, or something. She hadn’t targeted me because… I’m not sure why. Maybe she didn’t think about it, maybe a giant dog looked better as something to control?

But either way, in a single move, she’d stripped me of protection, and also probably ensured that she’d be lucky to survive, if Bitch knew about it and reacted appropriately.

Angelica’s white eyes gave me no hope of just trying to somehow talk her out of it, and the girl backed up, giggling with glee. “Huh! I just knew that’d work! Isn’t it neat? Now, die by the hands of your own dog!”

She was really, really talkative by Merchant standards, I thought, looking at the six of them leering. Then the black widow bit the girl’s ankle. I was almost out of bugs, yes, and too few to take out all of them… but I actually only wanted to take out one of them. The girl went down, screaming, as the rest of my bugs focused on her. Wasps stung her wrists just to make an opening at her veins so she’d start bleeding. Flies lodged themselves in her ears and nose.

I was going to go down. Perhaps I was going to even die, but if I could break her control over Angelica, over our dog, then--

The flying cape tackled me, slamming me back through a window, pushing me past mannequins. I felt something crack, and the pain was unbearable as I screamed and thrashed and tried to fight, bugs moving from her to him, but it wouldn’t be enough, I knew. He gripped his fingers around my throat and then--

I couldn’t breathe. The pain was insistent, and I couldn’t breathe and Rachel was roaring something I couldn’t interpret and I couldn’t breathe--

Darkness did not so much steal over me as it slammed into me.

******

“Please, open your eyes,” a girl’s voice said. I recognized the voice, and obediently, after a groan, I did as she said. It took just a moment for me to realize where my bugs were, which told me…

The Merchants were defeated, that much was clear. Everyone seemed gathered in the center of the
mall, and… you know what? Maybe I should just use my eyes for a moment. “Okay, so…” I groaned.

“Don’t sit up too much,” the girl said, looming over me. She was the girl that had just triggered.

I had been going to get up and move, but I decided that maybe I should take it easy for a moment. Rachel approached me, pushing the other girl out of the way. “You okay, Taylor?” Rachel asked. Her face was drawn, and I could almost feel the tension. She looked over at the other girl and said, “Thanks.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Char here saved you,” Sierra said, pointing at the girl, who was no longer naked, I noted. The jeans and the shirt didn’t really fit, but she was wearing something. Over in a corner, Franky and his sister were talking, and Bryce? Bryce was in a corner, glaring at everyone, but not retreating. He was still phasing, in parts or as a whole, in and out of existence in a very, very disturbing and worrying way.

He didn’t, besides that, still look completely human, with the semi-transparency one moment, and then the lightning-like glow, and then something human for a moment, but never his whole body, and never for long before it shifted to another part.

Whatever his power was, it was clearly hard enough to control that he was going to have to work at it.

I didn’t feel bad for him at all, honestly. He’d been the one to choose it, unlike “Char” or myself, unlike Rachel or Stefanie. That made all of the difference in whose fault it was. In who was to blame. Powers happened to you, and then you figured out what to do next: choosing it?

But now wasn’t the time to brood. “Char?”

“Charlotte,” she said.

“Charlotte?” I asked. The name almost sounded familiar. Not very familiar, but the kind of familiar where I might have heard the name mentioned absently once, and then never again. It was a nagging feeling in the back of my mind. “Do I know you?”

“No. You… your people. They saved me,” she said.

“You seem to have saved yourself,” I said, as my bugs began to take stock. There were about forty or fifty non-Merchants still up and about, the ones that had been enslaved or the like. The whole mall was completely wrecked. It stank of booze and corpses (none of them, it seemed, caused by us, though there were a lot of wounded people about), and weed and… it just wasn’t going to be good for anything, even if flying patch-parahumans hadn’t gone right through the roof in places.

“I wouldn’t have… done that. If you hadn’t come here. They wouldn’t have shot Suzanne.” She said it properly, and I wondered how she felt about killing Char. “But they would have… they would have done worse to her. And what would I have done?”

“Well, I still say you saved yourself.” I glanced over at Rachel, because I had a thought of sorts. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

Rachel snorted slightly, then added, “You saved Arachne. Modesty is bullshit.”

“How did she save me?”
“Healed you,” Pelter chimed in, nearby. “She’s going to have to do so for some of the goons here. We roughed them up pretty bad.”

I nodded, still not getting up. Doctor’s orders and all that, I thought with a slight smile. “Charlotte, what are you going to do now?”

“I… don’t know.” But the way she said it, it was like she did know. Everyone was hovering around me, worried. I liked that… not that I’d nearly died, or at least been hurt so badly I’d passed out.

But I liked the idea that some people cared enough to hover, other than my Dad. I wanted to go alone somewhere with Rachel. I wanted to kiss her again and again, because I could tell something from her eyes, I could imagine her panic and fury.

But I didn’t notice any dead bodies, so whatever she’d done, it was okay. It was alright. We could deal with it. “Do you have anyone to go back to?”

“No.”

I looked at Rachel. I wanted to ask her if she was okay with what I was about to say, but I didn’t know how to. “Do you… want to come back to our camp? We’re going to take anyone who wants to go.” I said, “Can I sit up now, or is there something else you have to heal?”

“No. No. It’s fine. I think it… is like regeneration? But slower? So you’ll feel sort of energetic for a while,” Charlotte said, biting her lip. She looked uncertain. “I do, I really do.”

“Oh?” I asked. I was really baffled at what I was hearing. I stared at her. She didn’t look familiar, but she looked like she should look familiar.

“I have powers now. I need to help people, and—,” she seemed to cut herself off, and just smiled. “Help people.” She said it as if it was the most obvious thing ever. I sat up, rubbing my head a little and looking around. I was still dressed in the same ratty, miserable clothes as before. They showed off my body, and I remembered that hand on me…

Now, if everyone else in the entire mall got the fuck out, except Rachel, then I’d be… more fine wearing this. If she cared, and I knew she didn’t care about clothes. Still, I shifted around, seeing her eyes on me. Worry mostly, I bet. “And you want to join us?”

“Yes! I’ve… heard about Arachne.”

“And Bitch,” I said, firmly. She was part of this too. She wasn’t going to be ‘and her villain GF, Bitch’ if I could help it. We were partners. In more than one sense of the word. Or that’s what I wanted.

“Yes…” Charlotte said a little doubtfully.

“We’re not that bad, don’t believe everything you heard,” I said, as I struggled to stand up, moving closer to Rachel. “Pelter, what’s happening with Bryce?”

“Sierra wants Bryce to join the Wards. If you won’t allow him to join your team,” Pelter said.

“No,” I said. I didn’t even have to look at Rachel. But when I did, I didn’t see any disagreement on that score. Rachel didn’t like new people period, and if I disapproved, surely she trusted my judgement. Bryce was… troubled. The Wards wouldn’t actually fix him.

Honestly, they’d probably ignore his abuses of his power, even if he beat people up or bullied them
or worse, even if he might be a murderer. They’d ignore all of that and maybe even encourage it, and then if he died to an Endbringer, they’d put him up on some fucking wall and tell sob stories about how nice he was.

Because yes, Cass had told me that there were actually threads where each person who died was memorialized. Shadow Stalker’s was way shorter than some of them, because if you didn’t have something nice to say, you’d probably get banned.

Well, screw that. Bryce could go be an asshole somewhere not around me, because I wasn’t going to spend hours and hours dealing with him. For no gain at all. It wasn’t hypocrisy, I swear.

“Can I join?” Charlotte asked. “I… think I could help you.”

“What does your power do?”

“I… power people up? I’m not sure how to describe it. I’d have to experiment.”

“Good. I can work with that. If… Rachel, is that okay?”

Rachel looked at Charlotte. Part of the problem for her was that Charlotte had saved my life. I could see the gratitude warring with the desire to just tell her to fuck off, out of habit as much as anything else. I could read it, and I could see the gratitude winning… though if we were doing this, there were a few ideas I had.

To help Rachel along, and make things better.

“Sure.”

“Why did you ask her?” Charlotte asked. But she didn’t sound annoyed or snotty, just curious.

“Because her opinion matters to me,” I said.

“And not… Pelter’s?”

“Hey,” Pelter said. “You don’t have to ask me, we’re not a democracy unless you want us to be.” She waved an arm, flushing a little bit at being put in the spotlight. “But I do approve of another member.”

“There, see?” I asked.

But Charlotte was looking at Rachel, and I had no idea what she was thinking. It might not be anything good at all. But she’d figure it out soon enough. I moved towards Rachel, and said. “Hey, can you guys get everyone gathered up? Have we called the Protectorate yet? There are a lot of people to arrest, and we need to get out of here before they come back.”

“I have,” Pelter said, with a smile. “We have this all covered.”

“Then, the vials?”

“Got them,” Pelter said, waving a hand. The paperwork is crazy. And we have proof that it works. But… it doesn’t seem like it’s Dose’s work. It mentioned something called Cauldron.”

Cauldron? “So, we have all four vials?”

“Four?” Charlotte asked. “There were only three vials.”
“There. Are. Four. Vials,” I said, barely keeping from grinning, punchdrunk, and exhausted, joking and yet also angry. My mood was black, my tone incredulous, uncertain about how they had missed one.

“Then you can look for it. Because Arachne, I didn’t see a fourth vial. I was very thorough.” Pelter looked worried. Worried that I’d blame her, worried that she’d made a mistake, worried about too many things when she’d managed things so well that all I had left was…

But then where was the vial? We’d see.

“Rachel, can you come with me? We need to pick something up.”

“Course,” Rachel said, looking at me. I moved close to her and hugged her tight. I felt a little bit unsteady on my feet, as if I wasn’t used to using them. Which was odd. Maybe it was a side effect of the healing? I didn’t know.

She helped me walk a little as I slowly moved through the mall. My bugs could watch out for any danger. “Your dogs okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, hugging me tighter. “You worried me.” She admitted it casually, but the look on her face told me it wasn’t a small concession. Or rather, she… didn’t like admitting weakness.

“It worried me too,” I said. Her hand wrapped around my waist, and I blushed a little, leaning hard into her. She was just so warm, and it was nice to just have a moment to breathe in and out. We were alive, and that was what mattered. Right now the future could be as far off as it needed to be.

I was planning for it, but I wasn’t living there. I was exhausted, but that just made me want to feel more alive. I wasn’t sure how I wanted to do it, but I did know a first step in a plan I had… I might as well start it. I smiled as we went into a store.

A Merchant had dropped a backpack when he was running. I’d noticed it as one of those thousands of unconscious details I’d had to take in.

Out from it had spilled game systems, games, batteries. Loot, in other words. I found the backpack, a dingy pink thing that must have belonged to a girl once, and scooped it up.

“What’s that?” she asked, as I continued to pick it up. “Why take it?”

“Don’t you want to play video games?” I asked with a weak smile.

“There are other things,” Rachel said, leaning in. I kissed her back, hard, and if we didn’t have a million other things to do, I would have probably pressed on with the thought my mind had had.

But now wasn’t the time. So I bit her lip briefly and said. “Alright, we have what we came in here for. I’m glad we’re both alive… now let’s get home.”

By now it was clear to both of us just where that was.

Chapter End Notes

And so the plot thickens. It's a soup, by this point.
While all of the new camp members and the others got settled in, Greg, Pelter and I stared at the bounty. Rachel had gone up to tend to her dogs, and perhaps something else, since I saw her moving like she was going to go straight past the shelter.

Charlotte was with ‘her’ girls, trying to manage them, and doing a decent job at it. Which left the three of us to go over the paperwork.

“This stuff’s crazy! I mean... geeze. Congratulations on your newly purchased superpowers?” Greg asked. “We should totally take these or something. I mean, think about it Taylor--”

“No,” I said. “The last person to take one… it’s not something to just jump into. We’ll keep these here, and…”

“Why should we keep them here?” Pelter asked, looking through another paper, which seemed to have specs on each of the twelve samples. Twelve? That really made me wonder. Why were there so many? If every single one of them was sold, then if they were sold to one group, said group would be one of the strongest, if not the strongest, in the city.

They each had names, it seemed. The three vials we had were labeled this weird way in the paperwork, each of them.

‘Canister C1: C-2-1-B-2, ‘Paragon’, 55% mixture.  
Added: O-0-1-2-1, ‘Division’, 30% mixture.  
Added: C-0-0-7-2, ‘Balance’, 15% mixture.’

‘Canister 2E: A-0-5-4-6, ‘Hephaestus’, 80% mixture.  
Added: C-0-0-7-2, ‘Balance’, 20% mixture.’

‘Canister FF: E-0-F-C-2, ‘Deus’, 60% mixture.  
Added: C-0-0-7-2, ‘Balance’, 40% mixture’

What weird names? How was I supposed to know what they meant? Hephaestus was the smith god in Greek, I thought. Deus was God in general, and paragon? None of this really seemed to give me much to work on. I frowned, leaning back a little on my heels, glancing at this little group.

“Here? As opposed to giving them to the Protectorate?”

“Surely they can use it. To... help people?” Pelter said it thoughtfully.

“Then why not us! We could do it. I could take one, and Sierra--” Greg bounced up and down, his gestures wild and

“She’d say no,” I told Greg. Not after what had happened to her brother. I glanced around the tent. “We’re not doing it... but we’re not getting rid of it either. Pelter, we need somewhere safe to keep them. Safe and hidden. A box and then buried and then kept under watch, maybe with a bug in a jar or something? I’m not sure.”
I shook my head. “Some way so we know where they are.”

“Why?” Greg asked, confused and dejected. He was slumping, his dreams of being a superhero dashed, and I felt bad for him.

Still, I had a plan to help cheer him up.

“Well, it’s possible we could need it.” I shrugged a little. “I don’t know if I trust them, but whatever this is, it could be useful. Certainly, the Merchants are going to do something about it.”

I frowned, thinking to the look on the faces of the PRT when we delivered all that we had. They’d showed up in force, perhaps expecting a fight, and found that somehow three members had become four, though Charlotte didn’t have a name yet. That’d take time, I thought, stretching a little bit.

“Oh,” Greg said, and I could see from the helpful and suddenly eager look on his face that he was going to keep on trying to get me to do it. Again and again. Now that he knew there was a chance, now that he knew we were keeping it in reserve…

Pelter didn’t look too happy about the decision, but I don’t think she’d disagree. Let alone bring up the good points that she could, about how it’d make us a target. After all, the Merchants had to know where it was: with us.

And three new capes was definitely better than six. As it was, they were going to be getting even stronger, as we spoke, as we tried to deal with it. But we’d ruined their wave and busted two of their newest members.

That had to hurt. Squealer, Dose, and Skidmark. If I took down Skidmark, would Dose take control? I didn’t know what to do next. There was still Coil to watch, and the E88 were still a presence.

The camp, though. That was going to be the biggest problem. We were expanding so fast it was crazy. Cassie’d probably keep everyone posted on it, but counting the new people, we were well above five hundred members now. Perhaps they should move to the nearby abandoned apartments too. If so, I could watch them, but it’d be more to protect, so for the moment everyone was squeezing in.

Squeezing in was the word. The apartment buildings themselves…

Long after Greg had left, at least for the moment, Pelter talked to me about the problems. I listened, trying not to focus on everything else I could be doing, including talking to Charlotte. “So, there are eighty-four apartment units there. Say we fit three or four people in each one, and that’s still hundreds of people camping out here. But if we take over those nearby apartments, it gets better, because it’s not as if we aren’t already stretched all along the street and the road and all the way over.”

It was true, actually. We’d had to set up roadblocks of sorts for anyone coming from the north or south. They’d have to stop or wait for people to clear out, because there were just too many people.

“Would we get everyone in an apartment if we did that?”

“Well, the real concern,” Pelter admitted, “is whoever the owners are.”

“Fuck the owners,” I said, with a shrug. “Would we get everyone if we did that?”

“We’re still getting power and plumbing and water all set up for these ones, but if we occupied both? That’d still leave a community down here in tents, but not as bad of one.”
“Make it so, then. How bad?”

“Oh, maybe a hundred, maybe less, down here. Though we would have to decide where you live if we start moving people in en masse.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, baring my teeth at the world. “There’s more people fleeing here every day. We’re never going to run out of the camp until this city gets fixed.” I shook my head. “And once that happens, we won’t need the camp. I have no idea what we’ll do next, but it’ll be something.”

“Well, I guess. Your range is good enough to watch both, but what if they attack one while we’re…” Pelter bit her lip and shook her head. “We did a good thing earlier today, and I--I don’t mean to doubt you.”

“You doubt me?” I asked, trying to sound as if I wasn’t aware of just how much I should be doubted. I… needed to keep up a facade.

“I thought that the attack on the mall was a bad idea, but I couldn’t say no to rescuing one of our own. But what do we do when they come back in even greater force?”

That was a good question. It was as much luck as anything that none of us had died, and if Charlotte hadn’t triggered, it would have been a lot bloodier. Skidmark wouldn’t have had a reason to rabbit like the coward he was, and if Squealer had showed up, then… it could have gotten messy, especially if they got desperate and started using these “Cauldron vials” to create new capes.

As it was, assuming they used all of the vials as soon as they found someone willing, that meant that the Merchants would have eight members plus some of their pseudo-capes within a very short time. Probably by tomorrow, or the day after depending on how picky they were.

At that point, they’d outnumber us slightly more than two to one, but…

But? I wasn’t that scared of the Merchants. Or rather, I thought we just might be able to match them. I could take out Skidmark, and Squealer wasn’t that terrifying. Dose’s danger wasn’t as a fighter himself, it was for all of the drugs he made. And the other six? I didn’t want to think about them just yet.

One thing at a time.

Next thing on the list?

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“Hey, Greg, come with me,” I said.

“Really?!” he asked, confused, frowning, a half hour later.

“We’re going on a little walk to see Rachel when she gets back,” I said, with a wave of my hand.

“Why?” he asked, blinking in confusion. “I-I mean, I’d love to talk to her, and all, but why?”

“Didn’t you want to play some video games? I found a Game Box and some games.” I looked at him for a moment, amused at the look of desperate hope on his face. “And I figured, what girlfriend would I be if I didn’t give Rachel what she wanted. And Rachel likes playing games.”

If I had personally kicked his puppy, Greg couldn’t have been more devastated. He’d been coping
well on his own, but I wondered: he had to know that his Mom was... well, she hadn’t gotten in contact, and he’d sent out word, so there was every chance she was burnt up completely.

Which meant he needed a friend... and besides me.

“So,” I said, realizing he hadn’t gotten it. “If you ask Rachel nicely, you two can play together.”

Actually, my scheme was slightly more clever than that, because then Rachel would say no. But I didn’t want to tell Greg the rest, because then that’d spoil it.

Because the truth was simple and undeniable: Rachel was awesome. But I also knew she wasn’t sociable. If I didn’t try to do anything about it, she’d ignore the rest of the team, and while spending more time with me wasn’t something I disapproved of...

Greg wasn’t part of the team, but he was my friend. Cassie already had an in with her, and I could figure out how Pelter and Rachel could get along later.

Charlotte I still needed to figure out, first.

“Sure! I can do that!” Greg said, clearly trying to drown out the doubts in his head. I nodded, looking at him. He was jittering, as if he was a junkie about to get his video game fix.

“And while you’re there, maybe she makes you help out a little. But dogs are cute, right?”

“Y-yeah,” he said, keeping his enthusiasm up as we went through a walk through the ruins.

We didn’t really get that much news from the outside world. We got plenty of people from the area, but I couldn’t tell someone what percentage of the city was still here. I couldn’t estimate how many people were without power, though I assumed there were tons. Still, it’d been over two weeks, and considering the way that Behemoth hadn’t hit parts of the city, I assumed that there was progress being made on pulling the city together.

It just really wasn’t here, and I wondered what the E88 were doing in all of this mess. Or Coil? I needed more data on what he had planned, because otherwise...

I brooded the whole way there, letting myself into the shelter and then waiting until Rachel came back in range.

I cared for the dogs, of course. “Okay, Greg. Now, start remembering names: Angelica, King, Stumpy... I think that new one is Louie, Ginger, Doon...” I pointed them out one by one as they greeted us. She had a lot of dogs. She’d been adding more every day, it sometimes seemed like, and all of them were... pretty used to me, mostly.

Which meant that I was assaulted by cold noses and wet tongues, and found myself on the groundfending off the happy hordes of dogs. Small, big, it didn’t matter, and I let myself be buried.

“I’m not sure if I can... I mean. I’ll try!”

“You can remember all of the names of that one Fantasy game,” I said, rubbing a belly with one hand, while scratching an ear with another. I liked the dogs: if you weren’t a dog person, and couldn’t become one, then being close to Rachel was kind of a lost cause. They also kind of reminded me of her, so I just felt kinda happier messing around with them.

“...okay, well. Then...”
“It’s not like they’re going to blame you for getting their names wrong,” I said, beneath the pile of dogs. In fact, they were sniffing around him, hopeful for a treat.

I could lay here for a long time, even though, yes, the dogs smelled like dogs. Some of them even stank to high heaven. But that’s just how you took them, I thought. Though I was going to have to give some of them a bath.

“Hey, Greg. Can you go grab those mobile tubs in the other room? The ones you can carry around. I think Stinky—” an actual name, and a fitting one, “Could use a bath.” I didn’t know how the dog smelled that bad, because she could be given a bath and then a week later smell twenty times as worse as any dog. Despite the fact that she wasn’t any messier than any of them.

“Oh, okay. When’s Rachel getting back.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “I’ll get a few of the shelter people to help us, if you’re so worried.”

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Cassie wasn’t there, but it was amazing how many people were taking care of this dog shelter now. I bet that they’d have to either expand or start giving away dogs before too long, but Rachel entered my range just as we were getting the dogs into the baths, and she arrived as we were drying off the last of them.

My shirt was ruined, soaked with water, and I was a little grouchy after one of the dogs had gotten free and gone straight for the mud, but her almost being back made me hum, and I could tell from the look on Greg’s face that he could see it too.

“Rachel’s almost back,” I finally said.

“Honey, we could tell,” a new woman, Marge, said. She was a big-boned woman, and she seemed to be one of those types of people who was gregarious and thought that everyone’s business was her own.

“Oh?” I shrugged.

“Your bra’s showing,” Marge said.

Greg flushed as if he were lit on fire and looked away, even though he’d been glancing at me moment’s before, and had to see that all that was showing was the outline of the bra. Taylor Hebert wears a bra, news at eleven.

Greg treating it like he needed to run out of the room and hide was somewhere between awkward and hilarious, but I knew he wouldn’t take me laughing well. “Greg, can you go check that the dogs outside are fine?”

Of course they were, my bugs were there, watching them. Not fleas, of course, none of the dogs had fleas, or ticks, or anything like that. But just flies buzzing around their heads that many of them had sorta learned to ignore. Or didn’t care about in the first place.

But he followed, anyways.

“I don’t care,” I said, with a shrug, as soon as he was gone. My face had flushed slightly, but only slightly.

“Just telling you,” Marge said.
“Well, thanks. Rachel’s coming in, could you give me some privacy?”

“Well, thanks. Rachel’s coming in, could you give me some privacy?”

“Sure, sure,” Marge said, in a knowing voice. Though the truth was that I didn’t have anything of that sort planned. There was far too much to do today to get distracted. That was something that could be saved for later.

Rachel stepped in just a minute or two later, with Brutus in tow. She looked me up and down. I was covered in dog hair on top of the water. She nodded in an appreciative way. “Washing the dog?”

I knew better than to tease her about how obvious that was. “Yep. Also, I wanted to talk to you. You want a GameBox?”

“Yeah,” Rachel said. “That’s what you were getting?”

“Yes. I know it’s traditional to get rather than give presents around your birthday, but I wanted to give it to you anyways.” I held up a hand. “On one caveat. Actually, two.”

“Huh?”

“First, what is your birthday?”

“Uh, I think it’s early on August?” Rachel said, with a frown. “Never celebrated it none.”

“Second… you have to play it and share it with Greg.”

Rachel crossed her arms. She was dressed in a sleeveless shirt, and a pair of shorts, and looked very fierce, ready for a long fight.

“I figure, he’s my friend, and he’s good at playing video games. If he’s annoying, just tell him to back off a little.” I shrugged. “He wants to play, and I want you to be able to play too, if you find it fun. You do, right?”

“Yeah,” Rachel admitted. It was good that she admitted it, because I’d watched her way, way too closely not to realize that as much as she had probably started playing just to have something to do with me, she was really into some of the games.

Not nearly as much as a lot of other things, but she got focused and then frustrated, and then, of course, triumphant when she won. She liked it that way. And she wasn’t that bad at it. She was bored by RPGs, and her reading still wasn’t good enough to easily parse some of the dialogue when it got a little complex. But still.

“So, yeah. Play with Greg. Get to know him. Just like… with Pelter. You could hang out, see if any of the people at camp need dogs. I bet she knows which people are jerks and which aren’t.”

“Sure, sure. One of the bitches is pregnant,” Rachel said. “Gonna have a lot of puppies.”

I must have been really busy to have missed it. “Ah, well.”

“I’ll try with Greg or whatever. And Pelter.” Rachel shrugged, as if she’d given a huge concession. And maybe she had.

“I know you don’t necessarily want a bunch of new team members, but if it’d just been us two, I’d probably be dead. And yeah, we could not attack the Merchants, but they deserve it.”

Rachel’s frown deepened. “Yeah.” She knew druggies, and so of course she hated them. Rachel also wasn’t the sort of person to ever back down, so the idea of not going after the Merchants wouldn’t
have really been her first thought. Or her second. It would have been far down the list.

“So, we work together. Like a pack, or something.” I shrugged. “So we need to know each other.”

Rachel didn’t look as if she completely bought this. Certainly, nobody would leave just because Rachel didn’t try to make friends with them. But people needed to see more of her, and I knew she was capable of making friends and being polite. She wasn’t ever that rude to me, at least.

I wrapped an arm around her and said, “Kay? I need to go see Charlotte in an hour, but if you want to read, we could…”

“Yeah,” she said. She frowned. “What book were we on again?”

“Oh, just whatever takes our fancy,” I said, looking up at her with that smile in my eyes that made her relax.

“Got it.”

*****

“So what can you do?” I asked Charlotte, sitting cross-legged in my tent.

Charlotte looked a lot more cleaned up now, dressed in jeans and a baggy T-shirt that had belonged to someone else, but bright-eyed and eager to talk about it.

“It seems like I have to tell someone something to do it. Like, an order.”

“That’s not what I asked, but it’s good that you’ve figured that out,” I said, trying to smile at her.

“Sorry,” Charlotte said, shaking her head, and looking a little put out. “Just, I’ve been thinking about it, and all I can do is heal and make people more durable. But it’s weird. If they don’t listen to the first order, they don’t get the power. After that, they can flip me the bird all they like… or at least, they still have the powers. Though I can also sorta take it away? It’s this resonance, sort of, that kind of vibrates through my voice…”

“Wow. Well, you could call yourself Amp, or Support Character, or Sarge…” I said, going for a joke.

Charlotte laughed weakly, even though it was a better joke than that, deserving of more than a weak laugh.

“Does it work over distance? I assume that if someone can’t hear you, they can’t take advantage of it,” I said.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Then that’s what we’ll try next. If we had a walkie talkie, then you could give us healing from the comfort of home.” I imagined what Greg would say about that. It did seem like it could be really, really powerful if all it took was a voice. It meant that we could go further, faster, and survive worse without having to risk another person. “Does it work on yourself?”

“No, it really doesn’t. And not dogs, I don’t think? I tried it on one of Rachel’s dogs back at the mall,” Charlotte said, frowning. “I don’t get why it didn’t work.”

“Powers have weird limitations,” I said. “Ask me why Rachel’s power works on dogs and not cats. It just does.” I made a waving motion of my hand, as if dismissing any of the weirdness as
unimportant right now.

“Okay, then. If we can get a walkie talkie and test it, that’s good, right?” Charlotte said. “I can help you guys without risking myself.”

“Though, I’m not sure how Rachel would feel about that. But maybe she could come around,” I said. I wasn’t sure how likely that was, but we’d see. If it really could work via nothing more than a voice, that gave me a lot of ideas. “You should look around the camp for men with combat experience. Ex-marines, that sort of thing. You can designate them, and then if we get enough walkie talkies, they can be camp defenders.” Deciding not to get ahead of myself, I added, “That’s if it works this way. If it does, then that’s amazing. So, how much can it heal? Have you tested how well it can protect?”

“It’s like slicing up the… resonance into different packages when I hand it out. The more people I give it to, the weaker it is,” Charlotte said. “But I can decide how it works. Um… hrm. I’m trying to see if there’s more I can do than healing and durability.”

“That’s not all you need to see. Is it healing… or is it regeneration? Is it something that is ongoing, so that if I broke my leg, it’d heal, and then if I ran ahead and broke my arm, that’d heal too,” I said. If so, that was the kind of power, same with the durability, that she could fire and forget on an ally and then…

“And what about how long it lasts?” I asked.

“I hadn’t really had time to test that,” she admitted. Charlotte smiled at me, and I suppressed any reaction. “I mean, I’ve thought of a lot of this kind of stuff, but… you’re getting at it pretty fast.”

“Hmm,” I said. “If it did work through walkie talkies, than the only difficulty would be getting Rachel to agree.”

“Her agreement matters that much?” Charlotte asked, a little wide-eyed. She bit her lip. “What’s your…”

“You haven’t asked someone yet?” I asked, snorting. “We’re dating.”

“Oh. Wait.” Charlotte’s mouth went wide, and she held a hand to her mouth. “Oh. Oh.”

“What?” I asked, perhaps a little more annoyed than I should have been.

“I… if I tell you something, will you not hate me? You’re… I want to work under you.”

Under me? She’d been something of a leader to those girls, and some of them were staying with her, but… maybe she didn’t like being in charge? If so, then her power was something of an irony, since it was the kind of power that couldn’t work well without other people. But then again, she could just sit back and let others use her powers.

“I don’t know. Will I hate you? You can’t ask me not to judge things. But… just tell me.”

“I was there. When you were pulled out of the locker. I mean, I figured out it was you. I wasn’t, I didn’t—”

Dark. Crowded. Terrified. I’d freaked out. I’d had to be watched, watched like some animal, to see if I’d hurt myself. It had closed in on me, all of my failures, my inability to control and understand
things. If I’d been able to see the bugs with my mind, if I’d been able to stop Emma from turning against me, if I’d done anything other than what I did, things would be different. If I’d been different.

Trapped, and despite all of the company, more alone than I’d ever been. Isolated, scared, with nothing more than the moment to keep me company. It was as if past and future had cut themselves off at once, in favor of now, now, now. And even in that sense, I’d been useless. Rachel didn’t plan ahead, didn’t dwell too much on her past, but she still would have kicked down the damn door.

She’d seen me at my most pathetic.

I stared at her. I was angry, yes. I was furious, the kind of anger that meant that I backed away from her for a moment, just out of the knowledge that… I could punch people out of nowhere. I had before.

But there was something else. How could someone who had seen that want to follow me? How could they--

“And you want to follow me? Is this some sort of joke?”

“Please don’t be mad,” she begged.

I took a breath. Somehow, somewhere, I’d started yelling. I stopped just as quickly, and made sure to say in a calm, level voice, “I don’t understand it.”

“You’ve saved so many people. You’ve saved me. And all of that happened to you and you did it anyways.”

“What was I supposed to do? Roll over and die? It’s not like you did any worse,” I spat. “But, were you planning on telling me this?”

“No. It’s… the past.” Charlotte flushed and looked away. She was sweating heavily, and the way the fear turned down her lips and tightened her look was not appealing, but the idea that I mattered enough to get that sort of reaction? I sort of liked it.

“That’s a good answer.” I hesitated, and then said, firmly. “Never talk about it again. I’m Arachne to you. So, you want to help me?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll have a lot of things to test. As far as other resonances go, how about super strength? It’s pretty common to have durability and strength, so maybe your power has that as a… similar resonance? I’m not sure how it works,” I said, trying to be brisk and professional. It was best to put this behind us, before I made some mistake or yelled at her. Still, I wasn’t exactly happy about it.

…it was also something that I didn’t want to tell Rachel.

“Well… I can work on that. And if we have walkie talkies we can test that. What about the regeneration question?”

I pulled out a knife from Rachel’s bag. Knives were very useful things. “We can test it right here.”

“Wait, don’t!” she said. But I didn’t listen to her, and pulled off my glove before prickling my thumb, “Oh, okay.”

“What, did you think I was going to actually hurt myself? Make with the healing,” I said, waving my
hand. “No durability.”

“Alright.”

It felt really, really odd. It was a sort of vibration that was going through me. It was a little hard to cope with. At the very least, it was something I’d have to get used to, just like any other power. Which could be one of the drawbacks, of course. I wasn’t sure. Either way, within a moment, my pricked finger healed. “It gets less dramatic the more people that are having it split between them, right?” Because it was pretty sudden. I literally felt my flesh knit itself back up: and that was just a slight cut. I pricked my thumb again, and it healed just as fast. “Alright, yes, this is regeneration. Now, can you leave it on me, and we’ll see how long it lasts?”

“Of course,” she said. Luckily she didn’t seem to have any more questions about Rachel, at least not at the moment.

Now began the fun part, actually.

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Cassie was very enthusiastic and supportive when I told her the plan, and knowing the whole community thing, I bet we’d have more walkie-talkies than we could use before the week was out. Getting one would take a while, but hopefully there’d be one in by Saturday.

I kept on pricking my thumb at random moments to try to test how long it’d last, because ultimately even if it stopped working—though the odd feeling was distinctive enough that I bet I’d notice when it stopped.

And I did. It seemed to take a few minutes, usually. How much, exactly? Always over a minute. Always under ten. And it seemed that she could renew or maintain the contact if she was nearby. It was… interesting, to say the least.

Besides that, I had a lot to do. Charlotte seemed active in seeing to people’s welfare, and I did want to check out the camp. See how people were doing. Saturday was the first day that people moved into an apartment. A family of eight, rather more than could really fit in an apartment like that, but they said they’d make it work, and they seemed eager to get out of the crowded tents.

Of course, their tent was immediately snapped up by another family, one that had fled from Old Chinatown, which was the site of a lot of gang warfare ever since the ABB had collapsed.

That’s how I learned things, now: refugees. Saturday brought almost thirty new people into the camp, which made it even more important that we got even more ground floor apartments working and began to get everything together.

But there were still rumors of the Butcher to deal with. People who came from Merchant territory had a message for me: “Skidmark’s fighting against the Teeth, and he’s building up an army, or something. He’s recruiting.”

So, he was using the vials, but the fact that the Butcher was in the way made me wonder whether he’d actually bother to try to attack our camp. If he were smart, he’d focus on the Teeth, if they were eating his lunch. That meant that there were pretty good odds he’d come after us instead.

Tomorrow was my birthday, but we weren’t going to be really celebrating it? I was sure that Rachel had something planned to get me, and perhaps a few others would get involved, but I would have heard if there were any major plans, seeing as I had this whole camp heavily bugged. Plus, the average citizen of our little… community knew my face out of costume, but sure as hell didn’t know
my birthday.

It really was a community, for better and worse, and I tried to pay as much attention to it as I could. Stefanie and Charlotte were both setting an example in this respect, and maybe I should keep it up. I was the farthest thing from alone these days. I had so many people that I could talk to, so many people who were relying on me. I could watch all of them, see their struggles and challenges.

I could know that many of them looked up to me. That was bizarre. Kids talked about me the same way I might have talked about Alexandria. Despite the fact that they’d seem me walk through the camp in jeans and a T-shirt. For some odd reason, the lack of distance didn’t seem to actually hurt the impression.

As long as I kept up the facade of being unflappable, at least. I knew how they talked about how I was hard to read, how I never smiled, and how I seemed to always have a plan.

...as if Charlotte getting her powers was part of the plan. As if I hadn’t almost died. All they heard was how we’d busted up the entire Merchant gathering. Just walked in there and walked back out with Kayla. We’d saved the one person the Merchants had been able to kidnap, a family was reunited, and if you ignored the terror and mistakes and the vials and a thousand other factors, it looked like a very simple success.

I just wondered what would happen if we messed up. Would they forgive me, or would they turn against me? I knew what the answer would have been at Winslow: you had only one chance, and if you flubbed it, you were an outcast forever.

It was hard to unlearn shit like that.

“No fucking duh,” Rachel said when I’d voiced the thought. “You see dogs that get beat, and they can’t trust nobody ever again. Or when they do trust, it ain’t the same kind of trust.”

“You can’t exactly put humans through training to get rid of that. Or if you can, it’s called therapy.”

“Eh,” Rachel said, reaching out to run a hand through my hair. “You seem better.”

“...I guess I am.” I was at least able to project confidence, and I knew that she was trying to cheer me up. I also knew that she had to have been at least a little annoyed with what I’d told her about Charlotte’s power. Yeah, being able to get tougher was interesting for her. I knew she liked getting into the thick of a fight: but that was just it. If Charlotte’s power really worked that way, then the best place for her would be as far away as possible. As long as we could communicate the situation properly.

Heck. The more I thought about it, the more excited I got. I couldn’t really let Rachel’s doubts get in the way if it really worked this way... and if it didn’t and she had to be within a certain range? Well, then Rachel’d get what she wanted, and it’d still be a really useful power.

“Yeah, don’t worry,” Rachel said, gently.

“That’s a little bit much to ask,” I said. Rachel looked at me, and I could read a lot of different thoughts in her eyes. I knew it wasn’t just the eyes, that there were complexities being conveyed by expression and just knowing her, but that’s what it felt like. Like I was staring into her dark eyes and making out signs and meaning. “Maybe I can try, though.”

“If you’re too worried, go run or lift shit. Just keep doing it until you are too tired to think,” Rachel said. She had weights at the shelter, actually. Somehow she’d gotten some, which meant my bugs had on occasion gotten the show of watching her exercise. Certainly, that and the dog training meant
that she had plenty of exhaustion to go around.

I bit my lip, thinking of other exercise for a moment, and said. “We need to go back and monitor Coil some more. Maybe on Monday?”

Sunday was going to be a day of rest, not least because it was my birthday.

“Sure. Sixteen, huh,” Rachel said. Rachel was older than me by almost two years. She’d been fourteen when she’d run away from home, but almost to her birthday. She’d been just about seventeen when she’d crashed into Brockton Bay, and she’d been recruited late in the fall… and so in two and change months, she’d be eighteen. It hadn’t ever really seemed to matter.

“Sweet sixteen,” I said. “Cars, GEDs, and other fun things.” I shook my head, “It’s not a big deal.”

“Nope,” Rachel said, almost too quickly. Was she hiding something? I supposed I’d figure out sooner rather than later.

“Though I’ll have to wait until there’s a test.” I frowned a little. “Then I guess I could take a year or two off before I went to college.” That was the idea, and Rachel nodded. There was no harm in not being college educated for a few years, especially if I was testing out of school early. We’d find a way: after all, I now knew that Rachel had this big following. Maybe we could live off of that support?

If not, I could always just get some dead-end job and suffer through it. It wasn’t like hard work was beyond me. Plus, maybe one of the dog shelters would have a job. I was probably qualified, though I was pretty sure most of that stuff was volunteer? Still, I’d figure something out. The next year--well, there were plenty of things to worry about, but I decided that I’d care about none of them.

“Sure,” Rachel said. “You’re smart.” Rachel would probably never go to college, but I wondered, if I helped her learn to read, and with math, and other things, whether she might not get a GED someday. Not that it mattered that much, she was known outside of her cape identity. She wasn’t exactly going to… though she could always do something involving dogs, which was about as useful as me thinking I’d set myself up as an exterminator.

“Thanks,” I said, giving her a brief hug. “I’ll be gone for about an hour, see you then.”

“Charlotte?” she asked.

“Yes. Amp’s going to test her powers.”

*****

“Can you hear me now?” she asked. She was only a few dozen feet away, but she was whispering into her walkie talkie.

“Yes.”

“Touch your nose.”

I reached out and touched my nose, and felt the odd tingle of powers rushing into me. My skin felt a little odd, and I walked along a little further. Five hundred feet away now.

The feeling of the powers withdrawing was a little bizarre.

“And now?” she asked.
“Yes. Give the command.”

“Touch your nose.”

I did, and again, on came the power.

This was going to be boring and weird, but hopefully instructive.

******

In the end, I went almost five miles away without losing the ability to be effected, and when I went outside of radio contact to see how long it lasted, it didn’t last any less time than when I was near her. A half-hour was a decent enough span of time to have a power, and I assumed that it would be possible, if she kept in radio contact, for her to withdraw and reapply a power as often as possible.

So there should be walkie talkies or radios or something in every household that needs it, just like some of the kids in camp were talking about distributing the fishbowls around the camp so that wherever I went, there’d be bugs to bring out. Which was kind of clever, though really I needed some sort of system, to keep the bugs from killing each other in their sleep. I was having to draw down a lot of bugs, and breed them as well, just to keep it up.

It was just rough, to say the least. Nothing I could do about that, I thought, as I walked back into camp just as the daily patrol came in.

This time, it seemed like it was Miss Militia, Weld, and Vista. Which was a good combination, I supposed. Vista could warp areas, which probably made Miss Militia’s targeting even more effective if need be.

I didn’t know whether they wanted to talk to me, or if they’d merely stop in on the way to other business, but I made sure that I was around when they showed up.

None of them looked run ragged, actually. This was the first time I’d seen Vista with my own eyes without just looking over her. The Endbringer fight was too busy to pay attention to any one person, and so I’d never really seen her. She was surprisingly intense, looking. It was something about the set of lines on her face, and the way her short blonde hair was out of the way. Maybe it was how she walked.

It was a little impressive, despite the fact that she was pretty young. Then again, Pelter was only fourteen. I loved her costume, the green armor, the white to add some details, the skirt… it all looked very effective at doing what it was trying to do, and of course I’d met Weld and Miss Militia before.

Miss Militia, for her part, nodded at me. “Arachne, I have a message for you.”

“Yes?” I asked, using my bugs to look around and make sure that nobody else was listening that shouldn’t be.

“Flechette would like to invite you, Pelter, and Hellhound to meet with her in Dolltown. She asked me to send this message to you, since she wanted to do it on Sunday.”

“Bitch. And we’re not going to be able to,” I said, amused at the idea that Miss Militia was serving as a messenger. “Tell her we might be able to show up on Monday at noon, and that we’ll get word to her soon.”

“Very well,” Miss Militia said.
I was curious, though, and so after a moment I decided to ask, “Do you know what it’s about?”

“The E88 has been putting a lot of pressure on the area around Dolltown. She’s probably worried. She’s been trying to clear them out of the area,” Miss Militia admitted.

“People are being pressed from all sides,” I said. “I’ve heard that the Butcher is hurting the Merchants badly. I almost want them to stalemate each other.”

“The Butcher…” Miss Militia shook her head. “Be careful with her.”

“I know. She’s so dangerous that if it wasn’t for her side power… she’d have a kill order, right? That’s what everyone says online.”

“Yes,” Miss Militia said. “Though I’m not sure why she’d want to stay here long-term. It just increases the pressure. But I don’t understand the motives of people like her at all.” Miss Militia looked troubled, thinking about people she couldn’t quite understand, and probably all of the duties she was facing.

“Neither do I,” I admitted. “Oh, and we have a new cape on our team.”

“You do?” Miss Militia asked, surprised.

“I know you might have heard about her when everyone came to pick up those Merchants, but… Amp is officially part of our team now.”

“Is this like New Wave all over again?” Vista asked, thoughtfully, looking around the camp. She didn’t say much, and Weld didn’t seem to be judging this place, either.

“I don’t know. We don’t have any large ambition like that. The only one who’s unmasked is Rachel… is that going to be a problem?”

“At the moment, no.” Miss Militia shook her head. “The Director has suspended any attempts to arrest her, pending further investigation.”

“Oh, good,” I said, aware that this meant that if she did go back to being a villain, they could easily reactivate all of the treatment in a matter of moments. And probably for me as well. She probably didn’t mean it as a threat, but it was probably something that they wanted me to know.

The mask hid my face, so they didn’t have to see the snarl there. The skepticism with which I took any of these claims. Any of this supposed leniency. “We have information on the power patches. The means of creating them seems to involve a number of highly specialized drugs, on top of the Tinker’s contributions. If we can find where the pipeline of chemicals is coming from, we can cut them up.”

Coil. He was bankrolling the Merchants, or rather Dose, who was about the only thing other than the ‘Cauldron Vials’ that the Merchants had going for them. Why was he doing that? The most obvious answer was the most likely: they were yet another piece that he could control in his bid to gain power over the city. And then at any moment he could cut them off, just like the PRT was hinting it could do with Rachel.

The difference was, Dose was happy to be a pawn, and worse, whereas I wasn’t going to go gently if they turned this all against me.

Hopefully we’d continue to work together, but it was hard to trust them when they clearly had other motives.
Flechette, though, seemed genuine. Weld wasn’t so bad… if I started listing members who were good people, it would probably include most of them. Now there was a real mystery, how an organization that had so many good apples was still rotten to the core.

“What’s Bullet’s power? Are you going to register her as an independent cape?”

“Maybe when the city’s a little less fucked. How well is that going?” I asked, my voice showing a little of that aggression. I was also not answering the question about her powers, at least, I was going to try to avoid them as long as possible.

“Progress is being made, except in the regions destroyed by Behemoth. There are parts of it that are still irradiated.”

Oh, well that sucked. I frowned a little, thinking about it. The majority of the city had power and maybe even plumbing back, sorta, but… jobs? Those would be a lot harder to get back, though at least the shoreline was mostly alright.

I assumed that there’d be a lot of supplies coming in by boat, since it was cheaper than driving through the mess that was the roads.

“Shit,” I said, shaking my head. “With the E88, do you have the situation managed?”

“We’re doing our best,” Weld said. “Help would be appreciated--”

“We’re on the front lines here,” I said, waving my hand. “Who else is a problem?”

“The Undersiders have started setting up territory, taking over city blocks,” Vista said.

Ah. That was the new suspicion, the new fear: that this was just an Undersider camp with better propaganda. But I really, really didn’t give a shit about making sure they had the right idea. If they tried to go against us now when we’d done nothing? I doubted it’d go well for them. “Huh, well. Hopefully you can deal with them. Unless one of them is close to us.”

“No. We’ve outlined where they are on maps,” Miss Militia said. “None of it overlaps with your territory.”

“Where?”

“Regent is well into E88 territory,” Weld said, as if reciting from a report, “While Grue is at the edge of Merchant and Empire territory.” He nodded. “We cannot determine where Tattletale is operating, but she’s been seen up closer to the hill, and the ruined areas near Behemoth.”

Separated, I thought. All spread out. In the margins. “Where’s Accord in all of this?”

“Everywhere,” Miss Militia said.

“Well, we haven’t seen him around here.” I shrugged. “I can only deal with the problems I have in front of me. There’s only so many capes.”

“We understand this,” Miss Militia said.

“Not like we don’t know the feeling,” Vista added, looking at me a little skeptically. I knew what she was thinking, or I could imagine it had something to do with the way that it felt like I was held at the end of a long stick to get bitten at… while the Protectorate and Wards felt in a similar spot, only the
person holding the stick was probably the Director. And I bet they--she, if I remembered right?--felt that way about the people further up.

Organizations all added up to a bunch of shit… then again, I was now part of a team of four heroes, in charge of a camp of refugees. So maybe that was hypocrisy. “Got it.” I settled into a sort of waiting stance. Like I was about to try to dodge a punch. Weld seemed to tense at it, and I wondered if it came off more hostile than it should have.

“Arachne, what can you tell us about Amp’s powers?” Miss Militia asked. So she hadn’t been distracted from the matter, she’d just been focusing on other things.

“It’s very useful, and we’re still testing it,” I said, as if I were some lawyer fending off the raving hordes of reports. “I’ll tell you if it becomes necessary for you to know.”

I could see them react to that sort of phrase. Necessary for you to know? But while I didn’t think they were the enemy, maybe it’d be best to wait until we had a better idea of what was going on, and where we were going.

“Very well. But she is decided that she wants to be Amp?”

“Yes. She’s very clear on that,” I said. “Anything else, while you’re here? Feel free to stop in for some coffee.” Someone had raided a grocery store nearby, at the owner’s permission. There were a lot of things to loot, and yet even despite all of that, we were definitely going to need to start getting food delivered unless we were going to retreat, and the longer we spent here, the worse it was.

If we left now, the Merchants would basically double in size and bleed out into other regions of the city.

“Very well,” Miss Militia said, with a slight, uncertain nod. As if she were walking on eggshells, just from being around me.

Some allies we were turning out to be.

I made a note: Monday, I had things to do.

Sunday, though?

I was hoping that the Merchants and the rest of the world all decided to take the damn day off, just for once, and let me relax.

*****

I woke up with a pressure on me, and when I opened my eyes, I realized it was my girlfriend. Now, of all the ways to wake up, with my girlfriend in nothing more than underwear on top of me was far from the worst one ever, and as a way to go to sleep, there were few worse. But she was kind of heavy, and while my gaze did stray, I mostly found myself annoyed and slightly hungry.

Ah, so this was the birthday present? “Rache… this is nice and all,” I said, totally staring at her eyes and nowhere else, “But can we just wait until after breakfast?”

Rachel snorted, her eyes giving the broadest grin imaginable. “Heh.” She reached down and ran her fingers along my neck, threatening to trail down further. “Wanted to get you up. Something else.”

“Really?” I asked.
“Don’t cheat with bugs,” Rachel said, leaning in to nibble at my neck. She smelled of sweat, dog, and--

I squirmed a little, trying not to get distracted from my purpose.

What was my purpose, again?

“...fine.”

“Get dressed,” she ordered, in a firm voice.

“I’m not a dog,” I said, with a playful tone I hope she understood. “But… if you so command… then please get the heck off me.”

“Can’t push me off?” Rachel asked, sounding amused.

“Nope. You’re too strong. And handsome. And amazing.” I didn’t smile, but I wanted to so bad, because the look on her face was worth the heat that ran through my body at my own words. “So now get off. And then I’ll get dressed.”

It wasn’t really possible to shut off my bugs. But I did make sure that they stayed in their bowls, the ones that were there, and any that were flying around when I woke up, I grounded. I kept up the perimeter, so any ambush would have to come from within the camp, but otherwise I allowed myself to be blindfolded.

Were they going to do some sort of birthday party?

Rachel rolled off and grabbed a shirt from the floor, and then with a fey sort of feeling, I grabbed one of hers as well, on top of a clean pair of jeans from my bag. She stared at me as I slipped on her shirt, which of course was way too broad and big for me. Well, not way too, but enough that it was kind of notable. “What?” I asked.

Rachel’s face was slightly flushed, her breathing a little heavy as she stared at me. “You’re really cute.” She shook her head, as if this was something to be rueful about, and I slipped into some clean socks and the same shoes I’d been wearing this whole time. The tennis shoes had seen better days, but I really didn’t care that much.

I was cute.

At least in the eyes of the only critic who mattered worth a damn.

******

I walked through the camp, blind for the moment. I wasn’t really, but I felt so clumsy as Rachel guided me, as if any moment I’d have to grab onto her arm as if I were some sort of belle with the vapors.

She was leading me into one of the apartment buildings, and I hesitated, wondering, at the door, as I stared at it…

Was this some sort of big surprise party? How many people knew? Nobody had looked at me in the early morning light, or said anything about it. But… that’s a surprise party.

I opened the door, and I saw who I’d missed coming in. I must have really slept in, because there was Greg, Stefanie… and Dad.
“Morning, birthday girl,” Stefanie said.

“Oh. You’re involved?” I asked, rubbing at me eyes as I looked at Stefanie, who was rather more dressed up than I was.

Dad was at the grill, making what seemed like a full breakfast. Pancakes were being made, eggs were being whipped up for omelets, he seemed to be managing half a dozen different tasks at once. Greg was sitting in the chair, with a video game.

“Hey, Rache!” Greg said.

“Rachel,” Rachel said, firmly.

“You get to beat level 9 last night?”

“Nah. A little busy,” Rachel said, not even blushing at what she was referring to, which was probably the reason I’d slept in late, all things considered. Was that part of some sort of strategy, or had Rachel just assumed that I’d want to sleep in, and waited to see if I got up.

“Oh…” Greg said, a little dejectedly.

“Also. The jumpy blobs sucks,” Rachel said.

“Though now isn’t really the time for video-game talk, is it?” Stefanie asked, with a bit of a smile. “I had to help organize all of this.”

So, the room was pretty dingy. Just a single slightly large room, and then a second room for the beds. But there was a table, and it was loaded down with presents.

“Eh, whatever works,” I said, glad that Rachel was talking to Greg.

“They’re called Erglings, and they come from--”

“Taylor,” Dad said. “Sit down.”

I nodded, trying not to feel too nervous. I just kept on waiting for something to go wrong, because it was just so amazing, so--

When I was a kid, Dad always did birthday breakfast for me, before I got older and more ‘mature’ and we went out to nice places for dinner. When we probably could have afforded it less. I thought about the breakfast with Rachel, getting her to try new things, victory as sweet as the taste of her lips in a syrupy kiss.

There weren’t dozens of packages or anything, but it was a birthday, and more than I expected.

“C’mon, open them!” Greg said.

“You can wait until after the breakfast, if you want.” Stefanie then added. “Also, we have an ice-cream cake in a fridge in another room, if you want something like that tonight. Greg said you liked ice-cream?”

Of course I did. I licked my lips and looked at the packages. They weren’t colorfully wrapped, but I took the one that looked heaviest, and began to shake it a little, curiously.

“That’s mine!” Greg said.
“And that one?” I asked, pointing to a card.

“Rachel’s,” Stefanie said. “Though she also kinda split the big present there with Dad.” The one wrapped in grey wrapping paper.

“And yours is the small red one?”

“I didn’t know what to get you,” Stefanie admitted, rubbing her hair in an odd nervous gesture. “So I just got some essentials for you. It’s been a few weeks, but I thought… well. I asked your father, so it’s sorta from here”

“I’ll check yours out first,” I said, politely, as I watched Dad flit around, clearly in a better mood than I’d seen him in for months.

A little bit of distance, I decided, had honestly kind of improved our relationship. Once there wasn’t the expectation for certain things, it could just continue on in its own way. I opened the box, and began to pull things out of it, one by one. Tampons, an IOU for some clothes she’d found that would fit me, a razor, toothpaste of my favorite brand, a shampoo that I really liked, a small purse and a money-pouch… it all seemed like little gestures that all meant one thing, that I was home here, and should make myself at home.

I liked it, and I looked up. “Thank you,” I said, surprised that I could get so emotional over just a few things like that. But they were sort of part of being here, weren’t they?

“I’ll try yours next, Greg. Also, Dad!”

“Yes, Taylor?” he asked.

“How long is it till the food’s ready?”

“Oh, about ten minutes,” he said.

It all smelled great. “More than enough time.”

*****

So I opened Greg’s next. Books, a lot of books. The exact sort of books I liked. Fantasies and old classics, about a dozen books in all, as Greg looked at me, eager for my reaction. I’d read some of them before, but that didn’t really matter. I just nodded to him and said, “Thanks, Greg” and he acted like I was the Pope and I’d just laid hands on him.

Next came Dad and Rachel’s, and that’s when emotional crossed the line into teary as I opened it up.

The first thing I pulled out was the sheet music. I recognized it at once, almost. It was music for a flute, and it had my Mom’s handwriting on it. Little notes. I stared at it for a moment, blinking back tears. “How…”

“Someone had stolen them. Not sure why,” Dad called. “So Rachel got them back. And the photos, they were in the ruins, nobody had taken them.”

Photos? I pulled out what looked like a photo album, and flipped it open. Mom at eighteen, posing for a class photo in High School. Mom in college, with a hairstyle that made her look a little like a hippie. Mom hugging Dad. Mom holding me as a baby. She didn’t look as if she’d been all that pregnant, I’d been a small baby, if not quiet baby. But she seemed almost to glow, just off the page.
“It’s… a family thing. I was going to give some of them, or maybe all of them, when you went off to college if you wanted them. Or, after that, when you got married,” Dad said. “Same with a lot of these things…”

I looked in the large box. There were eight or nine books, and they were familiar ones. Absalom, Absalom, Breakfast of Champions… works she’d gone over again and again for her classes, the ones that mattered to Mom. Not the introductory ones where she had to talk about the literary canon and how to punctuate your sentences, but the ones where she could branch out. Not that either of the two were obscure, but they weren’t something you gave to a Freshman, any more than you taught a Middle-Schooler Calculus. I flipped one open, and there was my mother’s writing, through the blur of tears.

“Taylor, are you alright?” Rachel asked.

“Just…” I didn’t know what to say. “Married?”

“You’ve moved out, so I’m offering them,” Dad said, uncertainly, as he flipped an omelette.

There were a few sets of lecture notes, and I just touched them and glanced at them, and knew that if I read them I could hear them in her voice. Even the fragments, because she never wrote speeches, but points to say. I could hear her say: ‘Intertextuality’ as one line just said, underlined three times as if to remind herself. Or, ‘Vonnegut=C, Discuss?’ I didn’t even know what that meant, I just knew that it was something she’d written.

I blinked away the tears. “Yes, I’m alright,” I added to Rachel. “Thanks, Dad.”

“I figured it’d happen someday,” Dad said. There was a long pause where he bit his lip, and clearly didn’t know what to say. I knew the dilemma. If he wished I got married, would it sound like he was wishing I broke up with Rachel? If it didn’t sound like that, would it instead sound like he was pushing for two teenage girls to marry, without asking them about it?

“The last one’s mine,” Rachel said. “But we gotta go outside.”

“Why?”

“Cause,” Rachel added. “Just a minute.”

She reached out and picked up the card.

“You’ve already give me something, getting this back… by force?”

“Sure,” Rachel said. She reached up as if she were going to lift and carry me outside. I got up, and followed her, as she clutched the envelope.

Once we were outside, she said. “I bet all of ‘em would want one once I said it. Be fucking annoying.”

“One what?” I asked.

She just thrust the envelope at me. I opened it. It was a plain white card, but inside it read, ‘1 Puppy.’

“A puppy?”

“That bitch is going to throw a litter soon. Wanna raise one? Yourself? With me,” Rachel said, biting her lip. “He or she, they’d be yours and shit.”
I thought about it, wondering why she treated it so seriously. She seemed to be staring at me as if she’d proposed we try for children or… something. That serious, that important. It wasn’t like I hadn’t cared for a lot of Rachel’s dogs before. But it’d never been my dog, per se.

“Yes,” I said. “And… how about she?”

“Choose whichever one you want. She’s a mongrel bitch, but that don’t matter.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“And after breakfast, do you wanna fuck?” Rachel asked.

“I’ll be stuffed after all of that. I’ll hardly be able to move or--”

Rachel just stared at me, her own eyes cutting it off, as if she didn’t see the big deal. And after a moment of thinking about it, neither did I.

Now I had a few other things to look forward to. I was sorta glad she’d told me all of this out here. I knew she wouldn’t have hesitated to say it in front of everyone.

...but then, a part of me wouldn’t have hesitated to say yes, even then, even there.

And best of all? Nothing went wrong that Sunday.

Chapter End Notes

A very high note to end the chapter on, relationship wise. But it's not going to be all saccarine sweets. Trust me.
We traveled as a team for the first time. I was in costume, as was Rachel and Pelter, and Amp was wearing a ski mask, and had, as a sort of replacement for an actual costume, bullhorn and walkie-talkie in a belt on her hip.

Two of the costumes weren’t that great, but it was fine. We’d figure it out later, and on the list of things that actually mattered, clothes were the last one. I’d finally decided to shave my legs yesterday, not that anyone could see it, and that was sort of nice… but who cared about the costume, as long as it worked?

I had to keep on telling myself that, because honestly I had all sorts of ideas, if we had more money that wasn’t immediately going into fixing up the camp.

Amp could wear some sort of sound-system, and a mask with musical notes on it, and Pelter could go for some sort of… ancient theme? Like a peltast? Or maybe a shepherd? Obviously, if she could throw little things, she could in theory throw bigger things, like actual spears, as long as she could lift them: the super-strength happened after she’d thrown something, it didn’t help her lift it.

I also imagined a bag for her, and perhaps she’d wear a choker? As well, sandals, and… hrm. The more I thought, the more I could picture what I wanted.

It was an idea, at least. But I’d decided against acting on it yet, and Charlotte… Amp, was by my side, nervous and uncertain.

She wasn’t the only person coming there. We were temporarily going with Sierra too, since she wanted to go talk to her brother again.

Sierra was nervous and a little too dressed up (green skirt, black blouse), having clearly thought a lot about the skirt and blouse she was wearing. I could have told her that it wasn’t as if the PRT would be turning her away for coming in a pair of jeans. Still, it mattered to her, just like the meeting with her brother the day before had.

“How was he?” I asked, glancing over at her as we walked along. There were no problems at all for at least five blocks in either direction, and I was almost in range of Dolltown.

“Fine. But he has to learn to use his power. Apparently if he doesn’t focus he could just fall through the floor,” Sierra said, with a frown, clearly unsure of what she could do to help. “They’re trying to think of some way to help him sleep, or else he’ll have to just… apparently he doesn’t need to sleep?” Sierra shrugged, looking a little worn out by the very idea of talking about it.

“Huh,” I said. It sounded a lot like a Case 53 situation. I’d seen a few online, and someone had leaked that this was what they were called. “What about emotionally?”

“He’s… not coping well. But they’re training him,” Sierra said. “They’re the proper authorities to do something with him.” She sounded like she was trying to convince herself of that, and so I wasn’t going to talk too much about how ridiculous that belief was.

The proper authorities had messed up way too often for me to trust them, but when I looked at Sierra, her red dreadlocks pulled back in a style that drew the least amount of attention to them, I saw
someone who was definitely willing to play along with things.

She was smart, and capable, or at least she’d known who to go to and how to convince me, and I’d seen her hanging around the camp, helping out. Not in big ways, because Pelter really still was the one in charge of the camp. I was just there. But in enough ways to matter.

“They do have the experience,” I said, meaning it in two ways. They had experience in messing it up, too. “Still, if he winds up a good Ward, that’s fine.”

“You don’t approve, do you?” Sierra asked.

“I’ve… seen some of what happens with the morality of the Protectorate,” I said quietly. “I know at least one of the Wards was a monster.” I said it absently, hoping that she didn’t follow up on it too much. We were just walking through the streets, in old neighborhoods that had once housed both immigrants and people who worked at the port, but now mostly housed sadness and broken dreams.

“… you know that?” Sierra asked, firmly. As if she were going to cite me in a paper of hers.

“I do. Are you going to go back to college in the fall?” She’d probably been off school for weeks, just barely starting to get used to that, and then it’d just slammed into us.

“Yeah. The school should open up again,” Sierra said. “It wasn’t badly hurt, apparently. My English Professor died, but other than that—”

I was glad I was wearing my mask. “Oh? Did a lot of teachers die?”

“Professors. And, enough of them. Enough that I wonder what we’re going to do,” Sierra said.

“What was your major?”

“Not decided yet,” Sierra admitted. “Maybe music? Or art… or…” she trailed off, and waved her hand in a gesture I guess I was supposed to understand.

“Just seeing what you want to learn?” I asked. Mom had apparently been like that. Dad had pulled me aside and told me story after story about Mom. But different stories, actually—during breakfast and then after when I got back from doing other things. It was as if some sort of floodgate had been opened. He could talk about this time she accidentally ruined her hair, or a date they had that had gone badly, then well. Or her bitching about her teachers, back before she’d been a professor herself.

It wasn’t that he only shared happy memories of Mom before, or only perfect ones, but he seemed a lot more willing to say. ‘And this one time, she was trying to clean the house before a colleague came over, and she just got so frustrated at how bad it smelled that she tried spraying air spray in a fan and then—’

Mom had been similarly undecided for a long time. It’d worked out for her.

“Sort of, yes,” she said. “I also wonder whether I should do more than that. Something that’ll help the world.”

I nodded, not sure what to say. There were ways to help people however you did it, and I sure as heck wasn’t going to offer my opinion or offer her a vial of superpowers if she really wanted to ‘make the world better’. I didn’t know if it actually would, anyways.

“Good luck,” I said.
“You mean that?” Sierra asked.

“You wouldn’t I?”

“I know you don’t like Bryce. I know he made a bad impression on you, but he wasn’t a bad kid.”

He wasn’t a bad kid, but he’d become, apparently, a horrible teenager. “I get that. But people change.”

“For the better?”

“Sure,” I said. I had to believe that much, if I believed in anything.

“I’ll see how he’s doing. He was going to test what he can do today, in detail.”

“We can’t really escort you… but hopefully you can go back with Flechette? Maybe you could ask her for her view?”

“From his colleague?” Sierra asked.

“Yeah. More likely to give you a straight story then someone in charge who wants to make sure that he looks like he’s doing great.”

“Ah, right,” Sierra said. “Thank you for the advice.”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure what else to say to her, what else she could use from me. I’d helped her, and she was helping the camp, and that was about it. I knew if she needed something, she’d ask.

I wouldn’t tell her how to live her life, and she wouldn’t tell me how to live mine.

******

Dolltown was a set of buildings. A few of them were shops, and about half of the people in the area seemed to be shopkeepers of one type or another, in a neighborhood that had a high portion of immigrants. But others, about a third, were clearly, from the talk and chatter, displaced refugees from E88 areas.

I didn’t know why, and I bet that whatever I found out was going to make me think even less of anyone who didn’t hate them.

The rest were just locals who had had jobs that had been quite a way away, and so now they were stuck in their homes with nothing to do.

All in all, there were probably a hundred, hundred and fifty people in the area, and from what I could tell, Parian lived in her parent’s store, which was a prosperous-enough looking general store for the area, big enough that it must have had more than just a few employees. Not a chain, but that didn’t matter.

I wondered if she’d ever worked in it. All around the area, which was pretty small, there were bits of tripwire of sorts. I could barely sense the threads with my bugs, and combined with the spray-paint, it meant that she’d know when anyone entered her area.

It wasn’t a large area, though. Just a block and a half, and I knew her range couldn’t be that much higher.

I glanced down as one of the dogs raised his nose up and began sniffing the air, and I quelled him by
petting gently, glancing this way and that, as if I needed to look to get a feel for the area.

Either way, the neighborhood hadn’t been too badly hit by the earthquake, and the road was even intact.

Flechette was in the general store, talking with a cashier as if she wasn’t in costume at all, and I wondered how often she’d hung around here. I had my suspicions about her motives… a lot of suspicions, about a lot of motives, since she’d been the one to reveal the whole thing I had with Rachel to everyone.

On the one hand, it’d led to far too many positive things, such as Cassie getting involved, to gainsay it. On the other hand, suddenly everyone knew I was gay. I’d sort of not thought about that part of it, tried to focus on the positive, but I really did need to talk to her about that.

Hopefully where Rachel wasn’t listening, in case it sounded like I was trying to hide it.

We made our way to the store, and I wondered about Parian. She was a rogue, and I wondered at that: there were worse things to do than make money with your powers, but it was just something that never occurred to me. I’d never thought, ‘Hey, I have it in me to be a very good exterminator.’

I didn’t know what sort of mindset it took to be able to think like that, and say that to yourself, but I didn’t have it.

The five of us opened the door to the general store, whose layout might as well have been designed by committee, though now it was barren. There was food in the food aisles, and other goods all flung around, but most of it was used up, and what they did have was clearly being taken as it was needed.

A store had started a fire sale, it seemed, because there were a lot of markdown stickers everywhere, and I saw someone walk out with some tape.

Flechette turned when she saw me, “Hey! Arachne! Good to see you.”

“Yes,” I said, blankly. “So what is this about?”

“We should go back there,” Flechette insisted. “For the talk.”

“Maybe, but I do have a few things to ask you,” I said, glancing over at Rachel. I didn’t want her to get the wrong idea, even though I was going off with Flechette alone. I didn’t think she was jealous, but then… I’d gotten jealous before, so clearly my judgement in these matters wasn’t unbiased.

“Fire away,” Flechette said.


“I haven’t agreed…” Flechette began.

“We’re going to talk,” I said.

Maybe I’d said it a little louder than expected, because she flinched slightly and gave a nod, following me as we went towards the bathrooms. Once we’d reached near the back of the store, walking across black and white tiles, I asked. “First, you need to tell me more about what’s going on. Second… I haven’t had time to thank you for announcing our relationship all over the internet.”

“Oh. But you… admitted it,” Flechette said. She seemed to realize how weak that was, and I didn’t even have to stand there, glaring at her from behind a mask. “It just felt like it couldn’t hurt…”
“And it didn’t. Not yet. But couldn’t hurt? People now know to use us against each other in a fight, if it comes down to that,” I said. Each word seemed to bring more and more concerns and worries to the fore, more and more reasons why this wasn’t okay. “They’ll know or be able to guess at our weaknesses, or perhaps at my identity.”

I was pretty sure that Emma knew all of it, and that I’d definitely never want to ever go back to school again. It was just that simple. She was going to use it against me. Emma wasn’t stupid, I knew her too well to think that all of the details wouldn’t add up in her head, as long as she was still alive and able to check the internet.

Her father was well-off, they weren’t the sort of people, not like the ones in my camp, who ever really suffered from these things. The storm crashed some boats, but most people drowned because they didn’t even have boats.

“Oh, I… I just thought it’d work out. In New York, nobody…”

“New York had the Butcher for a while,” I said. “But… listen. I know you meant well. But just think these things through. You know how many people have said shit to me?”

“No, I don’t,” Flechette admitted.

“If you want to know, I once admitted I was bisexual to someone, and then later they used it to make my life at school a living hell with implications and lies and accusations that I was sleeping with both sexes of teachers or worse to get ahead.” I shook my head. “Not all the world is New York, and I know that Rachel doesn’t give a shit. She had an entire fanbase, and she didn’t know about them, or care for that matter, not even about the fact that tons of them were creeps.”

“I’ve seen that, actually,” Flechette said.

“Oh god, don’t tell me you go to those sites now?” I asked, gritting my teeth.

“…sometimes. I get bored, and it’s interesting to hear about you. You know that PHO has started leaping on this weird bandwagon with you. That you’re the next great leader of a hero team.”

“Leader?” I asked, a little confused. I wasn’t leading anyone, was I? We all decided things together, Rachel and I, and then Pelter too. Probably Amp, once she got used to it.

“That’s what everyone says,” Flechette said. “Nobody’s talking trash about you, or speculating about you… not that way, at least.”

“Oh, great,” I said. “But I’m sure they’re doing it where I can’t see it. Whispering about me, talking… I shouldn’t care, but I do. What I do with Rachel is my own business.”

“That’s a good mindset to have,” Flechette said, hopefully.

“And not your business. I don’t get in your face about how you seem to be awfully concerned about Parian.”

I thought that eventually I could use my bugs to tell some very, very subtle things. Change in body temperature and perspiration smell in the air for a person’s nerves, all sorts of little details using all of the senses of bugs there were.

This time, though? I didn’t really need to look, because she flinched slightly.

“Oh, yes, I do want to ask her out on a date, but if I do… now? It’d be a disaster. She’d think that
I was trading things, you know? That if she went out on a date with me, I’d continue to try to protect Dolltown with her.”

“Ah,” I said. “Well, good luck with that. I’ll try not to interfere. From now on, don’t reveal information like that without asking the person.” I tried to sound stern, like I was some Dad in a sitcom, or something. After a moment, she nodded.

“That’s… fair enough. I’m really sorry if I outed you to anyone.”

“You outed Arachne, but… not me. If that makes sense,” I said. “I guess that rumors would have leaked eventually, but I like more control than that.”

“Oh,” Flechette said, quietly. When she shifted, I could see her crossbow, her weapons. “I’m… I didn’t think about it. I just saw… and acted?”

I frowned. Luckily she couldn’t see that. “Well, act less. Think more. Please. Thank you.”

“Man, I think…” Flechette began, then trailed off. “Nevermind. You’re right.” Flechette said. “But can you help me?”

“What do you want?”

“The E88 is going to attack any day now. She needs to evacuate. To work with the Protectorate to get everyone out of here, because there’s no way she can stop them. There’s probably no way we have the force to stop them without a long, protracted fight. And that’s the problem: people are trying to live here. If they lose over a few weeks but basically make it impossible to live here, then they win. They don’t have to build anything, they don’t have to help anyone…”

Her fury was evident. “What happened?”

“Pogroms. It’s… it’s crazy. Worse than anything they’ve ever done,” Flechette said.

“They’re… driving people out?”

“They stole supplies, and then if the people of a neighborhood get rid of all of the non-whites, they give them food. Protect them. If they don’t, they just drive everyone out. There have been at least four murders already, and it’s displaced hundreds… including the people here.”

I stared at her. “Those… bastards. And idiots! Surely that means that the Protectorate would… no, of course they wouldn’t.”

“It’s being applied for, some help from out of town,” Flechette said. “At least to take out Purity and cripple them before they continue to commit these sorts of crimes, but…”

“But what?” I asked, horrified. How were the E88 able to get away with something like that? Actual, admittedly non-genocidal (yet) ethnic cleansing of neighborhoods.

“There are a lot of problems, but only a few capes,” Flechette said, sounding as if she were parroting a line. “But that’s not really an excuse. And what happens if the E88 takes out this place? Piggot’s been demanding more capes, yesterday. But the focus on the E88 means that people like Accord and Coil are worming their way in… and people keep on trying to focus on them.” She shook her head.

“Sounds like a mess. How’s Bryce doing?”

I hesitated. “You know, I do have something to ask you about? I really shouldn’t, since you’ve spilled my secrets before, but it’s going to bite at me and nibble at me until I ask. Do you know what people say about Shadow Stalker? The Wards?”

“I barely knew her, and… I don’t know. Maybe they’re grieving for her, but nobody actually mentions her? They mention the others that died, but she’s sort of… absent. Mentioned in the speeches, though, I remember that. But not after.”

“Ah,” I said. I wondered whether she was right, or wrong. Whether they didn’t care, or didn’t know, or… there were a lot of explanations for what had happened, but none of them made it okay. “Well, shall we get back to them?”

Flechette clearly wanted to ask why I wanted to know, but instead, she followed me in silence.

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In all fairness, she did listen to the pitch. Parian’s costume looked a little more stained this time, as if she’d been having trouble with getting it clean all the time, though she also had rather nifty looking platform boots.

Even with them, Parian wasn’t very tall, and her mask didn’t make her very imposing.

We all huddled around the back table of the employee area, where people ate their lunches away from the customers. Six capes all together, and she listened as one of them talked.

Then she gave her answer. “No, I’m staying here. I don’t see how they can help me, anyways,” Parian said, firmly.

“They can be allies,” Flechette said. “If you had to flee. At the very least, all of us together, we could attack the E88, try to damage them enough…”

“That’s dangerous. It’s not going to end well,” Parian said. I couldn’t see her face, but her voice sounded both firm and worried. Firm that she was worried, perhaps. “I can hold out here. They’re not going to attack in the kind of numbers it’d take to beat me. And my friends and family are here, you know that, Flechette.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Flechette said.

“We can offer our help here and now, but only briefly. Every minute we stay here, our own camp is in danger.”

Parian turned to look at me, and though I couldn’t see much, I could almost feel the curiosity.

“I understand what you’re facing, and what mindset you have. I wouldn’t run away from the camp just because someone was threatening it. But on your own…”

“I can figure something out,” Parian insisted, staring up at me. I was actually quite a bit taller than her, by almost a head, and her costume didn’t make her look fierce. She had no experience with actually fighting before Behemoth. She’d been a rogue and a fashion designer, and neither of those gave her an understanding of the strategy and tactics of war. The tripwire and thread did mean that she’d know when anyone got too close, but if I were the E88, I’d park as large of an army as I could just outside of her range.

Then I’d strike all at once, so she didn’t have time to call for help. I was honestly sort of glad that I was up against the Merchants, and not the E88, because some of them I had no way to fight against
or even really stop. Others, I’d beaten and bet I could beat again.

And we definitely had a greater ability now than earlier to fight back against them than we might have had when we started. Still, there was no way that whatever Parian could do was enough to take out an entire powerful gang. It’d have to be Triumvirate tier to do that. Even if she had cleverly figured out how to use her object-controlling powers subtly, that wasn’t the same as pulling out the impossible.

“Think through what they could do,” I said, firmly. “If you don’t, they’re going to surprise you, and then where will you be?”

“Like what?” Parian asked.

The power flickered for a moment. At the edge of my awareness, I could see bald white men smirking, in a dead-end street, just barely beyond my range, though with my bugs hidden they couldn’t know that. It flickered again. “Like attacking the power stations and trying to cut this place off. They’re here,” I said.

And even as I said it, my bugs in the sky were able to spot Purity, flying past them at top speed.

Then they began to close in, six blocks away, but getting close fast… and yet unaware that I had seen them.

To them, they were still in the stage where they set everything up.

“The power’s going to go out?” Parian asked. “How?”

“Substations, power lines…” I said, thinking about it. I didn’t know the area enough, but I bet they could figure something out, especially if they had a bunch of old dockworkers in their group after their little… purges. At least some of them would know a little about electrical systems, and if they really were creating their own little post-disaster ethno-state or whatnot, then not only did they need to die, but they’d have plenty of manpower, though I didn’t know how long it could last.

The city wasn’t destroyed, and they were taking over areas that hadn’t really been wrecked. Someone would come and smash them flat.

But that wouldn’t save us today, from what they were going to do. They were entering my range even now, my bugs flying carefully so that they didn’t know too much was up. Right now, there was no reason to believe that I was in the area, which meant that they’d think they were beyond my range.

So, who was coming? Victor was, I could see him just at the edge, going back and forth, apparently keeping back to look after something. Fenja and Menja, both in their eight foot tall version, big enough to be hard to take out with bugs, but small enough that they wouldn’t draw attention, were coming in from the south, along with Rune.

Kaiser was coming in from the east, with Krieg and someone else. She was short, and rather plump, but also blonde. She was beautiful in a very plain sort of way, and her costume was all black bodysuit and red mask. There was nothing unique about her, or her costume, but she was holding some sort of gun that looked just a little bit weird. Was it some kind of tinker-tech, or was it some aspect of her power?

Either way, she was looking around nervously, and without any proof otherwise I’d start by assuming that she could just be swarmed and mobbed with bugs.
South, East… and from the North came Purity up above, with Night and Fog down below. I definitely knew it was Fog, because a few of my flies buzzed into his area and they died in moments… which might mean that he was merely in his gas form. Or it could mean I was discovered.

Of course, with them were dozens and dozens of thugs in each group, but I discounted them. Once a fight started, it’d really be a matter of dealing with the really tough enemies. Purity was very, very dangerous… but the fact that Othala wasn’t there was a good start.

I thought that, and then remembered her death. She’d died fighting Behemoth… yet I was glad of it, just like I was glad that Sophia had died. Without her, Purity would be nothing more than a very, very powerful blaster… with no defense against a swarm of hornets.

I needed to not worry about them, not yet. Instead, I needed to pick one of the forces that were going to surround us and show them what we could do.

“We’re going to lose power soon,” I said, looking around. “My bugs mean that I can see the battlefield. I’m going to take charge here, unless someone else has an idea of what to do.”

Nobody said anything.

“Who’s coming?” Parian asked, in a small voice. But there was something else about her voice. She seemed frustrated, and I could all but feel that she was frustrated at me. I couldn’t quite figure out why, though.

“Kaiser, Purity, Fenja, Menja, Night, Fog, Victor, Rune, Krieg some new cape.” I looked around, aware as I listed them that this wasn’t exactly the best case scenario. Ten capes, all of them powerful. “Flechette. Do you have communications with the PRT?”

“Yes. Maybe. We could make a call for backup,” she said.

“There’s no way for the E88 to monitor for that?” I asked.


I decided to trust that, at least for the moment. “Okay, then. Victor is out of the way. I don’t trust that he doesn’t have something dire planned, but I can always just sting him with black widows if he sticks around long enough. Rune, Fenja, and Menja are coming in from the south. Amp, can you give a little power to Rachel and I? We’ll try to take them out.”

“We’re dividing up?” Pelter asked, frowning. “Shouldn’t we… defeat them in detail or something?”

“We can. If you want to go along, Pelter, you can. But Parian and Flechette should stay back to protect the area, and Amp needs to be here…” I turned to look over at Charlotte. “To help them.”

“How?” Parian asked. She kept on glancing around, opening her mouth, questions wanting to spill out of her.

“She can give people powers. Right now, it’s just regeneration and toughness. She can give some to each of you if she can talk to you, and that’ll allow Flechette to put herself out more.” From what I knew of her powers, just like Purity she had a strong right hook but no way to defend herself from the most dangerous sorts of foes.

Unlike Purity, she couldn’t fly: Purity flew fast enough that if she really wanted to escape a bad fight, it’d take work to stop her.
“Ah,” Flechette said. “Yeah, that’d be helpful.”

“Rachel, you ready to go? We’re going to beat Fenja and Menja again,” I said. “And you, Pelter? Do you want to stick here with them, or go with us?”

“With you.”

Rachel only had two dogs on hand, tied up outside, that we could use.

“Got it,” Rachel said. I couldn’t see her face, but I didn’t think she’d protest at all. After all, we were going to be going out and beating up a bunch of capes. She didn’t really have any reason to disapprove, and she didn’t like the E88 any more than she liked most of the gangs.

I’d have my bugs ready to go after the other groups as soon as I’d attacked Fenja and Menja, and once we had taken care of our first three, my plan was to swing around to take out Kaiser, and hope that having lost half their forces, or more, they’d retreat.

The E88 had nothing to win from this fight, that much I was going to make sure stayed true. But if we were going to keep it that way, we had to hurry. “Amp?”

My heart was beating fast, my attention spreading out among a dozen different focuses. The power was going to go out any second, I knew, and then they’d attack. Their goal would be to destroy as much of the areas as possible, and drive everyone out. Maybe even kill people? They were Nazis, after all.

“Bitch, Arachne, touch your nose.”

I did, and I felt that strange feeling. “What combo did you do?”

“Mostly toughness, a little regeneration for anything that gets by,” Amp said. “Rachel?”

Rachel tensed a little, clearly not trusting this. It was a little weird, I admitted, but after a moment Rachel touched her nose, or the area where it’d be on her mask, at least.

“Alright, we have it,” Amp said. She sounded as if she were a little afraid that she’d done something wrong. “I’ll keep in touch with you, okay?”

“Yes,” I said. “Just… follow Flechette’s lead. She’s the one who has the most experience in fights.”

Parian hadn’t said much. “I need to tell my people to…”

“To what?” I asked, already walking towards the door. “They should hide and get ready to run, but if you want, you can talk to them.” I didn’t know whether it’d do any good, but as long as she was fighting to protect them, hopefully that’d be enough. Now, with Flechette telling the Protectorate, and everyone else set in motion, I could proceed to rush about in a panic.

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The power went out just as I walked through the doors to see Brutus and Judas, whining at being tied up, strain towards us. The air felt thick, and I could see now what Victor was doing. It looked like he was planting packages on the ground, big, black, and bulky, along what seemed to be one of the best maintained roads in the area. Many of the others had parked cars everywhere, still not towed, or had been shaken up enough that there were cracks or fallen glass, but this one road wasn’t like that at all.
Ah, I thought, glancing over at Rachel, who seemed tense, but not the same kind of tense as me. She seemed more like a dog that was just waiting to be let off the leash, more like her dogs than anything else. I could imagine her under her mask, her eyes boring into her target, focused and bristling with fury and dark imaginings. It was a powerful image, and I knew that she’d use her fury well.

I’d seen her dogs really rough up Fenja before, or was it Menja? I trusted that if we struck fast enough, without them expecting, we could take down one of them and match or exceed the other. Run? She’d be easy enough to send on a crash course if she tried to get above me, and as far as I knew, a wasp in her eye and a fly up her nose was just as effective on her as it was on everyone.

Rachel powered them up quickly, as I gestured for Pelter to get closer. Rachel was kneeling, carefully trying to make them big enough to ride, and big enough to take out the Valkyries, without being so big that they heard them coming.

Brutus growled a little as he grew taller, his eyes focused on Pelter, but I smiled and held my hand out, and he licked it, calming down a little. “Brutus,” I said, as soon as Rachel was done, “Kneel.” He was almost as tall as me, but he was built on a monstrous sort of scale, long and jagged, with spines and spikes here and there, and skin hard enough that I knew it’d take some real work for anything to get through.

I got onto him, and let Pelter come in behind me. “You want any amping up?” I asked.

“No. She can do only so much, right? It should be saved for people who are going to get up into it. I’ll just aim from afar, if that’s alright with you. Getting close doesn’t really help things, does it?”

“You’re right,” I said, though I was sure that Rachel disapproved. Even though I could fight people from five blocks away, she still liked it, I could tell, when I was fighting by her side, despite the danger and the risk from doing it. So I’d keep on doing it, because it wasn’t as if I liked only being at a distance, liked not being able to adjust to dangers coming in out of range… or being half the city away when Rachel was risking her life.

It just wouldn’t feel…

“Alright, we ready to go?” I asked.

“Yes,” Rachel said, with a shrug.

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We inched through the city as if at any corner we could be ambushed, though the truth was that the perimeter had been established at about four blocks away or so, and they were only just beginning to inch forward. What I could see, though, wasn’t good. Fenja and Menja were slashing at buildings to tear chunks of it to give to Rune, and if they were any indication, the plan was for massive damage to the surrounding area.

We were just one block away, crouched down, moving slowly, when they began to move in on two sides. Kaiser’s side, and the twins’ side were both pushing in, the men taking the lead, but Purity was hanging back. If anything, she seemed to be inching backwards, from four blocks away to five, though with her speed it wasn’t really all that hard for her to get back into range. Of her team, she was the only one that I could probably take out with just bugs.

Night’s powers required eyes on her at all times, and Fog’s? He was slow when he was in his smoke form, so maybe I could use that against him.
But I wasn’t going to order any of the dogs through that stuff, and short of seeing if it was flammable in some way?

“Ready,” I said quietly.

Pelter gripped the dog tighter, and Rachel nodded to herself, clearly eager to get stuck in.

“Alright,” I said.

We surprised them, leaping out as they were crossing a street. Fenja was the closer target, and so the dogs, urged by our knees, raced forward towards her.

We went right through a huge group of tattooed and young nazi punks, mostly men with a few women here and there. They scattered like wheat before the scythe, down, screaming as we were slowed down for only moments by the shield of bodies.

It was long enough for Rune to hurl chunks of pavement at us, but I ignored it. A piece of it glanced off my costume, barely hurting even though it was slammed at full speed, and then we were past it.

One dog knocked the girl down. “Grab stick!” I yelled, and Brutus obeyed my orders, grabbing onto the spear as he tugged it out of her reach. “Go!” We ran towards the other end of the street carrying the spear, as Judas and Rachel began to work together to maul the valkyrie.

The men turned, trying to chase after us out of some mad hope that they could do something, but Pelter was already throwing things at them, hard and fast, knocking down goons like bowling pins.

Rune sput debris around her, killing quite a few of my bugs, but others were in her boots, stinging her feet, or going for her eyes, and across the battlefield, my bugs struck.

The new cape didn’t seem to have defenses, as she yelled something and pulled out bug spray, which was not going to really help as the swarm of bugs surrounded her. But Kaiser was quicker on the draw, and his strange metal suit would be able to keep most of the bugs off, as long as he could still breathe in there.

Krieg, though? He too was getting the death of a thousand stings, shouting orders as the men around him fell to pieces. Night and Fog were advancing, as was Purity, the better to dodge the bugs I was sending her way.

I had black widows and other spiders gathered around the market, as Parian began gathering more and more people in the building, evacuating the outside buildings just in time as Night sped in, throwing smoke grenades as she ran.

I knew that she was fast, but this was insane, she was blurring, so quick that my bugs could barely track her, slashing out as she went through the buildings.

This wasn’t just an attack on Parian… they weren’t even going towards her. This was an extermination campaign. You didn’t send someone like Night into dwellings backed by smoke unless…

I felt sick, and uncertain, as I tried to focus both on the battle at large and the dangers of getting too distracted.

Fenja was down, her leg and arm ripped up, bleeding heavily, and Rune was wobbling in the air, but Menja was now passing ten feet, growing and growing against all logic, laughing off my bugs, at least in the numbers I could throw at her.
I’d need a real swarm to take her down. I could do that, if I had enough time. Still, the disease carrying bugs idea really would have helped out about now, especially since they didn’t have Othala anymore.

“Get out of here!” I yelled at them. “Retreat and we’ll let you go.”

“Not today, Zionist scum!” Rune yelled, throwing a huge chunk of building at me. Pelter had leapt off the dog, and so it hit only me and Brutus square on. I groaned, falling off the dog from the impact as she laughed and kept on throwing more at me, the gravel and stone breaking under the impact as I got up.

Ow. Ow. That really hurt. But I could feel the bruises somehow knitting themselves even as I got up, even the headache from a chunk hitting my head fading slowly, as I focused more of the bugs on her and less on Menja, who was now going after Rachel. She grabbed for the dog, but Rachel was racing away, playing cat and mouse with her.

If only that was the entire fight.

“You can retreat,” Kaiser said to the screaming and downed men and women, “Make sure Reich survives. I’ll move forward and link up with Purity, and we can finish them off.” He was cocky, confident, and supremely powerful… I didn’t know how well I’d be able to stop him if it came down to it.

I stood up a little straighter as Rune finally started screaming. My bugs had found her eyes, and one of them was carving it out. It had a nice, long stretch of serrated leg that worked just right for it, and the jerk was in so much pain, still flying on a big of gravel, that she crashed into a building.

My bugs kept on going in for the kill, because I could always heal her later. That’s all that really mattered, I thought, when I saw what they were doing.

Down below in the buildings, Parian had gotten almost everyone out, and Flechette and Amp were serving as shepherds to the survivors, but up above? Night burst into one of the rooms, where an old man was cowering, and threw down a smoke before advancing on him with a growl. An arm lashed out, almost lazily, and went straight through him. Dead. Dead dead dead.

I tried not to watch more, though she seemed not to be going to kill everyone. In fact, she just lifted up the body and seemed to be making for the window. She opened it and, still unseen, tossed it down, right as Parian was stepping out.

The corpse splattered down on her, as Flechette hurried to aim her arbalest up. But Night was retreating, grabbing a device on her hip and pulling it out. She spoke into it. “Attention! Leave, subhumans, or I will kill more people! Leave this neighborhood now, or within three days, or we will do more than just this one murder! Maybe I’ll even start now.”

She sounded somewhere between enthusiastic and… bored. As if she were reading from a script.

Pelter began to throw the steel and little bits of gem she’d gotten at Menja, who was getting big enough that Rachel would have to power up Judas more than she was to really be able to hurt her, though she was trying, slamming into her and biting at her.

The sword and shield were waved around, but now that two of the three capes were down, she looked very uncertain, glancing back and forth between us and her sister. “That surrender…” she said.

“Off the table,” I said. “If you give up now, I won’t kill you.” I meant it, too. I got what they were
We had Fenja. We had Menja. We had Rune. But the rest of them had gotten away before I even got back, and while my bugs had stung Purity as much as they could while they were retreating, it wouldn’t be enough. They were all hurt, except for Kaiser, and I even got a few vicious bites on...
Night, but she didn’t seem to maintain her injuries when she transformed.

I’d never really captured her, I remembered, and now I knew why. It was just… damn.

Damn. Damn. Damn. Only one person died. I said only, as if it mattered, as if the fact that Purity wouldn’t be able to go to the hospital for something like that wasn’t some small victory… though I knew they had in-house doctors.

Still, there was no way she wasn’t going to feel that in the morning.

As if the three capes were a trade for the fact that Parian had just backed down.

“Why the fuck did she,” Rachel began.

“She’s not you. But imagine if someone threatened your dogs, and you thought going along with it would save them?” I asked.

“It wouldn’t. I’d fuck them up,” she said. “I’d hate the shit out of them.”

“She probably does,” Stefanie said. I’d told her what had happened, before Amp even reported it via the walkie-talkie. “But… she cares about the people more than the revenge.”

“I guess,” Rachel said, sounding like she didn’t really understand.

“Would fucking up the asshole who killed your dog bring him or her back?” I asked.

“It’d feel good,” she said. Then, Rachel admitted. “No.”

“It’s really that simple,” I said. I nodded at her, and then we continued on in silence. I could tell that Rachel was thinking it through, though I wasn’t sure if she was actually going to revise her judgement of Parian for giving up like that.

I was fucking peeved too. I would have fought it out, no matter the cost, rather than giving up… but she’d been put in a bad situation, and even with all of the help, we’d still been unable to be in enough places at once.

The power was out. The roads were wrecked. Most of the buildings were filled with holes…

It hadn’t taken a victory to kill Dolltown.

*****

The Protectorate came. Late. The blood had had time to start to cool, the mess and destruction smolder, by the time they’d arrived, carrying excuses. “The E88 staged an attack on the PRT building. Then they pulled back from it once the heroes had arrived…” Miss Militia told me, her expression grim as she looked at the ruined street. People were gathered in the streets, talking about what had happened. Horrified, and some of them angry at Parian for giving up. Most, though, blamed the E88.

The Protectorate had been out of place to do any good against most of the Empire, and people had suffered for it. “Yeah, yeah,” I said. “But what do we do about this? I’m going to talk to Parian, but…”

“We shouldn’t back down,” Miss Militia said. “If we do, that’s another block owned by…”

“Monsters,” I said. “But look around you? Do you think leaving them out here would do any good
against all of the E88? Are you saying that this time we can stop them? People’s lives are at stake. I
don’t know if Bitch agrees with me… but I understand why she did it. I don’t know if I would have
done it.”

“Lives were at stake,” Miss Militia said. Then she added, “They always are.”

There was something about her eyes, something that I couldn’t figure out. It was something about
how she stood that seemed to tell me she’d felt something like this before, that she’d seen something
like this.

“Yeah, but… so, what would you have done?”

“America cannot be a place where this happens. If they leave, what happens then?” Miss Militia
cocked her head. “They will keep on doing it, until they win. Someone has to stand.”

“But why Parian? Why here, when…” I gestured around. I didn’t know. I knew that I would have
stood, but why expect she had to? But maybe she should have. I bit my lip beneath my mask, but I
wanted to focus on what I could do. “Either way, I’m going to make an offer to her. I’m going to see
what she wants to do. If she does… I don’t know. I feel like I’m part of the problem or some shit,
because I have my own camp to take care of, and that means I can’t just spend all my time parked
here fighting them off. But I could have. If… I had three of them down. Victor was a non-issue, and
Night?”

Miss Militia didn’t say anything, just looked at me, evaluating. “The Director will definitely get at
least some reinforcements approved of, from Boston, after this.”

“Oh? Why Boston?”

“Night and Fog are their problems. They have at least one Protectorate cape, Scan, who serves as a
counter for Night’s power, at least well enough that they’ve driven her off before.”

“Ah,” I said. “Well, great. How far away is that?”

“A week at the longest. Hopefully yes,” Miss Militia said. “The system needs time to work.”

I snorted. “Maybe it does, but pardon me for doubting that. But… thanks for telling me that. I hope
that Scan can help shut them down. I don’t want the Protectorate to fail.”

“Perhaps we could talk sometime, about why you have doubts about the Protectorate.”

“Many things. But start with Canary.”

Miss Militia nodded.

There it was. There was the first brick in the wall. “Well, take the twins and Sabrina the Teenage
Nazi with my compliments, then.”

******

Parian sat there. Her skin was dark, her features startlingly pretty, her hair under the wig dark as well.
She held out the mask in front of her in delicate hands, and it felt like she was holding her head in it,
not just a mask. Flechette was next to her, her face grim, looking at all of this and then at Rachel and
myself.

“Should I not have cared? He’s old man Bailey. His father thought that Bailey was an American
name, because this was after the Irish were…” Parian trailed off, her words tumbling and stumbling against each other, as if she wasn’t sure how to say them. “But he thought it would protect him. Maybe he did alright. I knew him, you know that? He used to have a parrot, but it died during the attack. Just keeled over from stress.”

Parian’s eyes were wet with tears. “He talked about that parrot so much, and not about his kids. I… I don’t know what I expected. But the parrot, it said his name, and the name of his wife, who died… and he never hurt anyone.”

I’d seen the corpse up close, the skin tan. Arabic, I’d thought? Or hispanic? I looked at her face, and then at Flechette’s. Flechette’s eyes were wide, soft things, staring at Parian.

I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t pretend I knew how it felt. I’d failed one of my own, but I’d gotten her back, and I hadn’t known Kayla nearly as well as Parian knew the old man. But I said, “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do shit to cause it,” Rachel said. Rachel crossed her arms for a moment and then said, “Sucks that he died.”

“Sucks? Sucks?” I could see the explosion coming a mile away.

“It’s bad,” Rachel said, her voice annoyed. I knew that she meant it, and that she was annoyed that… I’d talked to her, and now she sorta got it, and Parian didn’t get that there was a barrier, a wall where things were harder. “What do you do now?”

“Have you ever…” Parian began, then said, “No, I don’t want to interrogate you. It’s stupid.”

“Listen, Rachel means it. I’m here to offer help. I’ll help anyone who wants it evacuate to one of the refugee camps. And if you want to go with them, and just stop. You’re a rogue, it’s not your job to fight villains.”

“Fuck,” Parian said. She looked almost shocked at her own words, at her own. “I don’t like fighting. I don’t like any of this. But… I need to stop them. I need to stop all of this stuff. I’ve heard that the Merchants stole people away into slavery. These people are my responsibility.”

“If you want to come with us, that’s another option,” I said.

“What?” Rachel asked, sounding outraged.

“Not joining us, if you don’t want. But if you and whoever wanted to go with you, who thought to, could come to the camp. There’s a building there. I know that you just want to get out of it, or if not that, then fight the E88. But we can help the evacuation. We have… we? You know the truth?” I shrugged, looking around, and then taking off my own mask, since it seemed the fashion. “A ton of money is getting donated to us because people are fans of Bitch. I can’t exactly say I blame them, not when, you know?”

“I’d heard that as a rumor, but I didn’t want to assume, just in case…”

“I wouldn’t lie,” Flechette said, offended.

“You don’t always hear--” Parian began.

“Hear what?” I asked.

“Nothing. I should want to stay with them, or get out of it. And I do want to go after the E88, stop
them from what they’re doing. But where do I take a stand? I was thinking, if everyone left, if it was just me, I could fight them and they wouldn’t be in danger. But then I realized, what would I be without the people I’m protecting. I want both of those things. I’ve always wanted too many things.”

“Sometimes it’s just finding out what you want,” Flechette said. “That’s what matters. What you want most?”

“...you’d protect them? You’d what? Why did you mention the money?”

“Resettlement. We can start a funding drive. It seems so petty, it seems so pathetic, saying that. But we can. And in the meantime, you and anyone else who wants to come with you, your family, maybe anyone else, and if you stay in the building we’re fixing up, there’ll be plenty of things to do, fixing it up. And I promise it’ll be safe, no matter what we have to do.”

I meant it. I’d kill people to protect this, to keep this one thing safe. It mattered a lot to me, and i wasn’t going to let my own camp go like hers did. I wouldn’t give in even if i had to risk everything.

“You’re not very good at consoling me.”

“What the fuck would she say?” Rachel asked. “Words, words, words.”

“What?” Parian asked.

“What she means is that words are nothing. Anyone can say words. It’s deeds that matter, and I’m going to help you.”

“Why do you want me so much?” Parian asked. “And that’s what you want?”

“Because I don’t want to lose it. I have plans, I have things I’m trying to do. I have people I need to protect. I don’t want to fail them.”

“And I did?!” Parian asked, her voice cracking with the weight of the emotions that were pressed down upon it.

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t have given in. But maybe I’m a bitch. Maybe I’m too stubborn. But that’s why I’m asking for your help. Because I’m stubborn. Either way, I’m helping you… but I’m asking if you’ll--”

“How many of us do you think will come?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask them? Things are going to recover, I know they will.”

“And when it comes, can I go back to being a Rogue? I don’t want this to happen to people, but it’s not normally like this. Everything’s broken: women as slaves, ethnic cleansing, it’s not normal.”

I didn’t say she was wrong, but I’d seen it go wrong before, I’d seen it all. It was worse than she thought.

“No matter what I choose, you’ll back me?”

“Do you think that I have any right to not back you, or judge you for what you’re doing?” I asked.

Rachel snorted, clearly skeptical of all of this. And I could detect a little of her discomfort at the idea that we might, even might, add another cape. I didn’t expect her to say yes. You asked sometimes, and I knew she could help. Every cape helped, and her dolls were very useful against all sorts of foes. Her powers weren’t amazing… but you’d be surprised. I know I’d been before.
“No. That doesn’t stop anyone. What’s the camp like?” she asked.

“It’s very lively. There’s hundreds and hundreds of people, and they argue sometimes, but they’re all poor and they’re all dealing with the same problems. It felt like a community, sometimes.”

“You want me to go?” Parian asked.

“Do you want me to be honest?” Flechette asked.

“Yes. You said you were my friend, how can you say that and not be honest?” Parian asked, and there was something in her voice that made my heart ache as she stared at Flechette.

“I don’t want to you. It’s dangerous, and you’ll be away from the people you spent your time protecting.”

“They don’t need me. And I’ve decided,” Parian said.

Flechette looked as if she wanted to run away somewhere. “That’s what my opinion means?”

Parian looked at her, and reached a hand out, as if offering a handshake, and I wasn’t sure what that odd smile was about. “You can still visit. I know what you wanted.”

I imagined it for a moment. Parian at the refugee camp. If she wanted to fight, but didn’t want to stay, and didn’t go with me… would she become a Ward? Would she be part of the same team and thus work with Flechette?

There was the crush, driving her towards wanting certain things. But it wasn’t just that, I thought, wiping my forehead, wondering what they saw when they saw me without a mask. I put it back on, and turned to Parian.

I wasn’t sure how long she’d actually stay, or what would happen, but I knew we could use her. In a crowded room, my girlfriend glaring on, even beneath the mask I could feel it, in incredulity, I reached a hand out. “Want to shake on it?”

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah.

Rachel disagrees with Taylor's decision. No big deal, right?
Most of the people with her took the chance to leave. Ultimately, that was what I’d expected. But about thirty or so people, mostly her relatives and their employees and closest friends, had enough cause to believe in what Parian was doing that they wanted to go with her.

The bulk of Monday was filled with tasks for which I wasn’t really suited. Rachel’s dogs could help carry things for the evacuation, but all I could do is serve as a sort of watcher. Amp was here and there, the girl trying to heal anyone hurt in the evacuation, and testing another aspect of her power: whether her regeneration worked on illnesses. I knew the answer as soon as she did: it couldn’t cure cancer, though at least as far as the patient could tell, it didn’t do some nightmare scenario result such as just make the cancer grow faster.

I had no idea how it worked, but she was still learning, and I knew it’d be months or more before she had a full understanding of what she could do.

Parian was everywhere too, taking references and making sure that anyone who left, left with her blessing.

“I’m sorry I can’t go with you, but I have a family, and I…” an older man said. “You saved me from a bunch of them.”

“I couldn’t…”

“Listen. You do your best.” The dark-haired, but greying man gave a shrug, as if this was all that could be expected out of the world.

The Protectorate was helping, at least, and Tuesday found us still nervously going from site to site as the evacuations continued. The refugee camps, which were far more orderly than ours, though also a lot more spartan, as if they’d been designed for a minimum of resources, had just started to drain of people allowed to go back to their ruined homes and pick up their lives.

The people were a sea, a gathering of people just like my camp, and watching them made me hope that my camp was safe. I had to go back and forth between the two, as often as possible. Flechette was helping to protect the camp when we were evacuating people.

I knew to them I was some weird distant figure that they’d perhaps heard of, once or twice. They whispered about me, not sullen but tired after all of the time running, and then thinking they were safe, only to be sent scattering once more.

And in that simple movement of a few days, I pushed myself. Things changed. I got to see more of Dad…

*******

I was working until midnight on Monday, just patrolling and making sure that nothing was left behind, and then hurrying to the camp to watch over it in case the Merchants noticed.

My head hurt when I lay down to sleep, and when I woke up, I felt as if someone had stuffed my nose with cotton, and my arms and legs ached from all of the walking.

“Get up,” Rachel said. “Got shit to do.”
“Ugh. Sick.”

“Need… soup?” Rachel asked, frowning down at me. I felt really cold, and I moved forward to hug her. Of all the times to wind up a little bit sick, now? I needed to get through this, because I had another eighteen hour day, or more, left to get through. Maybe more after that. I didn’t know.

“Yeah, that’d be great,” I said.

Rachel nodded, and it was heartwarming to see the concern on her face.

So I just lay there, and then I started thinking. Maybe I could get Charlotte. I glanced around, trying to figure out what time it was. My mouth felt dry, and my thoughts seemed to skip and hop around.

Stefanie came with Rachel, who was holding a big bowl of warm chicken soup. She’d heated it up or--

The bugs seemed everywhere now, their sensations stronger, and I almost wanted to lose myself in them. It was a lot better than the aches and discomfort of feeling sick.

Stefanie reached a hand out and felt my forehead. “Arachne…”

“Get Char,” I said.

“What? Oh, of course!” Stefanie hurried out.

Rachel frowned a little, tensing as she looked down at me and offered me a spoon full of soup. I leaned up to take it in my mouth, barely tasting it. Taste and smell were tied together. My human nose wasn’t working, though my bugs could smell compost and refuse, and a leaking toilet that would have to be fixed. And someone having an early-morning smoke. “Thanks, Rache,” I said.

“Get better,” Rachel said. She glared over at the tent entrance, looking annoyed. Then she offered me more soup. I didn’t know what she was thinking. Her offer of soup was nice, but if Charlotte could stop a cold--and it might work better than with cancer--then that’s what I should be doing. Even if the idea of putting my head in Rachel’s lap and just letting her spoon me full of chicken soup was a little tempting.

“I’ll try.” I took another few bites of the soup. My empty stomach felt a little queasy, but I figured the soup couldn’t hurt it much, and considering how much I had to do. I didn’t want to think about it, but it kept on pulsing through my head. Only the most vulnerable people had been evacuated so far. Those who would probably be hurt and couldn’t run if the E88 went back on their word.

Today was the day I needed to get Parian here, and make sure she was ready to start holding down the fort. I didn’t know whether she’d want to immediately go after the Merchants, but at the least she could stay behind to make sure there wasn’t any sort of sneak attack. More hands meant we could divide up more without things going wrong.

******

“Hey, Rachel,” Charlotte said with a smile that seemed designed to set Rachel off. “Taylor, I’ll try to help you, but you really do need to take an hour or two off.”

“No. I need to get to work,” I said. “Maybe if it doesn’t work, I’ll take a few, see how I feel?” I coughed a little, but it was fine.

For one, I wasn’t coughing blood, and my Dad had worked through a lot worse than a little bit of
unwellness. I didn’t want to let people down. Heck, even just showing the weakness at all was the first problem. You gathered people around you, you knew that they were buying what you were saying… but then if you got smashed again and again like the Merchants were, then no wonder they had started to throw away an impossible advantage.

I didn’t want to do that, and the first step of failing to do that was failing to put in the work. It was already a fact that Stefanie was doing a lot of the work for this too. I didn’t want to make it worse.

Stefanie was waiting outside.

“No,” Rachel said.

“If you were sick, would you stop taking care of your dogs?” I asked.

Rachel looked away, crossing her arms. She didn’t have an honest answer, because of course she’d work through the sickness. And of course she wouldn’t necessarily trust other people to do it for her.

“What if the hour or two was spent with Rachel?” Charlotte asked. “That way…”

“She’s not gonna agree,” Rachel said, her voice frustrated. “Not for me, not for you.”

“I can try, I guess? Give reasons.” Charlotte let out a sigh. “It’s important. She needs to not push herself too hard. She’s important.”

“Yeah,” Rachel agreed. I smiled a little as Charlotte got closer.

“Taylor, please nod.”

I nodded, after a moment of uncertainty. Then I felt a little bit of a buzz in my body, as if I were being shaken apart. My head cleared a little, and I felt a bit less clogged up, but that was all. “It’s doing… something?”

“More, then?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Touch your nose again, then.”

This time she went all out. This time it felt almost good, as if it’d gone through the valley of being weird into some other side of things. I felt warm, but not in a bad way, and after a moment I was able to breathe. Smells came back, and I could more easily ignore what my bugs were smelling. Now that I had other smells to focus on. My bugs seemed to allow me to ignore problems like that a little… or make them worse. Either way, I wondered how well I’d be able to block out pain with practice doing something like that.

“Huh,” I said.

“Taylor, you need to stay in the tent for an hour or two. Just hang out with Rachel, relax… it’s important because you need to be in control, and that means not being overwhelmed. What little I’ve seen is really amazing. If you just stayed with your girlfriend, we can handle the setup. You know that the Dockworkers came out in force to move furniture? Or they will. Pelter got a message saying so. That, and the people online… we have it covered. You could focus on greeting Parian, relaxing, and--”
“Fine,” I said. She made good points, and I didn’t have it in me to argue.

“Huh,” Rachel said.

“What?” I asked.

“Whatever,” Rachel said.

“So… Charlotte. Amp. You can handle things on your end?”

“Yeah. I’m going to keep that regen on you in case it comes back afterwards. Though I wish I knew why it worked and cancer didn’t.”

“Maybe it’s time? Cancer is something you’ve had for a long time, so it’s harder to get rid of? You haven’t tried replacing a long-severed limb or curing the blind-from-birth yet, have you?” I offered.

“Oh, great idea,” Charlotte said. “Though I don’t know where I’d get them. So, I’ll be doing what you said. Helping the sick people and maybe a few people who might be in danger. I think… I had an idea for the resonance and frequency. I’m still testing it.”

I remembered her talking Pelter about it. ‘Strength, obviously, but what if strength is an extension of the same vibrations that cause toughness. But backwards?’ Pelter had given an uncertain thumbs up, tired herself, overworked herself.

“Well, go to it, then.”

“Aye aye,” Charlotte said, with a formal nod. She always treated me a little different, though it was hard to tell what it meant.

Charlotte left, leaving Rachel and I. Rachel stepped over towards me. “You wanna play games?”

“Nah,” I said. “What about reading. I have some of the books of Mom’s. I could just read to you. Not even practice, just relaxing.”

“Nah. What about if I read to you?” Rachel asked.

“Do you think you’re ready for it?”

Rachel tensed, and then said, “Won’t know if I don’t try.” Which actually made a lot of sense. Rachel was learning a little bit at a time, but learning to read well was going to be a matter of months. People spent years trying to relearn this. But she was very dedicated to it.

She pulled something out of a bag in the corner that I hadn’t bothered to look in, a battered book like the one I’d read to her, to begin with.

She patted her lap. I felt all better, but I didn’t want to jinx it. But as long as it was just reading, and not the prelude to something more.

I slipped into her lap, feeling her body against mine, and humming I prepared to listen to a story I’d heard before. It didn’t matter. The words weren’t why I was there. Whatever tension she had, as if it was wrong that I’d not been tended to by her, she’d get over it. See sense, if we just moved past it. So that’s what we did.

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It was moments like breathing in and feeling, at the same time, her breath on your shoulder. It was the warm feeling of just taking a few minutes off, and the way her hand ran up and down and
through my hair, playing with it. Mussing it up, but that didn’t really matter to me, not then. It was something natural and just that simple.

The tension left her, somewhere, and I listened. She stumbled over words, but she was too stubborn to let that stop her. Onward she ploughed through the book, even if slowly, and often needing little bits of correction. It was fine, it was all fine.

And then two hours later, we had work to do.

*******

“Hey,” Rachel said to Pelter, in the middle of the final transfer. Parian was at the head of a group of refugees that were now making their way to our camp. We handed the supplies to them, and the Dockworkers were glad for something to do, even if it was a charity case.

Charity was the right word. More reporters came, clustering around like a mob of hungry birds, wanting to be fed stories of heroism and deprivation, and it was annoying. I was glad they didn’t try to question Rachel too much. She was too clearly not in the mood for it, perhaps, though I was shocked that it stopped them.

“Yes?” Pelter asked. She looked down at the clipboard she had, considering everything.

“Puppies are coming soon,” Rachel said.

“Yes?” Pelter repeated, sounding baffled.

“Any of the people need some time…” Rachel shrugged, making an off-hand gesture. It was actually a good idea, I thought, right in the middle of monitoring the trek from afar, to make sure nobody ambushed it.

“Oh. Right. When are the puppies coming?”

“Few days,” Rachel said. “Have a few small dogs too, at the shelter.”

“Oh, right. I was wondering about that: could we maybe start up adoptions?” Pelter made sure not to smile, having finally figured it out, though it wasn’t natural on her, and she didn’t seem to do it consistently. Well, less finally figured it out, and more finally started to manage it.

Rachel shrugged.

“My idea is that you personally talk to anyone adopting, and then you can check in every once in a while,” she said. “It only makes sense.”

Rachel nodded. “Sounds good,” she admitted, as if this was a surprise. Pelter didn’t really pick up on the tone, just interpreted the words as a good sign.

“Do you need anyone else to help out at the shelter?”

“Nah. There’s enough,” she said. Rachel looked at Pelter for a moment, then said. “Too many, sometimes.”

“Ah, well. I guess you weren’t really used to it?”

“Nah. Not used to people giving a shit,” Rachel said, with another, even more expansive, shrug. “It’s new.”
“Well…” Pelter said. “I’m not used to this either.”

“Huh,” Rachel said, and she sounded almost thoughtful. I wondered what she was thinking, because I knew that she wasn’t used to interacting with people. But she managed Cassie and the Shelter workers every day.

Maybe that was changing.

“So, we’re almost done, can you get… Judas?”

“Brutus,” Rachel corrected, but she sounded a little less dismissive than I thought she would have, after that kind of mistake.

“Brutus. To carry just a little more. We’re almost done here.”

*******

Greg found me with my hands on my hips, looking across at the room we’d made for Parian. We’d made sure it had electricity and working toilets, and we’d gotten what we could together, combined with her furniture, to create something that would feel like home.

Home, for Parian, was a lot more frilly than anything I would have been comfortable around. She had a lot of dolls, and only some of them were actually used for her powers. She also had a lot of books, a lot of posters… just adding up all of the stuff around made the room feel small and cramped to me.

I saw Greg coming, but of course I couldn’t have known his purpose, or I would have probably found a way to get distracted.

“Hey!” he said. “So, you’re adding another member to the… I guess they’re still working on a name. Cassie said that they hadn’t thought of one online. Right now you’re just Team Arachne and company.”

“Well, okay then.” I shrugged. “Team names are pretty far down on the list, though.”

“That’s not it. If you’re making a team, and you’re searching for people to join up to fight the Merchants…”

He trailed off, staring at me with wide, dark eyes, clearly hoping I knew what he was thinking. I did, actually. I just didn’t approve. It sounded like a really bad idea. “No. We’re not going to use the vials yet. You know that Bryce, who took the vial, is having trouble staying phased in. He’s falling through the floor. He’s not eating. These aren’t safe, or at least, they can go very, very wrong, and you’re one of my best friends.”

Greg frowned, pouting as if that would get him what he wanted. “It’s a risk, sure, but what else do I have, anyways?” Greg hesitated a moment then said, “Um, Taylor. You kinda weren’t there, but… I met someone a little while ago that said that my Mom was probably dead. She was in one of the buildings where the elevator broke during the quakes, and most of the people above a certain floor weren’t able to get away.”

Greg bit his lip, his eyes watering.

“And that’s why you want to risk your life?”

“I could be a hero!” Greg added. “I could fight evil and save people and stuff, like in the movies.”
I turned my head away, glad he couldn’t see the look on my face. He was being so earnest, but what was this except a retreat.

“Do you have relatives?”

“Yes. But I don’t want to live with them,” Greg said, twitching and jittering around as he circled me, as if trying to find an angle of attack. “Any more than you live with your Dad.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said with a shrug. “C’mon, Taylor, it’s not like you don’t have more of them.”

I didn’t know a lot of things, but giving it to him felt like a mistake waiting to happen. Besides, we had five capes now, and Flechette was probably going to hang around as much as she could justify with her near-fulltime job of dealing with all the problems that were cropping up.

“We’re good right now. Things are under control,” I said.

“Yeah, and you know it,” Greg said. “Everyone talks about how amazing you are and it’s really cool, but then I’m here and what about the Butcher. She’s, like, overleveled? How will you stop her?”

“We’ll figure something out,” I said bluffly. In truth, I had no idea what would even work against someone like the Butcher. I wasn’t sure whether my bugs could do anything to them. At least, none of their known powers seemed to involve being able to tank, say, Purity. They were more durable, but it was at the extreme of human, more being able to shrug off a few bullets than being able to shrug off a few destroyed city blocks. If I were thinking about things in the context of one of Greg’s games, she was hard to hit, hard to hurt, and apparently you could break her leg and she’d work through the pain. But did she need to breathe?

If I did get enough bugs on her, would they be taken by the teleportation? I didn’t know. Either way, one possibility was… huh.

Now that Greg had me thinking, I had a lot of ideas, but most of them were going to take time. Right now, though, the Butcher wasn’t even on the list of targets. Ultimately, as long as the Merchants distracted the Butcher, I didn’t think she’d go after us. It’d draw too much attention to her, too early, and she’d already been around long enough that this had to be something more.

I wasn’t going to give up hope while we still hadn’t even fought her. “Yes,” I repeated. “Thanks for offering, Greg, and I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Aww… but thanks and all. Is Rachel around here, btdubs?”

I wanted him to never say that again. “No, she’s at the shelter.”

“Oh, alright. I wanted to talk about maybe playing a little more with her. She’s a lot of fun, kinda? I mean, like, she cares about what I’m saying.”

“Oh, that’s great. We can talk later,” I said, a little distracted.

******

I asked Rachel about it.

“He’s annoying. But he’s good at the games.” Rachel shrugged. “So I talk to him..”
Well, that was something, at least.

*****

It was nearly dinnertime when Parian arrived, alongside the rest of the refugees. They looked around at the food and dived right in. Oddly, we weren’t eating that much worse than they’d been in Dolltown, because while we had worse access and more people, we definitely had more money to throw around.

Stefanie explained it to me, a little, last week. “We have to rely on donations, and even with all of that…”

“We’re spending a lot,” I said.

“And taking in a lot. This isn’t a moneymaking venture,” she admitted. “We’re just three heroes working for nothing.” She was less stressed then, but she also didn’t have Charlotte to help her out. “But.. it’s working out so far?”

“I don’t know how we could really do anything to make it better,” I said. I gave a shrug. “It kind of just happened.”

“You see that sometimes, with charities,” Stefanie said. “Something just takes off, and you don’t know why.”

It frustrated me, not being able to be sure. Not knowing why. But what could I say? I said the only thing I could think of. “Well, I do know why, sort of. Cassie’s a big part of it.”

“She is pretty impressive, yeah,” Stefanie said. “My Dad jokes about adopting her.” Stefanie shook her head, trying not to smile around me but failing.

I nodded. It didn’t hurt that it was clear by now that Rachel wasn’t responding to any of the slightly too lingering gazes sent her way. So I could drop any residual jealousy--I totally could, and would soon, I swore!--and focus on what she was helping. Which definitely put things in context.

“You okay, Taylor?”

“Fine,” I said. “Just wondering what goes wrong next.”

“I worry about that kind of thing too.”

*****

On Wednesday morning, after a hard night of rain, the city felt very humid and miserable, but I pulled myself up anyways, and began getting ready for the meeting with Parian. I’d been watching her the whole evening, but that wasn’t the same as meeting with her, and somehow or other I’d managed to avoid it.

But I figured that as soon as she got up would be a perfectly good time to come over.

I even had bribes, once I’d asked around.

Stefanie’s Mom actually was making cookies and donuts as a sort of unhealthy breakfast, in celebration of… Stan’s birthday? I think that’s who it was. He was a teenager who had showed up last week, all alone, and didn’t like to talk about his family.

So I clutched that tight in my hands, my costume on but more just so I’d be recognized, as I made my
way towards the building. Everyone had a room, or at least every family, and Parian actually lived separately from the rest of her family, just now waking up.

I could see her brushing her teeth, and smiling in the mirror. I could see her humming as she went through her morning, getting dressed and stopping to look over an old magazine, flipping through it with thoughtful pauses.

I watched all of that while I moved, keeping track of everyone in both camps, waking up in their own time. Going about their day. There was still some work to be done with the second new apartment, and then everyone was going to get to work on fixing up the first apartment and the second for excess people.

The goal, I’d been told, was to fill up all two apartments before moving onto the third.

People turned to look at me as I jogged up the stairs. I hadn’t been exercising recently, but dealing with the dogs and running around being a cape had been enough that I wasn’t breathing hard by the time I reached Parian’s room. I knocked on the door, and watched her hesitate, looking around, and then go for the door.

“Oh, Arachne,” she said, stepping back. She wasn’t wearing her costume, and I knew I loomed over her. So I reached up and took off my mask with one hand, while proffering the donuts and cookies with the other. “Ah, well. Thanks.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “And call me Taylor. It’s not a big deal, knowing that much. As long as you don’t spread it around. I just wanted to see how you were settling in.”

“Don’t you know? I saw your bugs?”

“Sorry,” I said, though I wasn’t sorry at all. I glanced over at the table where she’d spread paper, pencils, magazines… all of the ingredients for costume designs.

“I’m doing fine. So are the people that followed me. I’m going to start moving to set up a perimeter soon. Cassie mentioned that some people said it’d be a good start.”

“Probably heard it from PHO,” I said, with a shrug, gesturing to the couch. “Want to sit there and eat?”

“What type of donuts are those?” Parian asked. “I should be on a diet.” She frowned a little. “Though it’s easy when you don’t have that much to eat. But hard when it’s all processed.” She shook her head. “Sorry if I’m talking about trivial things.”

“No, don’t worry, it’s fine. I don’t really think about it anymore,” I said. “There’s not really time.”

“I know, it’s a silly thing to worry about,” Parian said.

Especially since, and it didn’t take anything but me having eyes, but she wasn’t fat. Or pudgy. Or even anything other than pretty thin. “You worry about what you worry about. I hope you might find time to do what you love,” I said, trying to lay on the charm as I walked over to the couch and flopped down. “Oh, and they’re donut holes and glazed. Nothing special. I think…” I opened up the bag.

The smell of donuts was strong, and I breathed them in for a moment, glancing down. “There’s cookies too, and I think a bagel, somewhere? If you want something a little more plain. I know you have food here, but I felt…” I trailed off, offering the bag to her as she sat down right next to me.
She took it and pulled out an oatmeal cookie of all things and began to nibble on it. I grabbed a donut, taking off my gloves to do so, and then ate it quickly. It was gooey and warm and delicious, but it did mean I’d have to wash my hands before I went and touched anything. The cookies, on the other hand, were a lot less messy than all of that sugar glazing that had had to be made for it.

So I took a chocolate chip.

“Thanks, really thanks.”

“How are you holding up?” I asked, nibbling as I watched her.

“I’m alright. I… hope I can work a few things out. I can make costumes if you want. Or at least help you with some of that. For… Amp, and Pelter?” She bit her lip. “Pelter’s costume is pretty… basic.”

Even with all I’d tried to do it, it was true. I didn’t have the time or energy. “I suppose so. If you’re willing to help out, that’s good. I didn’t know you made costumes.”

“I don’t, normally,” Parian said. “But maybe it’d be fun. It’s another way I can help out.”

“Part of what you can do is just be present. Once you have all of that thread set up, it means that even when I’m away, there’s still warning enough to call the Protectorate,” I said. “That’s the idea, at least.”

“It’s a good idea,” Parian said, though I felt a sort of shift in her mood. She didn’t want to talk shop, or not just shop. “And if you’re wondering, the people that came with me seem willing to work, and contribute.”

I nodded. “That’s good. What about you? What are your concerns? What’s bugging you? Anything we can do better?” I felt like I was some sort of survey-taker, trying to run down problems, but I did want to know.

“Well, you know, Flechette…” Parian began.

“Yes?”

“She’s going to be around here a lot,” Parian said in a low voice.

I frowned, trying to see it from her perspective. “Do you want me to drive her off?”

“No! No. Plus, she can help protect the camp, if she’s here.” Parian waved a hand, frowning a little bit and squirming as she tried to figure out what to say and how to say it. “It’s… can we just talk? In a way that’s not about the camp or ambitions or the like? Girl to girl?”

I was a girl, so… hopefully I’d be able to do it? The last person I did ‘girl talk’ with was Emma, though, and I was out of practice. That and I could feel my stomach curl at the idea of it, at the possibility that it might all be part of some trick to get close to me and betray me. Again.

“Of course,” I said.

“Your face doesn’t say that,” Parian said, then shook her head. “Back before I triggered, there were guys who were nice to me and then expected me to date them. Or more. Because of it.” She was frowning, and looking around, as if making sure nobody else was there. “I hated it. I hated the way it felt.”

I bit my lip, and then wondered how to indicate to everyone… well, maybe there were particular
someones. “I never quite felt that, but there were people that were nice and--”

“What?” Parian asked.

“Nevermind. So, he expected things.” I thought for a moment. “Is Flechette like that?”

“She’s everywhere. She keeps her distance when I tell her to, but it’s that look in her eyes, as if she’s a knight about to lay down her life for me if I wave a hand. Or something.” Parian frowned.

“A knight?”

“I guess. She’s powerful, and good at what she does. And she’s fighting for the good guys. Or at least, the Wards,” Parian said. “I don’t think she wants to just pressure me into going out with her on a date, but I still feel pressured.”

“Oh. I think she’s afraid of that,” I said.

“She should be,” Parian admitted, shaking her head. “What was it like for you?”

“I should wash my hands. I’ll tell you if you really want to know. It’s not some big secret. But, Parian. Do you want to date her? That’s the first question: are you interested?”

“Yes. Yes I am. But I don’t want to wind up… she comes in, she’s helpful, she tries to protect me from the E88 and the world, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to say to all of that.” Parian shook her head. “She’s like me, but not like me. New York, not Brockton Bay. Sansei, not second-generation from a family that…” she shrugged.

“No, go on if you want. I sorta get that,” I said. “Though also not.” I walked into the kitchen and washed my hands, glancing down at the water. I didn’t know whether there had actually been any radiation damage to the aquifer. Nothing had been announced either way. Perhaps all of the water we were using was subtly contaminated.

I wouldn’t even know, and considering how dangerous around here it was, it wouldn’t be an immediate concern.

I was also considering something else: how to lie. My history with Rachel was far from toxic, but it was personal, and we barely knew each other. Yet the more I thought about it the more I tried to think about Rachel. Her attitude, if not her opinion, in this case. She wouldn’t want me to act ashamed, wouldn’t see anything shameful or odd about it, even if she wouldn’t be sharing the story with everyone.

So I took a breath and said. “I was a new cape, going out on the town. I wanted to be a hero, but didn’t even have a name. I found a dog fighting ring, and decided to attack it, but Rachel was there too, for the same reason. And I managed to convince her to work together to do it.” I knew I was probably softening it a little. “Then I got her to agree to let me help the dogs she rescued. There was something about her that drew me.” I paused, aware that I was about to get way too deep into personal opinions. I walked back over towards Parian.

“How did it happen?”

“I didn’t even realize that I was staring. But she noticed it, and then only two weeks into knowing her, she asked me if I wanted to have sex.”

“What?”
“That’s what I asked. And I turned her down, and she didn’t freak out, or… she just wanted to have sex, and the way she told it to me later, she figured that if she offered to someone she liked, then they’d either accept or start thinking about it.” I shrugged, aware of the incredulous look on Parian’s face. “Less than two weeks later, I took her up on the offer. It’s a longer story than that, but it’s kind of after that that I kept on getting closer to her. And closer.” I shook my head. “I know that’s not really something you can do.”

“I don’t know how well I’d do with, uh, that level of commitment.”

“There was more connection than you think. We were already close friends by two weeks in,” I admitted. I shook my head. “I didn’t even realize I was crushing on her. But no, I’m not telling you to go ahead and have sex with her because what could it hurt?” I flushed. “God, it sounds so not-me, doesn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Parian pointed out. “You’re very bold.”

I snorted at that. “Ha. That’s as much pose as anything. Admitting it to you is better than admitting it to the people I’m protecting, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” Parian said. “I was always a little… open with them? The mask helps, though, sometimes.”

“It does,” I said.

“Anyways, that’s not something I can do,” Parian said, and then paused. “A part of me wants to try it, but it’d be dumb. I’d make a mess of it. And that temptation, it’s more like… how sometimes you see a cake and you want to just taste the icing a little?”

“Are you comparing Flechette to a cake?” I asked. Though it was true she was rather pretty. Parian giggled a little nervously. “I guess? What I really fear is that she’ll get power over me. She’ll be a ‘partner’ or even someone I owe and have to…” she trailed off, and shrugged. “I don’t want to listen to other people telling me what to do.”

“Is that why you aren’t staying in the same apartment as your family?” I asked. A little blunt, but she was being pretty open with me. I wasn’t going to get anything by being subtle.

“A little, yeah,” she admitting, frowning. “Thanks for telling me. It doesn’t help that much, I’m a very different person from you, or Rachel either. Older, for one. Supposed to be more responsible.”

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Twenty-one,” she said.

I didn’t gape or take a second look at her face, but it really was impressive, I thought, pacing a little bit, glancing at her. She could legally drink, and she’d been in college. She’d graduated high-school, while I was still dealing with problems there. “I guess I look like a kid,” I said. “Me and Rachel, and… hell, everyone. Charlotte, Stefanie, we’re all teenagers.”

“Maybe. Though so is Flechette,” Parian said. “She’s only seventeen. I’d be robbing the cradle.” Parian smiled. “I don’t know why I almost like that thought?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The… power? The control? I want it all to be on my own terms.”
“I understand that,” I said. I really did. Wanting control, that was something I totally understood, though it wasn’t a concern between Rachel and I. Things were going great there, but I could get how wanting to be the one with more of the power and control would make things complicated.

“You seem to be in charge,” Parian said. “And I admit, I don’t think of you as someone who is only sixteen or seventeen.”

“I just turned sixteen on Sunday,” I said.

“Huh,” Parian said. “Pelter seems older too. I suppose it’s just being out here, taking care of yourself. Perhaps I could—”

“Wait.” I held up a hand. “One moment.”

At the edge of my vision, I could see Lisa. Lisa, not dressed up as Tattletale, but also just as clearly not trying to hide. She was walking from building to building from the south-west, which was the safest way to come here, the one that we used for moving people. She smelled as if she’d bathed recently, and she was humming to herself, clearly confident as she strode forward.

“Someone’s coming,” I said. “I’m not sure why, but I bet they want to meet with me.”

“Who is it?” Parian asked.

I hesitated, and then decided to tell the truth. “So, Rachel used to be with the Undersiders. Back before she left them, I met a few of them as well. They’re criminals, though there are… worse ones out there. Though also better ones, I suppose. They’re all a bunch of teenagers, and one of them is Lisa.”

“The name rings a bell,” Parian said. “You know her?”

“We were close for a while. Still are, I guess. She tells me a little about what’s going on in the streets, and I don’t think she’s a mean person.” I bit my lip, since ‘mean’ and ‘bad’ weren’t the same thing at all. “She’s also still giving me info, and it’s helped so far. So, if she’s showing up here, she wants to talk.” I bit my lip. “Is Flechette going to show up today? Tattletale is a villain, but I don’t think that means we need to immediately arrest her right now.”

“Really?” Parian asked. “Are you sure…”

“Sure of what?” I asked. “I want to hear out what she has to say, and she has knowledge that could be pretty useful.”

Lisa was going pretty fast now, jogging even, and she was within a block of the camp. It wouldn’t be long now, just a few minutes.

“I…” she hesitated, and then said, “I have veto.”

“What?” I asked.

“You just told me about her. I could tell Flechette. I don’t think I will, but why not have the meeting here. I’ll just watch, to be sure.” Parian nodded, apparently liking the idea.

Meanwhile, I took a breath. Fury licked at my limbs, anger that seemed to come from nothing to overwhelm me. I was losing control, or at least… the truth was that I was a member of a team now. But I expected to mostly get my way. I didn’t know why I’d expected that, but we’d gone from three to five members in the span of a week.
“Fine. We can do that.”

“Please don’t pout,” Parian said. “Sit down and have another donut. Do you think she’ll come to us, or do we need to tell her where we are?”

“You should get your mask on. I bet she knows exactly where I am.”

*******

Lisa hesitated only a dozen or two seconds before turning towards Parian’s apartment building and walking in, still humming. She was dressed in a long, flowing brown skirt that looked familiar, and a white blouse. If she’d ever looked more like an office worker, it’d have to be her wearing glasses.

“She’s coming,” I said. “You ready?”

“Yes,” Parian said. She sounded interested. No doubt wondering what this was going to mean.

A minute later, a few cookies still saved, there was a knock on the door.

I went to answer it in my mask. “Hey, Tattletale. I hope you don’t mind company. My teammate insisted.”

“I’d heard about that,” Lisa said. She nodded, managing not to smile. She looked good, like she’d showed, slept, and was finally finding her groove. But there was something nervous about the way she looked around. “Now you have a team of five members. It’s very impressive. How have things been with you?”

“Fine. A lot has happened. Especially regarding… news. I’ve heard that you and your team have started setting yourself up as Warlords.” I nodded at her, and gestured over to Parian, whose mask hid her expression.

“…some of us, yes. I’m just looking around. If they’re wondering what territory I own, it’s because I don’t own any. Information, and figuring out what’s going on. Watching things: Accord and Coil are talking a lot, aren’t they?”

“I did notice that,” I said. I bit my lips. “Have you been talking to Accord?”

“He’s been talking to everyone. I’m surprised he hasn’t sent a representative to your camp. It’s as if he believes he can deal himself into his position. He probably has contact with the Protectorate too.” Lisa shrugged a little, and then moved towards the bag. “Any cookies left? I’m actually really hungry.”

“You can have them,” Parian said, a little uncertainly.

“So while Accord and Coil play their games, and my teammates set up their castles and territories… there’s two different wars going on. The E88 is warring with the Protectorate. I can’t know how well that’ll go. But… it’s what you might suspect.”

“What?” Parian asked. She sounded suspicious.

“Are you willing not to spread this around?” Lisa asked. “But it’s very clear that something’s driving the E88 to be far more aggressive, even more offensive, than they were before. They’d probably have still tried to push you out, Parian, but it doesn’t make sense.”

“They’re nazis,” Parian pointed out.
I nodded. “But it could be that new cape? Do you think that she’s like Dose?”

“Honestly, probably? But it doesn’t matter too much, not right now. What actually matters is that the Merchants and Teeth are fighting. If the Teeth win, then you have to go up against Butcher. I’m not sure how long the Merchants can last, but if they even hold out another week or three, it’d help you a lot.”

“How?”

“Time to gain allies. You’ve already gained two new capes, right? In a few weeks you could have more gear for each of them. And find ways to work together,” Lisa said, expansively. “I know it’s a big vision, but I really do believe in it.”

“You know, you’re probably not helping the suspicion that I’m working with the Undersiders. Or even am one.”

“That you’re gaining territory through a nice way as some sort of secret member?” Lisa snorted. “Yes, I know the kinds of things they probably say. But they’re not getting traction… I just came here because I had some information and advice. I’ve helped you before, and you’re doing pretty well.”

“The Undersiders are too,” I said. “Almost too well.”

“Not well enough, in some ways. Though we do have a new member. Nobody you’d know, though.” Her smile quirked into a smirk for some reason as she said that, tilting her head as if surveying her own joke.

It made me tense a little. “Oh?”

“But what I wanted to talk to you about is how to balance the two sides.”

I didn’t have to speak my suspicion. If Dose, the new cape in the E88, and the Undersiders were all working for Coil, and Accord was working with Coil, then every faction out there except the Butcher, as far as the villain underground went?

They were his.

“Oh? By attacking the Teeth?” I wondered what Coil would think if all of us died harming the Teeth. If the Teeth actually did capture and kill or enslave hundreds of people in some big camp massacre, that’d be all the excuse the authorities needed to come down with multi-city force. If she was an agent of Coil here, then I wasn’t sure if I could trust anything she was saying.

“Yes. We’d do it ourselves, but that’d raise too many questions. I want your camp to continue to exist. I want all of you to be alive and opposing the Butcher over here. It fits my plans. Our plans. But it also fits with what’s right.” Lisa nodded, looking around. “Which is why I have some information about the war that I thought you could use.”

“What?” I asked.

“There’s an apartment building and nearby areas that were just taken from the Merchants last night. It has become a forward base for the Teeth. That means there will be a few of their capes there, and a lot of their thugs.”

I crossed my arms. “And you want me to attack it?”
“You finally have the numbers to both defend the camp and go out on a limb, and if you wait, the Teeth are just going to get stronger.”

“Maybe. Let me think about it. I’ll have to talk with other people. What else is going on?” I asked. “What do you know about New Wave?”

“They haven’t been having Panacea to support them lately. She’s been withdrawn,” Lisa said, thoughtfully. “I’m not sure why, but her sister’s death hit her even harder than I would have thought.” Lisa shrugged, “I have a… suspicion, but it’s not worth saying. But either way, she has showed up at the edge of Grue’s territory at least once to talk with the people there.”

“About?”

“Grue wasn’t sure. She left when he moved to confront her, and it seemed like she had a cousin there to back her up just in case. But I don’t know where it’s all going. However… the good news is that the Protectorate talked to New Wave early yesterday, and most of them are working together to try to put the lid on the E88.”

I didn’t know whether I’d trust that, or not. “Huh,” I said. “But I’ll talk about it.”

Lisa was eating a cookie, and held up a hand, finishing chewing. “Thanks. That’s all I’m asking. I just think that we can do something here. And it’ll make the camp safer. I… know you don’t have reason to trust me. But I want what’s best for you, this city… I want a lot of things.” She shook her head. “So just consider it. And thank you for the peanut-butter cookie. I was delicious.”

“Then why are you a villain?” Parian asked.

“A long story, beginning with family, but ending with it being none of your business,” Lisa said, with a slightly catty smirk. “It’s complicated, though.” Lisa sighed. “I don’t mean to… it’s personal.”

“Okay,” Parian said. “I… if we have the information about who is going to be there, then I approve, but I’d be staying back behind. To protect this place.”

“That’s alright,” I said. “We still need to discuss this among ourselves. Thanks for visiting us, Lisa.” I nodded at her, trying to keep my voice even. “This isn’t a trap, right? If it is, I’ll get out of it, and I’ll go after you.”

“No. The Butcher should be distracted, and she can’t be everywhere, and the rest of the Teeth? I think you can handle them.” Lisa smiled wide at that, but I got the feeling she believed it. I didn’t know who all of the rest of the Teeth even were, but that’s why if we did anything, it wouldn’t be now. It’d be tomorrow.

“I think we might be able to either, but I know just who to ask to check up on that,” I said.

*****

Rachel was frowning when Cassie came in with her papers and notes. Cassie was dressed a little nicer than when I’d last seen her. Not dressed in clothes she was willing to get dirty in helping Rachel. “You sure this is a good idea?” Rachel asked.

“Yes. You can vote no if you want,” I said.

“Well, I hope this helps,” Cassie said. “So the first thing you need to know about the Teeth is that they’re nomadic, which is confusing because they should be moving out of here within a week. Or less. But they’re not. They’re digging in, and I’m not sure why. There has to be a cause, but—”

“People are weird,” Rachel said.

“That could be part of it. Another question is whether it’s the power patches,” Cassie said, waving her hand a little as if to indicate them. “They could be very useful if they were in the hands of the Teeth, because it’d allow each of their members to be a cape. And they’re what the Merchants are trying to be, in some ways.”

“That could be it,” I said.

Yeah. You wonder what the catch is?” Rachel asked. Which was a good point: could the drugs really have no consequences? It was something to think about.

“I guess so. But who do they have right now? If they choose to go away next week, that’d be great, but I’m not counting on it.”

“Which is a good idea, Arachne,” Cassie said, with a nod. She’d learned already not to smile too much, and I’d seen her asking around with the refugees to see what they said. About what capes there were. “So, from what I can tell, they have either six, or seven, capes. It depends on what certain stories mean. The Butcher you know, right? I’ve printed out a list of her observed powers, though.”

“Yeah. She has a ton, doesn’t she?” Rachel asked, frowning. “They don’t have healing, right?”

“No. If we can break her leg, it’s going to stay broken,” I said.

Rachel seemed to settle down at that, thinking through how she could do it. I had ideas, too, but I didn’t want to spend too long hesitating. Still, if I could give her some kind of non-communicable disease, or a festering wound (of the exact type that she could make in others), that’d do a good job in convincing her to fuck off.

That’s all I really wanted. I wasn’t that ambitious. If she went somewhere else, I’d be fine.

“So, her capes include… Animos. He can transform into a monster that’s… not that huge, but is large, four-legged, pretty dangerous. He has a scream that can cancel powers.”

“Would it work on my bugs?” I asked.

“It seems like it only affects the person with the powers. If you were in range, you’d lose bug control for a while,” Cassie said, flipping through her notes. “But the bugs themselves don’t have powers.”

I frowned at that logic. It wasn’t targeting powers so much as a person’s ability to use them? “Wait, so would Rachel’s dogs be fine?”


“Good,” Rachel said, nodding along at that.

“Hemorrhgia can control blood, and she can turn it into cutting weapons or use it to scab over her own wounds. She’s dangerous, and the more blood is shed in a fight, the worse it is.”

I nodded. “Take her out quickly, then?”

“Maybe,” Cassie said. “I’m not going to tell you what strategies to use.”
“So, three more?”

“Spree can spawn temporary clones. A few dozen at a time is about the max, because they devolve rather quickly.”

“But I bet they can all bleed,” I said.

“Ah,” Rachel said, getting my point.

“And take up space and get in the way,” Cassie said. “Him, combined with Vex, mean that if you give them time it’s going to be hard to get through to them. She can make a large number of tiny, razor-like forcefields to add up to a hostile version of a regular forcefield. There’s jokes online about her power being barbed wire,” Cassie admitted.

I bit my lip. That sounded pretty dire, but thus far none of them sounded like they were going to be immune to what a few well-placed bugs and giant dogs could deal with.

“Any others?”

“Finally, there’s Reaver. He’s stronger than he should be, but more importantly, if he strikes someone fast enough, even with something he’s wielding,” Cassie said. “They can start to disintegrate. It works better on objects than people, but he has killed enemies before.”

I nodded, glancing over at Rachel. “What do you think?”

“We can beat them,” Rachel said.

I considered that for a moment. It was a mistake to be too confident. But…

It was also a mistake not to project as much confidence as you could muster. “I think so too. Let’s do it.”
Chapter Notes

I've been told this is against at least some forms of a03 etiquette, but if you do see any typos, then please point them out to me. It's not much work to fix minor problems like that. Chapters have an edit button.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It went well at first. We decided to make our trip into the territory that Lisa had pointed out to me just after breakfast. Pelter could ride on the back of one dog, and Rachel would bring two others with her. That way we could both ride and command one dog to attack.

It was a warm day, and somewhat muggy, the sun beating down on us as the dogs panted. They didn’t smell all that great, I thought, hugging Judas closer as Pelter shifted in her uncomfortable seat. Even with the saddles, it wasn’t exactly a joy to ride a dog.

Meanwhile, out ahead of us were our bugs. Amp was in walkie-talkie contact with us, and each of us was loaded to bear with a decent amount of toughness and regeneration. Enough that we wouldn’t die from a few bullets and could heal from it after we survived the hit.

“I think I almost have another frequency… I’m not sure yet, though,” Amp admitted to me, just after I’d finished my eggs and bacon. Rachel had eaten ravenously, which seemed to me like it’d be a bad idea, but she knew what she was doing. I trusted her.

But for the moment, what she could give us was more than enough. She’d radio us if Butcher attacked and she had to withdraw her powers from us. If Butcher did attack, though, then we’d be in a bad situation, yes, but also pretty sure to take them out.

Not all of them were in the apartment building six blocks away when I finally got my bugs in.

Just like with the Merchants, the Teeth had little discipline. The apartment was a mess, with dozens of men and women lying or walking about. Even though it was eight, most of them were still abed.

I’d been worried that I wouldn’t be able to tell the capes apart, even with photos of them in costume to work on.

But no, the capes were each isolated from the rest. Whereas some people slept two or three to a room, the capes each slept alone, and looking around the room with my bugs gave me the impression that they had a lot more stuff.

Everyone was unpacked here and there, in a clumsy fashion, but you could make out who was in charge by the amount of stuff they had to unpack.

At least, you could for Spree, who slept on the bottom floor in an apartment with an entire table devoted to empty beer cans. He was a thin man who nonetheless had a little bit of a beer gut. He was white, and currently completely naked on the bed as I began to sneak a spider into his room. As far as I knew, the original Spree was always the real one, which meant that if I bit him with a black widow or three, he’d have to deal with that.
And then one floor up was Vex. She had messy blonde hair, at least at the roots, but it’d been dyed with a half-dozen other different colors, and her costume itself looked like she was cosplaying as someone after the world had ended. She alone was up, and only then to open the window and stare out at the back lot while she smoked.

She seemed to be about twenty or so, and didn’t seem to be paying attention to her room at all. I made sure to gather some wasps and spiders in that room as well, because she’d take more to take down, and I knew that the weird force fields were a problem. I didn’t know if Rachel’s dogs would be able to force their way through, and if she layered them right it’d at least make it harder to swarm her to death with bugs.

Finally, Reaver was still asleep on the second floor of the apartment as well. His room was a trashed mess, and at first I overlooked him, glancing around at Stefanie and Rachel, worried that I couldn’t help them.

But in the corner of the room I saw his sword, a ridiculous sword that could have been on the cover of a fantasy novel. If so, then he was a barbarian, because it was a clumsy, crude, black thing, as if someone had hammered it out drunk. He himself was heavily muscled, with dark brown skin. He was also snoring, as far as I could tell. I looked to see if there were any capes I’d missed, since this was just who everyone knew was there, but as far as I could tell? Nope.

All three enemy capes were there and vulnerable.

“Alright, then,” I said, turning to Pelter. “Pelter. Make sure to hit anyone getting too close. Rachel, we can do this.”

“Course,” Rachel said.

We still had six blocks left to travel, but the moment anyone spotted us, and there were people placed here and there, I was going to start the attack. bugs down the throat, black widows biting with everything they have, wasps stinging, especially in the eyes… I wanted them to suffer and fall apart as fast as possible.

The point wasn’t to make it a long, drawn out fight. If we could capture one or two of them, that was a good thing, though I knew that the Butcher wouldn’t like that.

But barring that, we wanted them broken and hurt badly enough that they wouldn’t be able to go after us for weeks, if not longer.

I bared my teeth at the world from beneath the mask as we headed ever closer along ruined streets that nobody had bothered to even begin fixing up because it was the site of a bunch of gang wars.

The place stank, and the there was broken glass all over the streets. Everything that could have been looted had long since been torn to pieces. There wasn’t a store or store-owner in sight, just looters and squatters.

I tried to focus on what I was going to do. Black widows rarely killed people, but they could certainly hurt them, and spiders were actually shy, gentle creatures. They didn’t attack in swarms like the ones I was going to send after Reaver and Spree. Even one bite hurt a lot, and could lead to muscle cramps or spasms. Twenty? That’s where you started getting into situations where it got sketchy.

I had only so many black widow spiders, and I had to breed them carefully—which was less weird than it sounds, since bugs don’t really… it isn’t like with people--to get even enough for this sort of
attack. If I really wanted to go full out with them, I’d need to find a way to order more, or something like that.

Which was just as absurd as it sounded.

About a block and a half from the building, someone perked up. I saw them open their mouth to let out a shout. They were in an old payday loan building, keeping watch the whole time, no doubt expecting Merchants to make their counter-attack, sooner or later.

That was close enough, and so I sent my bugs to work. Reaver didn’t even wake as a dozen spiders crawled to the right places and bit, once, and then twice, then scattered as he started yelling.

That’s when the wasps went for his ears, and mouth. His eyes felt like it’d be a little much, blinding him, but I held a few in reserve. I wouldn’t hesitate. What was he going to do? Sue me for assault?

The same spread of bugs went after Spree, who woke up a moment earlier, screaming and thrashing as his eyes began to roll. Then the clones began to explode outwards, a dozen in seconds, each of them yelling and screaming in agony as they stumbled forward, choking off the bugs ability to…

I really lost any clue of what was going on there, even as Reaver lurched towards his sword only for his leg to go out from under him in a cramp.

And in the third place, a black widow bit Vex on the ankle, and a wasp stung her on the neck, but that was all that happened as my swarm converged on her before she got her power up, which began to shred a few of the flying wasps, though the black widows walked along on the ground.

Her scream was surprisingly high-pitched as she ran over to the bed and pulled out… bug spray? And then, as the picture grew increasingly rough, we charged forward on the dogs.

I couldn’t really see much of Vex, and my view of Spree was confused as he tried to stumble out the door of his apartment, tripping over his own bodies, which made it hard for me to get to him.

They collapsed where they stood, naked and frothing at the mouth, within seconds. He didn’t have clothes, but he was still headed towards the front entryway, where the mailboxes were.

Rachel hurried her dog on, and smashed right through the glass doors without a care.

Spree leapt to try to stop her, bodies exploding outwards, but she just seemed to shred through them in an ocean of gore. Each of the bodies was filled with real blood and guts, and so within moments she was soaked in it.

Reaver was down, shaking and screaming, having failed to reach his sword, and now clearly in too much pain to do much. He’d fallen on some of my spiders, distressingly, but since he was being a good boy and not moving, I think I’d allow him to keep his eyes. For now.

Rachel was still wading through the bodies as Spree ran back, desperately blocking the way. The other Teeth were all waking up to find that wasps and bees were working on them. A few stumbled out, and a few of those few had weapons that they fired at random.

But within a handful of seconds, Spree was backed up against a wall, endlessly throwing out naked clones to try to keep away. Pelter, on the back of our dog, threw a handful of pebbles at the swarm of bodies.

They went straight through, as the figures collapsed in another shower of gore.
“It works!” I said, in awe. It hadn’t even been my idea, though I would have thought of it eventually. But if she can throw one object, she can also throw many at once. The aim was terrible, but it made a pretty effective shotgun.

But up above, Vex was setting up barriers with her power, and while I couldn’t get a great bead on her, I was able to feel… vibrations.

Oh, I thought, gritting my teeth. “Rachel!” I yelled. “We need to get up there and take Vex out and then get out of here!”

“Okay,” Rachel yelled back, as Brutus began to trample Spree. Angelica was standing, cramped in the hall, and Rachel yelled, “Angelica! Stairs!”

The dog raced towards the stairs, heading upwards, another order coming in handy as I pulled myself off of Judas and glanced over at Pelter.

In a matter of moments the front area was soaked in blood and downed Sprees, as well as a handful of other gangbangers. It was very easy, but my heart was racing, and I was aware of just how long I had left. Once Butcher started to show up, we’d need to begin to make our way out of here.

If we were able to cripple three of the Teeth, that’d be a real blow. Something she couldn’t recover from easily, and then we could take a defensive stance. Hold out long enough, and see what happened. Still, there was a nervous feeling in my gut as Rachel followed Angelica upstairs to deal with Vex.

She’d be fine, and I had bugs to watch her just in case. “This… seems to be going well,” I said to Pelter.

“Yes. I… god, all this blood. It’s gross.”

“It is,” I admitted. I was a lot more used to sweat and mud than blood. Let alone the oceans of goop and blood that I was having to wade through. We had two dogs down here, and that should be enough to at least hold off any attack from the streets.

But even though we’d barely been attacking for a minute, it felt as if we were starting to run out of time. I followed Rachel’s movements upstairs, as Angelica, at her orders, forced her way through the razor-sharp forcefields. Rachel followed close behind her, and while Angelica was cut up a little, it wasn’t enough to actually stop her.

Vex kept on backing up, but now that I had a way through with my bugs, I could hear her talking. “Arachne. Bitch up here with me… no, I don’t know… fuck.”

Oh. Oh shit. So the vibrations were her talking to Butcher.

Which meant–

I tried to bite at Rachel with flies, but she was in tunnel-vision, as Angelica tackled Vex. And then she began to work the other woman over.

“Pelter. Stay with the dogs. You can’t command them, but I have to get Rachel to go. We have to get out of here.” I didn’t feel any of the confidence I’d felt before. Instead, I was sweating as I ran up the stairs, wishing that Amp could give super-speed. Thinking of that did give me another thought, and I reached down to the blood-soaked walkie talkie and activated it. “Amp?” I asked, panting as I came up on the second floor.
“Yes?”

“Anyone attacking the camp?”

“No, Arachne,” Amp said.

“Can you give Pelter and I a little more toughness? And Rachel. Just use up all of the juice and resonance you have on the three of us.”

“Got it,” she said. “Touch your nose.”

I did that, stepping out into a long, dreary hallway, at the end of which was Rachel. “And contact the Protectorate and tell them to show up here. I doubt they’ll make it in time, but…”

“Understood, Arachne. Good luck,” Charlotte said. I could hear the worry and concern in her voice.

“I’ll try.”

Rachel grabbed onto Vex’s arm and lifted it up so that Angelica’s paw could come down on it with a sickening crack which meant that she’d need to get that treated.

“Rachel! Butcher’s coming, we gotta go,” I yelled.

“Right,” Rachel said, nodding at me. The few Teeth left active in this building were all hiding and cowering, if I hadn’t bitten them enough to disable them, and now I was just trying to get as many of my bugs out alive as I could, to fight another day.

“Oh, and turn on the walkie talkie so that Amp can give you some power,” I said, as I pulled myself up onto Angelica’s hard, heavily muscled back.

“Fine,” Rachel said, sounding a little more reluctant. She looked truly grotesque with all of the blood that was on her, and it’d take some real work to wash it clean. It’d take real work to make all of this better, really. But if we could just escape in time, we could--

I saw a creature, about six feet tall, skitter forward on all fours. Just six blocks away. It was yellow-eyed, a snarling beast that had to be Animos. I briefly got the impression of a second person, and heard the small whuff of a minor explosion, before he screamed. It was so loud that I… couldn’t hear it.

My control of the bugs in a somewhat broad radius just stopped, leaving a hole in my grid as he kept on racing forward, eating up the ground.

This was their strategy. I could follow them by the control slowly slipping away from me, control I was so used to that I couldn’t imagine being without it. But I couldn’t see details, couldn’t figure out specifics. It was oddly terrifying, in a way, having that knowledge stripped away from me. Slowly I was being trapped, and as Rachel clapped her hands at Amp’s command, I felt my own range paradoxically increase. In the areas that weren’t blackout spots, I could feel as far as ten blocks, roughly, away.

I was almost so distracted that I didn’t notice Angelica skidding on the blood, claws digging into the floor as we raced down the stairs, Rachel yelling orders.

Downstairs, Pelter was holding onto the two dogs, uncertainly. I clung to Rachel’s waist, blood or no blood, but I’d need to be on the dog that led Pelter, because she hadn’t yet been trusted enough to be taught commands for the dogs.
Maybe that’d come with time, but not if we didn’t get out of here before it was too late.

“All right, we need to get out of here. She’s… shit, she’s close,” I said, climbing off onto Brutus and then gesturing for Pelter to get in behind me. “She’s… no, she’s here.” I was suddenly unable to see just a half a block away, and now I could hear it with my human ears. The scream was loud, but from the way the bugs around me didn’t lose control, it was clearly not that wide of a range. Even hearing it wasn’t enough, if it was distant and echoed. “We should just rush it. Get out of here.”

I could imagine Rachel gritting her teeth, angry at the idea of backing off, but she actually just nodded. I hoped she trusted me, because I didn’t really trust myself that much. This was going to be rough, getting away from someone who could teleport.

We burst outside through the destroyed entrance, and there Butcher was, standing just across the street.

She looked… weird. Weird was one word for it, at least. Ridiculous was another word. She herself was pretty impressive, with a long-neck and an air of athletic grace about her that was certainly helped by the pony-tail. She was an attractive woman, her eyes dark, her hair dark, looking at me from a crowded face.

She was wearing… there, that’s the problem. What wasn’t she wearing? The base of it was armor that looked like someone’s Hollywood stereotype of Japanese armor, though some elements just didn’t seem right about it, like they’d also taken… later, I’d be able to actually think about what was wrong with it, besides everything, but the studs and randomly thrown blades didn’t make it look any better.

Then there were random bleached skulls at the shoulder, and other little details in the skirting--yes, the skirting--that all combined to make me want to either burst out laughing or run away.

On the other hand, the huge bow that she was carrying, which looked like it had a draw weight greater than one of Rachel’s dogs, made up for it. You couldn’t really mock someone that dangerous even if they were dressed like they didn’t know what costumes were but wanted to try it.

Her face was hard, her eyes, though, dark as they were, seemed oddly distracted as she looked around for a moment.

And next to her was Animos. Animos was a large, strange black thing. His red eyes were staring right at me as Peler tensed behind me.

Our dogs turned, in that moment, to start running away.

She spoke just one word. “No.”

It all happened very fast after that. Pelter threw some rocks in her direction and Animos’. She disappeared in a small explosion that left a little smoke as well, but Animos was winged by it, though he didn’t seem to mind that much, as he lurched forward towards Judas.

Drawing her bow in one moment, she appeared right next to Rachel, ready to fire, only for Angelica to claw at her.

She disappeared in another explosion before the dog could hit her, and Angelica danced back in pain and surprise. The explosions weren’t large, but they were loud and sudden. She appeared nearby, and the arrow slammed into Brutus’ leg.

I was riding Brutus, and so as he thrashed suddenly--and that had to be the point--I was thrown off
onto the ground. I hit it with a crash, trying to focus as flies managed to land on the Butcher. Even wasps as well. I was scrambling on the one hand to run away, while also wondering how long until Animos screamed again.

Pelter threw a stone at the Butcher, who teleported out of the way once more.

Pelter and I were both scrambling, trying to figure out where to run.

Where to hide, for that matter. It was chaos, and we hadn’t yet even hurt the Butcher. My bugs went with her when she teleported to… right behind us.

A second arrow went into Brutus’ stomach as he screamed and thrashed.

Blood poured out on the ground. He wasn’t dying yet, but I wasn’t sure how many he could survive, and she was already notching a third. She had perfect aim, so I didn’t know why she hadn’t finished him off in a single blow. It had to be some sort of game. Some sort of trick. We were hurrying towards Judas as the dog engaged with Animos.

Successfully, actually, because despite Animos’ screams, it seemed an even match.

Rachel growled, angrily turning her dog around to confront the Butcher as she shot yet another arrow into the downed dog. “Surrender,” she demanded, her voice booming as she appeared again, a little further back. I no longer had bugs on her as I retreated, aware that I was still well within her range. I wasn’t sure if I’d survive an arrow from her.

Rachel hurried forward, ready to fight hand to hand if need be, even though it was just going to end badly.

Butcher drew back the bow, aiming right at Rachel’s stomach.

“Rachel,” I yelled, “Don’t do it!”

“What’s she doing?” Amp asked.

At the same moment, I called out, “Judas, come!”

We needed to get out of here. My hands were shaking, and I was aware that one of our dogs was hurting, that there was no way that she’d turn around.

“Rachel, get out of there!” Amp yelled, sounding more desperate than anything else.

At the last moment, Rachel turned. It didn’t stop the arrow from tearing through the air, but instead of hitting her head on, it went straight into her leg, and then bounced out, not penetrating deep enough to stick.

Rachel was bleeding, and I tried to climb onto Judas, the world reduced down to chaos and confusion. Brutus was standing up, slowly, not healed but too tough in this giant form to be put down immediately. I figured it out then.

He had veins, but he didn’t have a heart. He was a dog surrounded by a meatsuit. There was a body that could be attacked, but she could no more hit him through his heart than she could puncture a lung. No, it didn’t make sense. But that’s how it worked. Legs worked because they felt pain and needed legs to move.

But I knew that Brutus wouldn’t get away, not if she wanted it.
It was a helpless feeling. We were still trying to escape, but Rachel was still retreating, the bloody arrow on the ground… if it hadn’t been for Amp, Rachel would be dead.

That fucking bitch. I was scared and angry and helpless. Because there was no way we could beat her, and I wasn’t sure if we could even escape from her. I was sweating so hard as I tried to figure out what to do. We could make her pay for it, I realized.

This short fight could end when I turned the dogs on Animos and mauled him to death, and did everything I could with the bugs I had left in the apartment to murder them as well.

She’d take revenge, and there’d be another desperate exodus after she killed all three of us.

Nothing would change for the better, because if that wouldn’t stop the Butcher, what would?

I was trapped, trapped by the fact that she was so powerful and hard to damage that we hadn’t even landed a single blow on her yet. I didn’t know if we would. The fact that a single arrow wouldn’t be enough to kill us was good news. Sort of.

But I’d have to…

Have to what? I realized. With a sick feeling in my stomach I realized what I had to do. I realized what I was actually fighting for, and what the actual point of all of this was. It wasn’t to beat the Butcher. I felt pathetic and stupid for not realizing it. “Butcher! Butcher, your men are in that apartment building. Out of Animos’ range.”

“Oh?” the Butcher asked, pausing for a moment. She turned to look at me, and I realized that this could be a trap, to distract me before the attack came. But Rachel stopped running, and we all seemed to be waiting for what I’d say.

I hadn’t even been sure she was going to play along with this. But now that I had her attention, I had to use it. “I could kill them. Now.” It was true, I still had the wasps to do it, and all three were still down. “Put out their eyes while I am at it. Reaver, Spree, Vex. Obviously, you could kill the dog, fight us… but we’ll make you pay for it.”

“You attacked me,” Butcher said, but her face was doing odd things. It was twitching, first into a snarl, then a frown, and then a threatening grin. It was like she was having a debate all on her own… maybe it was.

“Yes. And we learned not to do it,” I said. A lie, but true. “Right now, they’re hurt, but they’ll get better, and we’re hurt, but we’ll get better.” I was lying about that too: we’d improve on our situation far faster than the Teeth would.

“I should kill you all,” Butcher said.

“And get the Protectorate to come down on you? They would.” They knew where she was, in fact. For each thing I said, there was something I didn’t say. I felt pathetic, talking it out with someone who could kill me, but what other choice did I have. “Let us go, and this all ends. You leave, they recover soon enough…”

I could see her face twist into a smirk. Actually, it was surprising how open and obvious the fact was when I heard her say, “Sure.”
She was going to betray it. It was that simple. She didn’t even try to hide the emotions on her face, the way they just crossed her without any barriers. But if she was faking it, she’d have to give us one extra moment to run to try to fool us.

I hoped.

“Brutus! Home!” I yelled. And the dog took off, nose up towards the air, at the same time as I gripped Judas’ neck and yelled, “Judas! Forward!”

Rachel turned Angelica around, and we began to hurry off as Animos howled and screamed, no doubt trying to make it impossible for me to see the double-cross coming.

Pelter grabbed two rocks and prepared to throw them.

From bugs afar I could almost get a picture of Butcher’s hesitation, and then her explosion as she appeared to my right, ready to fire--

And then disappeared in another explosion as Pelter threw one of the rocks. Pelter was grinning for some reason, and I didn’t even know why. I didn’t even know what there was about this that was… she was chasing us, but if she followed, she’d run into our Camp, and then it’d be a fight that we could hopefully stall long enough for.

But it was a slim hope.

So I was surprised when she showed up in front of us again and was scattered by the toss of another rock, and then she just… stopped coming after us. She was behind the three of us racing away, slowly drawing her bow. I could see the camp, safe and sound. I could see her, at least until Animos screamed again, and she wasn’t moving. She was standing and watching us flee.

Smug, confident. Victorious. As if the attack was just to remind us to keep running.

I’d keep my word. I would not kill them. I would not blind them. It was the least I could do.

The bugs swarmed Spree and the others, and went towards their left eyes, each of the three of them. Tearing and ripping them apart.

That wasn’t blinding. I was in no mood for anything less.

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A few hours later, I was still curled up in the sleeping bag, shivering. We were back at camp, and for some bizarre reason Pelter wasn’t terrified. Instead she seemed confident, sure of herself, and despite the close call, nobody else seemed to realize just how bad the situation was, just how much we were completely unprepared if the Butcher actually came here, right now.

I was watching for her, Rachel in the room. “Taylor. We won.”

“Was that victory?” I asked, remembering the feeling of the bugs committing suicide in the enemy’s eyes. At the time, I didn’t really have time to panic and worry about Rachel, but now I could picture that moment where she might have died in great detail, and each time I did, it hurt a little bit more. “If she comes, we can’t stop her.”

“You did well,” Rachel said, firmly. She pressed closer to me, hugging me close. “Kicked ass. Used words and shit to get her to back up. I couldn’t have done that.” Rachel shook her head, not used to having to talk to me, I guess. Or. I didn’t know what. She stroked my hair. “Just relax.”
“I can’t,” I said, still shivering out of control. “And there’s nothing we can do. If you hadn’t listened to Amp, then you might have died anyways. And if it wasn’t for Amp, you’d be dead. And I’d have lost you. You’d have charged at Butcher and we all would have died.”

“Something’s weird about Amp,” Rachel grumbled.

I ignored it, because I wasn’t really in the mood for her to grumble just because it was true that Amp was the reason we’d survived. Part of it, at least. “Maybe, and even with her help and everything we have here, I don’t know… what am I supposed to do?”

Rachel was speechless, frowning down at me. “I dunno. Fight harder? Use more words?” Rachel shrugged a little and said, “We can do it.”

“Maybe,” I said, a little distractedly. “Yes.” I bit my lip and looked up at her. “I love you.”

Rachel looked like she hadn’t expected it at all, her eyes wide, her expression blank. “Love you too.”

“Thanks. Sorry. I just maybe need…” I shrugged. “You should check up on the shelter. Cassie’s there.”

“Kay. Tell Greg I’m ready for another one,” Rachel said. “If you see him.”

“Oh, right,” I said, trying to perk up a little bit. It was cute, the way she was trying to make small talk. “See you soon.”

She left, and I kept on lying around, feeling sad for myself. I might have kept on doing that for a lot longer, but five minutes later, Charlotte began to approach. She opened the tent’s door and then zipped it back up as she knelt by me. “Taylor, are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said, still laying on my side.

“Sit up and talk to me, please.”

I shrugged. Might as well. I got up, distractedly, and asked, “So why are you smiling?”

“I’m… not,” Charlotte said. “But nobody died. And Pelter says that she figured it out. She reacts to threats too fast. If you throw something that might hurt her her way, she’ll teleport away, and that means that she’ll be running around if you can keep on attacking her… maybe until she just stands up and takes the hit.”

“That’s not going to be enough to beat her.”

“Then what will be enough? Tell me,” Charlotte said, her voice soft but firm.

I sighed. “First, I need to hurt her. I need to hurt her and keep on hurting her. Bugs with diseases, bugs that can get through her tough skin. Something. Then, we need more capes. A lot more capes, because the more power interactions we have, the better. You need to find more resonances, because if we have something with strength or lasers or… there’s possibilities here. Flechette could help too, if we could only force her to stand still.” I frowned, thinking about capes with powers involving freezing someone else.

If she didn’t move, we could just hurt her badly. But we couldn’t kill her, I realized, trying to think through it all. “There’s only one way…” I trailed off. “You just joined a week ago. Parian just joined a few days ago. What will Rachel say if I add another cape?”
Because I did have a way to gain at least one more parahuman. Three, even, but one would be enough to start with.

“You could leave it to a vote? Among the members of the team?” Charlotte suggested.

Which sounded like a good idea. It’d build consensus and all, but Rachel wouldn’t like it. At the same time, if the Butcher really did destroy this camp, she’d probably follow it up with all of the dogs.

I hesitated… “Alright.”

“I’m sorry if I’m pressuring you,” Charlotte admitted. “But I just don’t like seeing you down on yourself. And everyone believes in you, and I know you’ll be able to do this. I’ve only been here a week, and it’s so, so obvious.” Charlotte shook her head. “You’re doing something good here.”

“I hope so,” I admitted.

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“No,” Rachel said, crossing her arms.

“And you, Amp?” I asked. We were sitting around a fire, my bugs screening us on all sides.

“Yes.”

“I’m voting… maybe myself,” I said. “Until I see what everyone else says.”

“Who are we giving this to?” Stefanie asked.

“Greg’s the only person who has offered,” I said. I’d called a meeting only of the Parahumans, because I wasn’t sure if I wanted Cassie to know about this.

“Oh. Right. I…” Stefanie looked over at Rachel. “Rachel, you really don’t want this to happen, right?”

“No,” Rachel glared around a little harder, and I wanted to go over to her and tell her it was okay, or that it was for her own good. But really, it so obviously was. It so obviously would only help things.

“Did Charlotte put this idea in your head?” Rachel growled. “She meets with you, then.” She shrugged.

“All she did was try to cheer me up,” I said.

“What are we even talking about?” Parian asked. “You have a… vial that gives superpowers? And we’re giving it to your friend, Greg? Who I haven’t met yet?”

“Yes. Basically,” I said.

“Then, I suppose so. If it’s what it takes to help protect us, then I agree.”

That was two to one, with myself and Stefanie still undecided.

I bit my lip. Was Greg really the right choice? But asking Cassie to get involved like that could be a big mistake, and I wasn’t sure if she’d agree. Did she want to be a parahuman the same way Greg would?

“Is it anyone that’s the problem, or just Greg?” Stefanie asked. “We could ask Cassie, or… try to
figure out what they do before we hand them out.”

“Nah, Greg’s fine. Just don’t want him to join,” Rachel said, bluntly.

“Sierra wouldn’t agree,” Charlotte said. “Not after what happened to Bryce. Cassie… might not if she knows how dangerous it is.”

“And Greg would?” Parian asked.

“He’s always been a fan of capes,” I said, in his defense. “I’m sure he can handle it. And if he does get a swelled head, we can just help guide him.”

“I… am giving a provisional no, because Rachel…”

Pelter’s eyes said it all. Rachel’s your girlfriend, they said.

But that shouldn’t matter. I was a member of the team. We had a camp to protect. “I vote in favor. That’s three to two. It passes, then.”

Rachel stood up and stalked out, giving a baffled look to me, and then a furious, bared-teeth look to Charlotte.

“I’m… sure that she’ll come around eventually,” Charlotte said, weakly.

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Rachel glared at all of us as Greg wrapped his arms around me. “Really?! Really really?! Thank you thank you thank you! Which vial?”

“There’s Hephaestus,” Stefanie said, holding out the vial. “You need to drink all of it, and then we’ll see what your power is.” She glanced at me, and I wondered, if we got a power that wasn’t that useful, whether we’d go and ask Cassie. We had three tries. In theory. But if Rachel was glaring like this already, I didn’t want to try again.

“I can do that,” Greg said, stepping away from me with a blush on his face. He gripped the vial and opened it up, looking at it for a moment. He muttered something about a drinking animation, and then, clearly nervous, he smoothed back his hair as if we were going to take a picture of him drinking.

Then he tipped the whole thing down in one go.

Flashes of memories and strange visions passed through my head for a matter of moments, and then there Greg was, standing there.

“Well?” Stefanie asked, glancing over at Charlotte and Parian, at Rachel… “Is it a dud?”

“No,” Greg said. “I… I have visions in my head.”

“Of what?” I asked.

There was awe in his voice as he said two words as if they meant everything. “Power. Armor.”

“What?” Rachel asked.

“You see it’s like…” Greg began, then wilted in the face of Rachel’s glare. “Well, it’s really cool, and I bet I could totally help you guys.”
“So, you’re a Tinker?” Parian asked, looking him over.

“Yes, yes I am,” Greg said, proudly.

“Power armor?” I asked, still not sure what the specific details were about what he was able to imagine, but sure that it could work out. “That… should help.”

Chapter End Notes

So ends the arc. Interlude next. Sorry for the long wait. My writing schedule's intense.
Feral 5-A (Dose)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The room was small, but the lights were all bright, searing into his eyes. He hated that feeling, hungover or hanging out, that hesitation that came between hits, between jobs, between everything in the world like a thousand thousand little cracks in his mind. And into the cracks came doubt and delusion and uncertainty. Into the cracks came the things that ate at him at night.

He hadn’t really slept well in years, years and years. Nathan hated that, hated everything about his life, and sometimes he hated himself.

It was weakness, but it was weakness that he could stand up against. He had his craft now, his passion. He saw it in dreams, dreams and half-waking states. He saw it in the lines of coke and the other strange substances. All of them were excuses, ways to put off his mind, to push it to the side, and yet now he had something real and great.

Shouldn’t things work? He’d found his passion, and he’d found a way to sacrifice everything to it. He’d found something worth fighting for, and these vials, already used up on the undeserving, but for one, they were the key.

The key to beginning to understand just what he was going to do once he was turned out on his behind.

He wasn’t like Skidmark, not until he was high as hell and flying off into space, but he understood what Skidmark was about. He was about indulgence and crime and bucking the system, and so no wonder Coil had placed him here, had convinced him that this would all work out.

And it had so far. Now it was going to end.

“Skidmark,” he said, quietly. “I know that this is a bit of a shock, but, uh, fuck. You know the power patches, there’s actually side-effects, and get this, there’s a little maybe minor case of slight…”

Nathan bit his lip. “Okay, no, that’s not how to do it,” he said, staring at the mirror. He’d been practicing for almost an hour in a cracked mirror. There was a vanity below the mirror, covered with makeup from some girl of his. Skidmark, that was.


Sometimes his mind rambled and he had to chase it. That always annoyed him. But he had to find a way to tell Skidmark. And Coil, for that matter, since the ultimate plan was to eventually abandon him with the test data and jump over to Coil.

It was such a simple idea, so brilliant that when he was fully sober he was sure that Coil had other elements of the plan that he hadn’t revealed yet. Why have the Undersiders, why have all of these other gangs of parahumans when you could find a source of powers that you could control and give out only to the worthy and deserving.

They were threats to Coil, and his plans, and that meant that ultimately they’d have to be cast aside.

But not if… it did this. Or maybe even so, but the idea that it was slowly killing people was definitely going to make it less useful than he thought.
But he’d fix it. Somehow. Eventually.

Everyone thought he was a drug tinker, someone who made drugs and some of them did superhuman things. But the few times Skidmark had put him in charge of a meth lab, it hadn’t… gone well.

So stupid, that he was good at doing drugs but not at making drugs. So stupid, that he had dropped out of college and become what he was, and then failed to consider just what he was doing.

Coil had found him, and yet he knew he was indispensable, not like some of the others. Not like the Undersiders, or the rumors of other gangs that he wanted to bring in. Not like Accord or whatever the heck his name was.

Gosh darn it, people needed him! Skidmark wouldn’t kill him. Skidmark wouldn’t do anything to him at all.

He looked at himself in the mirror, noting the dark circles around his eyes, and tried to believe in the lies he told himself. Skidmark could get really fucking angry when someone went against what he thought should be. He was crude and casual and interesting… interesting in a way that made Dose wonder how long he’d survive without Dose to back him.

His gang was already splintering. You could hear it if you listened, along with loud music and the sounds of way too many people having way too many orgies. It was a crack house, a place that stank of the gutter and the street.

Who would believe that Nathan Hale had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He thought of himself, sometimes, a little like some of the other people Coil employed. There were people born high who had brought themselves low, and bringing low was certainly an important point.

Even now, even in all of the danger that he was in, he still had a few books hidden away to read. Erudition was something that marked a person as worthwhile, even if there was a certain charm in… the baser appeals that Skidmark spoke to.

His thoughts were skipping, his mind slipping in and out of one mindset and another, and so he shook his head and pressed his hand against the glass, feeling its cool surface, which promised to reveal but only truly concealed. Which meant that ultimately he was--

“Hey, asswipe. Whatchu staring at the mirror for,” Squealer said, as she oozed into the room. He jumped, turning on a dime, almost tripping over himself. “Y’all wanna be a pretty fucking girl? Some sort of…”

Dose shook his head. “Nah, don’t know who this cocksucking shitwhore is that used this table, but it’s filthy.” You had to talk like the natives to blend in, and Squealer was perhaps the crudest woman he’d ever seen. Crude enough that it felt almost like a joke.

She had huge… mammaries. Which was apparently part of her appeal. And she was currently dressed in what might be called Daisy Dukes, and a crop-top, and… gah, it was just too much. She was a decent Tinker, though. She knew her stuff, but her stuff was endlessly narrow.

Her own makeup wasn’t any better than the woman who had used this stupid…

“That’s my table,” Squealer said.

“Oh,” Dose said.
“Yeah. Want me to whup your ass, or will you fucking do it for yourself, you shithead ass-gargler.”

Her high-pitched voice made it even worse, despite the fact that she meant her threat: but there was a point where it became parody, and then self-parody.

“Nah, not likely,” he said. Dose crossed his arms and asked, “So how’s Skidmark doing?”

“He’s freaking out and shit. He wants to leave here soon. As soon as you finish the latest batch.”

“Why?”

“Some shit about the Butcher. Apparently she’s been riled up since that spider-bitch took out three of her peeps. Dunno why she’s taking it out on us, and not…”

Dose didn’t know either, or at least, he suspected that the real answer was more complicated, because it couldn’t be that the Butcher of all people was worried about the outcome of a fight. But at the same time, Arachne and her team seemed to have truly coalesced. They were growing larger, in part because of their…

Well, let it never be said that the only competent people in the world were Coil and Dose.

“Well, tell him to see me down in the lab before he goes. He’ll be going ahead of me, right?”

“Yeah. Get settled into our new crib.”

They were being pushed back, but with the new cape, Snot, they’d probably be able to hold out as long as the Butcher didn’t show up. Dose would retreat via a longer route, with his shop in his van, and hopefully it wouldn’t be too noticeable.

Of course, with how the streets were fucked up, maybe that was a little too hopeful. But hell. It wasn’t as if they’d been having a lot of wins lately. As long as he could figure out how to perfect it, to fix the… fatal flaw in the power dosing, then he could get out of here.

They really just needed to hang on until the Butcher left, or until Arachne and her team was strong enough to stand on her own.

Arachne wasn’t an ally, but Coil knew that he could play her against the Butcher, and no matter what Tattletale might also be telling her, whatever scheme they had, she was still playing by Coil’s game.

Maybe she wanted Arachne to win, rather than merely stalling the Butcher out in order to build her up as a threat. A threat that could be destroyed, or made into something worth, say, bringing out the patches. If he’d turned against the villains once, to another villain, why not wind up a Hero in the end?

It was always that simple: theirs was a world where a person could change their coat, where brutal assaults could be forgiven if the cape and her girlfriend were suddenly useful. If assaults, why not murder and drug dealing?

Things weren’t looking up, but Dose could see a way forward for everyone, a way that would make the city better, sure, maybe. But more importantly, it’d give Dose a dose of just what he needed.

Respect. Power. Fame.

Not having to deal with Squealer.
The lab was his home, really. It was a very large van, with a very large back area that he’d stripped completely of anything lievable in order to make more room. His experiments had first turned on the idea of gaseous drugs, but liquids were better, and time-delayed liquids better still, such as in the patch. It entered the bloodstream, and went from there.

So there was a metal table welded to the back of the van, and on it he did most of his work. They involved rare compounds and substances that it was really, really hard to get, but the basic principles were very simple. If he knew exactly how one thing worked: where the powers came from. That the drugs stimulated the brain in a way that mimicked what a Parahuman could possess. At least that much was obvious. But how was something as simple as a slight and temporary nodule on the brain enough to give powers?

And for that matter, why was it that there were different formulas, that each tended to get different sorts of powers: but each set being related? Obviously, the Protectorate had their silly little rhyme and all, but that couldn’t map to objective reality, could it? So he knew the process, and he’d even figured out how to tweak it to have less obvious physical side-effects, like the glowing eyes and the quick comedown.

Even in the short time he’d been working on it, he’d doubled the duration of the powers, which still wasn’t all that damn long. But it’d be really nice if he understood the underlying principles of his own craft. It’d at least make him feel better.

“Yo,” Skidmark said, opening up the door. “What did you wanna talk to me about?” He licked his chapped lips. “I got a thought when I was thinking it through.” The dark-skinned man smiled a little. “You’ll like it, Dose. You see. We can use that last vial, sure, and that’s all good, but what we need to do is find more of those things. And where are they? The Spider-bitch, yes, but Cauldron. Who the fuck is that?”

“I’m… not sure,” Dose said. It had been a surprise when he’d found them, but Coil hadn’t seemed nearly as shocked. Which itself was odd. “But I don’t know who would… wait. Actually I do.”

“Oh? Holding out on me, are ya?” Skidmark asked. “Don’t fucking do that. But c’mon, who is it?”

“I’ve… heard that Accord has some of those vials.” It was true, Accord had made it very known that he might have a line on purchase of such vials.

“Really? Fucking hell, that’d be great,” Skidmark said. “Also, you got any more a’those patches, I need to top myself up.”

They were in a crate, and the weirdest thing about them was that they actually did work on Parahumans. Not as well, and you only got a dozen or so minutes of charge per each one, but it was a way to strengthen your powers or get new minor ones. But the effect was even more unknown than whatever it was that had caused…

“Yeah, but I did have to tell you something about that?”

“What?”

Nathan took a breath, but found that he almost couldn’t breathe. “There are… side effects.”

“They’re drugs, no duh!” Skidmark said, with a roll of his eyes and a grin. “So, what? They kill you slowly? Make your shits purple?”
“Well, there’s an effect on the brain.”

“Pft, as opposed to what? Course they fuck with the head,” Skidmark said. “Tell me something else.”

“It… could be… dangerous in the long term.” Nathan didn’t’ want to talk about the brain of that one traitor he’d opened up. Someone who had stolen a dozen patches and stuck them all to himself and then tried to take out Skidmark. He’d been killed, but his head was intact, and looking at the brain… well, it started to speak to problems that couldn’t just be wished away.

Though even all of those patches together weren’t enough to actually, y’know, kill him. That’d taken Skidmark.

“How dangerous are we? Eh, whatever. You only live once. Unless you’re tellin’ me I should stop.”

“Maybe just cut back? Use them only in a fight?” he suggested.

Skidmark considered that and said, “Sure, why not? It’s not like most of the powers are useful for non-fighting shit. Not really. So eh. But do you have three of the Greenies?”

The ‘Greenies’ were usually powers involving strength, toughness, and sometimes regeneration. The ‘Blueies’ were lasers, almost always lasers or explosions or the use of light… it was very, very predictable in one sense, but in another not at all.

Baffling, really.

“Yep. I’ll get some to you. But I do need to talk to you soon. About what it does. I had a thought… maybe.”

“What sorta thought? Well, fuck it. You need to get out of here. You can take the vial with you, I guess. Because I don’t trust any of those cocknuggets not to steal it. Got it?” Skidmark offered his fist to Nathan, who bumped it and nodded.

Oh, he got it.

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Two hours later, he sat amid the ruins of the van. It had been tipped over, and now his arms hurt. He stretched himself out to his full, not all that impressive, height. He scrambled amid the chaos and the wreckage. The Butcher had just come down on him, and in a single gesture she’d slammed his van off the road.

Now he lay there, trying to crawl out. Shit. Shit. How had they known to go right after him? Or had they not? Butcher was fast, Butcher was dangerous, and since he had a vial and the power patches, it could be that she was after that. Though she wouldn’t know about that.

Nathan was only just beginning to consider all of the things he could do, like slap patches onto himself and attempt to take the Butcher with him, but the truth was, he had a much better idea. So he reached out and grabbed a few of the patches. Then he smirked. He knew her powers, and so he knew what might happen with what he did… but that’d buy time.

He breathed in, then out… and watched as the door of the van was ripped off. And there was Butcher, in her Japanese-American glory. In a way she was like the unmourned Lung, though she hadn’t been triggered at that time, according to analysis. But she and her family had fled, and reached New York because everyone wound up there at some point. And she’d fallen into the wrong crowd,
so to speak.

Quarrel, some called her, though Coil had shared a report from one of his best agents that called her Natsumi Amari. This was just a guess, though.

And looking at her as she stepped in, Nathan knew the truth: if she’d ever been Natumi, it had been years ago, and now she was nothing more than the Butcher.

“Got. You,” the Butcher said.

“You… seem to have caught me, yes. What are you going to do with me?” Nathan asked, no longer having to be crude and lude. He moved his hand forward, with the patch in it. She’d jump out of the way, right? Her power would notice that there were certain side-effects and register it as a danger, wouldn’t it?

She stepped closer to him.

“You’re. Mine,” she said.

“Hey! I, uh, do you mean you want power patches?”

The Butcher hesitated, and he could see her scrunching up her face, seemingly debating what, if anything to say. Which was interesting, because it really wasn’t that hard of a question. It wasn’t something that should lead to all of that internal debate, but maybe that was…

“Yes.”

“Then have one, free,” he said, as he slapped the red patch on her leg.

He blinked, surprised that she’d allowed him to do that.

“Huh,” Butcher said, holding out her hand as something dark and red formed in it. The heat from it flickered off. It wasn’t a fire, but it felt like fire. “Huh.”

“Yeah, it… works on capes too,” he admitted.

The Butcher stared down at him, and then at the patch, and he watched her slowly grin. It was a horrible look to have on her face, and from the way she lifted him up effortlessly, she wasn’t likely to let him go anytime soon.

“What else?” She glanced around, gesturing to the patches.

“What else do I need?”

“Yes.”

Nathan hesitated. Was it worth it? He was squirming, aware that she was going to lock him up and wring him dry of power, and that this was only going to make finishing off the Merchants faster. But he was also curious about what the long-term effects of this would be. And if it really was as dangerous as that, then maybe he’d get out.

So he should cooperate. “I actually… discovered something. Didn’t make. Found. A vial that gives a person a power forever. Makes them into a Parahuman.” He cleared his throat and said. “Most of them have been used up, but we still had one left, and if you throwing the car around didn’t break it, then it’s yours.”
“Where?”

“Please let me go and I’ll grab it for you,” Nathan said. “In exchange, can you maybe just… not kill me? And not lock me in a little room? I promise I won’t run away, as long as someone’s there to let me do my research.”

Butcher snorted and muttered, “Tinkers” almost under her breath with obvious contempt, before frowning and going through the same mental gymnastics she’d gone through before. Yet another cape whose social skills were ruined by her power: and yet she’d wound up and was in charge of an entire gang, just as the other one that sprang to mind was part of an entire team of heroes. At least at last report.

Finally, she nodded, and let him go. He hit the ground hard and crawled over to a metal fishing box. He opened it and then stared at… nothing. “What?” he asked. “Where is it?! I put it in here.”

“It’s not there?” Butcher asked.

“Unless it’s invisible,” Nathan said with a sinking feeling. “That makes… two. Someone’s stealing my vials!”

“Two?”

“When I was running away, I tripped and dropped the vials and someone picked up one of them and ran off with it. I didn’t notice them, but I bet it was some sort of cape. Maybe some kind of Stranger?”

Butcher growled, angry and frustrated, and Nathan realized he’d raised her hopes of something she could use. So there she stood, looming over him, ready to take it all out on him.

Nathan hadn’t been that afraid since the first day he’d run away from home, and ran straight into this punk-ass bitch who’d beaten him up for looking at her funny. He’d eventually gotten his revenge, down the road, but there was that same fear, that same feeling that he had stepped beyond the world he knew, and that here was a place where people like him got wedgies and broken teeth, not parental disappointment and sweet sixteen birthdays to make up for never being around.

He’d been unmoored, and now he was again without anyone. Not like he’d really been close to them, but he would have liked something more. He would have liked to have gotten away and continued the plan.

There was only one card he had left that’d keep her from locking him so far deep down that he’d never get out. “But I know where some more are!” he yelled. “Arachne-bitch has some! She took four of my vials.”

“Oh?” Butcher asked.

“And she fucked up your people, didn’t she. So just walk all over her? It’s not like she’s a threat.”

“Shut. Up.” Butcher said, reaching down to pick him back up again. “You’re coming with me.”

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If Nathan was a sympathetic type, he’d have spared some time to feel sorry for Arachne, who was going to be dead within a few weeks, maybe less. Especially once he started babbling about how powerful the vials were. The Butcher had had three of her team members horribly mauled by the girl, and now she’d learned that she’d have a way to get more Teeth if she just broke into the camp.
Just like she planned.

But he was way too busy feeling sorry for himself, especially once she stuffed him into a small room with nothing more than his work and a warning:

“If you stop working I’ll kill you,” the Butcher said.

He’d have to make a lot of power patches if he was going to survive.

And he wanted to survive, survive long enough for Coil to triumph and both sides to wipe each other out.

He stared in the mirror, that night, and remembered that not that long ago, his biggest concern had been telling Skidmark a hard truth: now what mattered was keeping that a secret from the Butcher.

Now what mattered was trying to survive, because if she learned the truth, she’d kill him. It was that simple.

So, he’d have to be very, very careful…

Chapter End Notes

So that's about it for the Merchants.
“You think she’s going rogue?” I asked, glancing over at Flechette as I continued my walk around the camp. Charlotte had suggested it, just as a way to be seen, and when I used my eyes, I did pick out a few things about the camp that mattered. One was that people were keeping the boxes clean like I’d hoped. All throughout the camp, I had put not just the fish bowls, but also boxes, here and there, to hold some of the spiders. The boxes had little latches that the spiders should be able to pull open if it came down to a fight, and I’d done a lot of work—the kind of work that I hadn’t done since I’d had school projects—on making it.

“Well, that’s one possibility with Panacea. She has to be watched, certainly. We’ve been fighting the E88 more directly now. Did you hear that Chevalier managed to drive off Fenja and Menja?”

“No, I didn’t. You know I’ve been busy.”

“Yeah, I do,” Flechette admitted. She glanced around at the work that was being done. The two apartment buildings that actually weren’t structurally damaged, the ones we’d been moving into, were almost completely built up, except for the top floors.

The camp should have been smaller, but instead, it was just as large, or maybe even larger. The camp was a growing creature that devoured food and filled porta-potties that Cassie had shipped in. It was an being that constantly squabbled and yet was holding together despite everything. The city was still a wreck, it hadn’t been all that long since the attack, really. But things here were at least starting to come together.

We had working plumbing, and could even hope to bathe more than once in a never. We had electricity, even though it was spotty. We had batteries and food. We weren’t doing great, but Butcher hadn’t attacked in the three days we’d been prepping.

And we had diseases…but not among the population. Thank God. But I did manage to find some typhus once I started looking. Fleas on rats of all things, and so I gathered together the fleas and kept them separate. The plan was for my bugs to carry them to drop down on someone like, say, the Butcher. It was treatable, sure, but would she even notice it at first? Of course, I’d need to make an open wound, since no flea imaginable could make it through that thick skin.

Hell, if she ignored it for long enough, maybe it’d really hurt her. Though hopefully not kill her. Since I didn’t want to have to turn myself into the Protectorate. I also had some ticks with Rocky Mountain, and I’d managed with some effort to find Lyme disease. That was a potent little cocktail, if I could get all of that into the Butcher.

...but I wasn’t going to tell the Protectorate about that. Honestly, it sounded like something an evil villain bragged about before threatening to hold the entire city hostage.

Which it shouldn’t, because it wasn’t as if I was searching out bubonic plague. I was trying to find diseases that couldn’t really be spread too easily, or at least were treatable. But only if the Butcher knew to treat it, and I doubted someone like her really paid that much attention, especially if she was as immune to pain as the rumors said.

“We’ve been busy too. We’re fighting them on the beaches, we’re fighting them in the streets,”
Flechette said. “And you’re doing your part here. I’ve heard you have a new cape. He triggered just after the Butcher fight?”

“Stress from not being able to help us out,” I said. “He’s a friend of mine. Still hasn’t picked a name out yet, though.”

“Right, right. Names are pretty hard sometimes,” Flechette admitted. “But as long as he’s helping out, hopefully you should hold out against the Butcher.”

The Butcher had been busy taking the Merchants apart, but I wasn’t sure how long they’d really be able to last. There were stories about some of Butcher’s men with powers that nobody had heard of, some even without costume: which meant that the Butcher had grabbed at least a few of the patches.

All in all, it was a chaotic, murderous clusterfuck. I’d heard stories of at least a handful of deaths already, and all I could do is wait where I was. With the way the city was wrecked and everything else, we were a sort of concentrated stopper to Butcher’s expansion this way. She could always go south, and then along the docks and fight the E88 there, but that’d put her right in the middle of most of the other gangs.

If she wanted to get through this way into some prime territory and enslave more people on the way… then I was going to be a target. But she hadn’t struck yet.

I didn’t know why. But I didn’t want to remind her that we existed, not until we were ready to really come after her.

“Yeah. Speaking of holding out,” I said, distractedly. “How are you doing with Parian?”

“Hey, I don’t ask you about you and Rachel,” Flechette said.

“What about us?”

“Oh, nothing,” Flechette said. “I don’t know, because you don’t tell everyone… and I won’t either.” Then, with a frown that seemed almost pouty, she added, “You already have bugs on everyone, so you know anyways.”

“I was asking to be polite,” I said. “I know you haven’t asked her anything yet.”

“I’m going to. Soon, very soon.”

I nodded at that. I wasn’t in my mask, because I didn’t need to be. We were walking towards a very specific area, where Charlotte and Greg were hanging out, a huge tent of the sort you’d use for a revival or something, the way it looked. It was Greg’s workspace, and he needed all of it. “How are you going to ask?”

“On my knees?” Flechette said with a slight smile. “I don’t know.”

“Well, good luck,” I said. “Just… think about what she wants, and try to see to her needs.”

“How does Bitch feel about the new teammate? There were a few hints, back when she was in the Undersiders, that she wasn’t a team player. And she was alone for a long time, after she triggered,” Flechette said.

“She’s annoyed, but she’ll get over it,” I said with a shrug. I’d been a little too busy to talk to her about all of it, but it was just moping. I’d know if it were more than that. And her suspicion of Charlotte was outright absurd. She was just being a little ridiculous. And jealous. But I’d talk to her
about it soon, I thought, fondly. Once we were more settled and ready for the Butcher, I’d have more time to talk to her.

“Well, you’re the expert,” Flechette said.

“Yes. I am. I know her pretty well,” I said.

Flechette made a face, and I almost smiled at it. “You know,” I said, “that I didn’t mean it that way. Though that’s true too.” We walked by a family, two younger sons and a mother, who were carrying some of the food supplies off of today’s truck. “Hey, you need any help Ms. Greens?”

“No thank you, Arachne. But thanks!”

I nodded in the older woman’s direction.

“You know their names?”

“It’s only the right thing to do. Charlotte said that it’d help them know that they’ve got a friend in me. And I guess they do?” I shrugged. “PR’s important, I’m sure you know that,” I said, too quiet for anyone but her to hear.

“Has she tried to convince Rachel to do the same?”

“...yes, actually,” I said, wincing when I remembered the slight growling and storming off that had occupied the latter part of Saturday. I did need to fix that too, make Rachel understand... well. Okay, make both of them understand each other, but Charlotte was clearly just trying to do the same thing I was. Just not as well.

“Ah, that bad, huh? Can I come in with you to meet this new cape?”

She’d recognized what I was walking to. I gave a shrug, glancing around at the sky. “Looks like it’s going to rain soon.”

“The weather?” Flechette asked. “That’s what we’re talking about?”

“If it rains, this whole place is a muddy mess,” I said. “That much harder to get supplies about, and it means we’ll have to use more hot water on baths or deal with being dirty. Not that I mind that much.” Which was sorta true.

“You have been living out here for a while,” Flechette said. “Still in a tent, even though...”

“Nah. In a tent puts us closer to the action,” I said. “If there’s a fight.”

“I’m sure that’s all,” Flechette said, with a nod. As if she didn’t believe me.

“It is. So, yes, you can meet him. Just be gentle,” I said, and then I pushed open the flap and stepped into his workspace.

We’d had to gather a lot of stuff real fast, and if it wasn’t for Cassie, he’d still be in the stage of having a lot of ideas and nothing to work on. But she’d managed to drive in, with Sierra’s help, and the rest of the people online for that matter...

Well, this.

There were three workbenches spread throughout the room. On one rested a ton of notes and what looked like several radios that had been torn to bits. Because it was several radios that had been torn
to bits. Plus, we’d sacrificed Walkmans and CD players and ipods to get him the parts he needed.

On the second table, there was what looked like the beginning of a helmet. It was thick and iron, but on the rest of the table he had this liquid that was still cooling. It was dark blue, and if I understood his design—and I didn’t—part of the step that made it into power armor was soaking the equipment in it. That’d allow the armor to conduct the power running through it from the battery, which was a work in progress on the third bench.

The battery at the moment looked like a giant backpack of sorts, with dozens of tubes coming from it, and the idea is that it’d plug into the suit, powering the hover-boots, the cling boots, the built in laser guns, and everything else it had that in theory should make him a mid-level brute with lasers and flying.

If he had time to work on it, and all of the right equipment. That was a work in progress, which is why his first goal was something very, very simple.

Greg was out of costume, as short and excitable as ever, bouncing slightly as he explained things to Charlotte. “So, then that’s when it really gets interesting! You see, the idea is, if we set up poles with this on it, then you could give random people powers!”

“But wouldn’t anyone be able to seize my power? Wait, how does it work if I give a general command?” Charlotte asked, frowning. She actually was in costume, unlike him, and she started when she saw Flechette and I entering. “Oh, hey Arachne. Flechette.”

“Howdy,” Flechette said. “Hope I’m not interrupting.”

“No, they’re just talking about strategy,” I said. Because of course I’d been listening in without really trying, while I’d been talking to Flechette. Which meant I knew what his idea was. “Great idea.”

“I’m still not used to you knowing and seeing all!” Greg admitted, bouncing around a little. “But since you don’t know, hey, hi, I’m… Suit? No, no, that’s stupid. Mr. something? Nah, that’s like my Dad or something.” He frowned at that, looking briefly troubled, before he sunnily continued. “Ironmonger?”

“Well,” I said, not sure how much to crush his dreams, because it was a better name than Powersuit, or Laser Law.

“Could use some work,” Flechette said. “If you don’t mind me saying.”

“Of course I don’t! You’re only actually a real Ward and everything, and I’m still trying to build my costume and all, because that’s what it’s going to be, power armor. Though I guess I could get an underlayer of armor if I went with the Tron vibes. Hey, who made your armor by the way it looks very—”

“Ironmonger!” I called, trying to make my voice sound more authoritative. “Calm down.”

Charlotte smiled softly, nodding and saying, “Yeah, just breathe. Also, Arachne, I’ve figured out super-strength, finally, and I think I have some leads on some other resonances, but I’ll need to test out the strength first. Can you maybe get your girlfriend to please talk to me, boss?”

“Boss? That’s a new one.”

“Well, you’re clearly the one in charge,” Charlotte said. “And I’m glad of it.”

“Well, thanks Amp. But I’m pretty sure Pelter and Cassie are…”
"You’re the one everyone looks to," Charlotte said.

"It’s true. I mean, online at least,” Flechette said.

I shrugged, trying to brush it off. This was a partnership, between myself and Rachel, and between ourselves and everyone else. Rachel and I were a unit, as it were. That’s the only way any of this worked.

Maybe? I glanced over at Flechette and said, “Anyways, Amp was just talking with Ironmonger here, because he had an idea to create a set of headphones as well as speakers. Headphones for his costume and ours, speakers for the camp, so that she can use her power. Walkie talkies have to be used, and it’s possible for interference, intentional or otherwise, to get in the way. But--”

“Quantum!” Greg yelled. “The headphones communicate their radio waves through a quantum sub-dimension of the…”

Quantum sub-dimension. I listened for a moment longer, but couldn’t make heads or tails of it. It was Star Trek babble, only less intelligible, and yet he was definitely making far too much progress for it not to rely on real, working principles.

Just ones that made no sense.

Flechette was clearly being lost here. “Anyways, yes, he’s working on that, and Amp, what’s this about Rachel?”

“I thought she’d like super-strength,” Amp said, thoughtfully. “Since it is something that’d let her fight people directly.”

“She just might,” I said. “I’ll try to raise it with her. Iron... “

Well, we’d think of a better name. “Uh. How long will it take for you to make the speakers?”

“Those? The quantum connection is the hardest part, and it doesn’t have to be perfect, right? The earbuds I’m working on, you could hear her from the moon. But this just needs to get through easily and loudly, right?”

“Yes, though poles might not be the best idea. They could be knocked over. What about boxes on platforms, with the poles to help indicate where they are so people can gather for any instructions, if they need it?” I asked, trying to think seriously.

“Huh, that’s a better idea than I had,” Charlotte admitted, smiling at me. Smiling, not baring her teeth. I reminded myself of this.

“Yeah, I can do that,” Greg said. “And ASAP, I assume? Because the Butcher’s going to come here, right?”

“I’d come here,” I said. “If someone had hurt people who were on my team as much as I hurt the Teeth.” The Butcher was powerful cape, and more than that, one that was so loyal to the Teeth that it drove capes who weren’t insane just to throw them in the path of rejoining the Teeth. There was no way that the people of the Teeth didn’t matter to her.

Why else would they be so loyal if not to the people that make up the Teeth? It didn’t make sense otherwise, I thought to myself. So she’d want revenge, she’d want to get back at us, and I wasn’t going to let her. I wasn’t going to let her hurt the camp, or those I cared for.
“Ah,” Charlotte said, with a nod. “Got it.”

Flechette said, “I probably should get going. I hope you all have it in hand. Remember, I’m there if you need me, and so is the rest of the Protectorate. We aren’t your enemies, even if you seem to be trying to stand alone.”

“I’m doing what I can,” I said. “That’s all. Do what you can, and what else can we ask for?”

Flechette didn’t say anything. She just looked at me, frowning, then nodded and turned to leave.


“Artificer?” I asked, as Flechette turned, curious.

“Arachne, Artificer, Amp, Hellhou--”

“Bitch,” I said.

“Yeah, B-bitch, Parian and Pelter,”

“Alphabetical except for my name, huh?” I asked.


“I think that’d work,” I said. “Charlotte, what do you think?”

Charlotte nodded. “I think so too. Hey, Artificer, I was thinking… I could also use a helmet, instead of a headset.”

“Well… that’d take time, especially if I wanted to make one of the batteries for it, to give it some protection. Your power doesn’t work on you, though, right? It’s, like, your big weakness, your kryptonite,” Greg asked. “What about, like, power armor, or…”

“It doesn’t,” Charlotte admitted, not commenting on his idea. I felt Flechette retreating, no doubt with things to tell the Protectorate about the team dynamics. I didn’t know how I was supposed to feel about how much Charlotte seemed to be encouraging me to step up as leader. It was things like ‘Boss’ and stuff.

I wondered what they’d think of me. But I didn’t care. Much, at least.

“So, I was thinking…” Greg began, ready to bury her in attention.

I took my leave as soon as I could.

********

The shelter was overcrowded by far. This would be a crisis, at least to other people, if it were people instead of dogs. But people just assumed that dogs would be able to cope, I thought. When I walked in the dogs started barking, and once one or two were at it, the others followed. Not all of them were the same kind of dog, so when combined it created this wall of sound, which trailed off or grew louder, thudding against my ears as I made my way towards Rachel, frowning a little.

Rachel was crouched next to what I thought was a poodle. I associated poodles with fluffery and fanciness, but this was a poodle that had rolled around in the mud, and seemed to have gone from perfectly groomed to bit of a mess in a very short span of time. It was a small dog, small enough that Rachel had to really bend over.
Rachel looked like a lump, strong, defined arms moving carefully to lift the poodle’s leg as the animal whined a little, miserably.

It was really starting to warm up, and in deference to this, Rachel was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, which meant I could really see her arms.

And her legs, which could in theory use some shaving—but really did it matter?

She was a little bit of a mess too, her sneakers covered in mud, and I almost hesitated to approach her. “Hey Rachel,” I said, stepping forward. “What’s with the poodle?”

“She’s in pain. Not sure why,” Rachel said. “I think she’s not used to running around. Found her rooting around in the garbage.” Rachel’s frown deepened slightly, and I could almost see the memories pass across her face for just a moment. “Trying to survive.”

“This place is getting pretty crowded,” I began, and then bit my lip. I wasn’t stupid. I knew her, and I knew the way her scowl deepened yet further. “But then, so is our camp. The question is, what do we do to make more room for the dogs?”

Rachel relaxed, and I could see the smile in her eyes, as she glanced down at the dog, then back up at me. “Yeah. Cassie’s talking about donations and shit. Words, words, words.”

“What’s the matter, Rachel?” I asked, wishing she could understand the joke I’d just told.

“Dogs are getting crowded. That retriever bitch is whelping tonight, at the latest. You gonna be there?”

“Well, I wanted to patrol a little with Amp, see about making sure the camp’s all good. Just like you’re doing with your dogs,” I said, a little defensively.

Rachel grunted. “Charlotte’s just fucking whispering in your--”

“Rachel. I don’t think this helps,” I said. “I promise I’ll pick up my dog by tomorrow morning. But Charlotte had this planned since Friday, and I didn’t know the dog--”

“A week is a week,” Rachel said, crossing her arms.

I stepped closer to her, shaking my head. “I’ll try to get out of it, but there’s a lot to do. We have to be ready. But as for the dogs, we could open another shelter, sure. But we could also maybe give them out to other people? In the camp, that is. Stefanie…”

“Well, my folks do like dogs,” Stefanie had said of my idea.

“Stefanie likes dogs. She’d like one, definitely. I’m not sure if Greg is responsible enough, though. But there’s people who could use the puppies, or dogs in general. And you know what happens if they abuse their dogs? We sock ‘em in the eye,” I said, making little fists and punching forward.

“Yeah.” Rachel nodded, seeming a little more mollified. “Charlotte don’t want one?”

“Not at the moment, no,” I said.

Rachel seemed almost pleased, as if somehow I’d confirmed her low opinion of Charlotte. Her opinion based, it seemed to me, on nothing at all. “Anyways, so, we give away a few dogs, and then maybe we start looking to move into nearby buildings? Or maybe take them apart. Not all of them are really sound. Though I have no idea where we’d get the rights to build our own stuff.” I frowned,
shaking my head. This refugee camp wasn’t supposed to be a chance to play SimCity, and so I probably shouldn’t be knocking down buildings, even if that’s what the ultimate result would be.

“Just do it,” Rachel said.

Which was my first instinct too. Knock it down and fuck if anyone wants to say anything. And then maybe build some shacks to hold more of the dogs. Though we’d also need more people, I thought, looking around.

It was only a few seconds in that I was basically doing exactly what I’d thought I wouldn’t. And it was thanks to Rachel.

“Maybe I will, eventually,” I said, walking further into the mud to get closer to her. It was up to my ankles now, but I really didn’t care. I could clean my shoes. “Other news, is that Amp figured out how to do super-strength. I thought you could help her test it out tomorrow.”

Rachel looked over at me, her eyes almost playful. “Plenty strong already.” She looked down at the dog, and then added. “Could help with this. But.” She shook her head. “Always talking.”

“You really don’t trust her, do you? Don’t answer that. But yeah, you are,” I said, crouching down next to her and feeling her muscles. I was aware of what she meant me to think by that, but I was still blushing, still slightly warm. If only I wasn’t so busy, maybe we could take time… no. No, I had to take charge. I had to get ready for the Butcher.

I needed to do my share of the work. Maybe even be the ‘boss’ if nobody else was willing to step up. “Hey Rachel,” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“What do we do if we really can hold off the Butcher? What do we do next?”

“Live?” Rachel asked, with a shrug. I ran my fingers along her arm, desire warring with duty. Duty won.

“Yeah. I can try that.”

******

Charlotte picked her way around the ruins two blocks away from the camp. “We should maybe think about gathering anything left to take,” I said.

Charlotte frowned. “You mean looting?”

Charlotte frowned. “You mean looting?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a thought.”

Charlotte nodded. “We could do that, but I think most of it is gone already.” It was late afternoon, and the streets still weren’t any better than they’d been when Behemoth came around. This was almost Teeth territory, so of course nobody was going to bother to try to save the area.

We were within range of the camp, and help, at all times. Charlotte had her headphones, and she’d have a helmet too, before that long. If the Butcher even started coming here, we’d make it back in time. I was sure of that, as long as we didn’t go much further than this.

It was like being tethered onto a leash, like being trapped, just a little bit, but it wasn’t. I wanted to be back at camp, which was the odd thing: shouldn’t I want to escape? If I was leashed, shouldn’t I
want to bite through it?

I didn’t, though. Off in the distance, Rachel was playing a game with Greg. The bitch hadn’t yet whelped, though I knew it was only a matter of time. I could see a lot about the camp, all those people crammed together, all of them relying on me. “Why do you want me to be leader?”

“You’re the best leader,” Charlotte said. “You should take charge more often: I’ve seen what happens when you do. You saved us, you threatened the Butcher and saved time… I don’t know if I approve of the maiming, and the diseased bugs make me nervous.” She shook her head, clearly trying to be open with me.

“That’s fine. As long as you’re willing to go along with it. I can try to do that a little more, but it’s supposed to be a partnership. I wouldn’t be where I was if it wasn’t for Rachel.”

“I know,” she said. “I think I do. She doesn’t like me. Do you know why?”

“No fucking clue,” I admitted with a shrug. “She thinks you talk to me too much.”

“I could try talking less,” Charlotte said, dubiously. “I want her to like me, but she doesn’t even listen to me. She doesn’t talk with the girls I saved, either.” I could see said girls, isolated in a corner of the camp. They stuck together, in a way that was both impressive and perhaps a little worrying. “We’re all girls, surely she could have plenty to talk about.”

I winced, considering what she was saying, “Like, what?”

“About shit we have to deal with,” Charlotte said. She narrowed her eyes. “I wasn’t talking about boys, fashion, and cute things.”

“I didn’t think you were,” I said, which was only sorta true. “Rachel’s been through a lot, but I don’t think she really thinks of things like that. She’s dealt with a lot, but it’s not…”

Well, it wasn’t the kind of thing where she could complain about it holding her back. Because so much else was just piled onto her. Her illiteracy—which she was only slowly fixing—her poverty, all sorts of things that… didn’t really speak to talking with people about how much their experience sucked.

“Not what?” Charlotte sighed. “You should come sometime. We don’t spend that long complaining, if you’re listening in.”

“I am,” I said. It was another thing that I noted down without really processing it. There was so much that I couldn’t really focus on, if I wanted to keep sane. Multi-tasking was far easier than multi-deciding and multi-evaluating. Especially when it came down to evaluations that weren’t ‘how many spiders should I sic on this gang member.’ It all rattled around in my brain, and I knew that if I didn’t write it all down, I’d forget it sooner or later. There were just so many details.

Still, I probably had written down notes on the discussions. The indignities they’d faced, the difficulties. The, without putting any finer point on the grotesque, rape and abuse. Sometimes not merely at the hands of the Merchants.

It was a cruel world, and a vicious one too.’Human beings suffer’ I remembered my mother quoting once. It was some poem: despite my love of literature, perhaps I was not the best teacher for Rachel, when it came to appreciating literature.

What had I read, really, in the last few months?
“Oddly, it’s kind of comforting, as long as you don’t tell people about what we say,” Charlotte said.

“Comforting?”

“That someone is listening,” Charlotte admitted. “That someone might care. We can’t do anything except cope, and try to get over it. You can.” Snatches of memories of the poem came bubbling up, along with guilt, and doubt, and other things that perhaps should have been locked away.

“Do they hate that I fought the Teeth to try to prop up the Merchants?”

“They don’t really get it, and even if they did, the Teeth are just the Merchants all over again. They do the same stuff. Butcher takes sex slaves you know, and does all sorts of other disgusting things. She too doesn’t see gender in it… or they?” Charlotte shook her head.

I winced at the comparison. It was true that none of the Butcher’s experiences had apparently given her any mercy or understanding of others, anything other than cruelty and loyalty to her own and nothing and no one else. “I suppose she doesn’t,” I said. I shrugged, frowning. I’d definitely spent a lot more time lately just doing things. Kneeling in the muck and punching people and taking charge, than I’d spent reading things, thinking through things that didn’t have to do with the task in front of me. Perhaps I was changing, for better and worse, always both.

“I didn’t mean to press you on it,” Charlotte said. “I know you have a lot on your plate. Your girlfriend’s dog is having pups, right?”

“Soon,” I said. “And, all dogs are her dogs. Pretty much.” There were well over a hundred dogs at the shelter, enough that anyone but Rachel would have trouble telling them apart or remembering what they were called.

“You should go. It’s not like we’re going to find anything more here, and I think the strength works? Try hitting that wall.”

I lashed out with a hand, as lightly as I could. I left a cratered hole in it. I blinked, smiling. It hadn’t felt like anything at all. “…huh. Now that’s useful.”

*****

The retriever could barely waddle, she was so clearly pregnant. Her golden fur was well cared for, only a little mussed, and she lay down like she was unable to do much else.

Stefanie and Cassie were behind me, as were some of the shelter people, as Rachel did her work.

“How did you know when the labor was?” Stefanie asked Rachel, who was dressed in clothes she could afford to throw away, because no birth was simple. The dog panted, glancing around as if she were confused at all of the attention. She had food and water, and she was in this warm looking padded wooden cage.

“Temperature,” Rachel said, as if it were patently obvious. “Other signs. Beatrice was vomiting this morning, and couldn’t stop moving about. You know, this is going to take time. Bring a fucking book, it’ll be hours. I’m only going to help if things go wrong. Otherwise, it’s natural birth.”

Cassie nodded, as if she was filing this all away. “I wonder how she feels about it.”

“Ready for it to be over,” I guessed, as Rachel stepped back.

“Now we watch,” Rachel said. “Wait. See if anything goes wrong.”
The miracle of birth wasn’t much of a miracle. There was discharge and water going everywhere, there was this strange thing that looked like a puppy’s head, but wasn’t, and then finally, after what seemed too long, the first puppy made its way out, blind and confused.

It took two dozen minutes before the second, and that was about normal. Nine puppies in all, which meant that by the time Stefanie had wandered off and then returned, looking a little less green, and by the time Cassie had already started to help out.

The mother, Beatrice, seemed to do most of the work. Cleaning up the puppies and licking them hard until they started whining and breathing like they were supposed to. They were small, tiny blind bundles of fur and feelings, though they weren’t cute until one got all of the stuff off of them.

Until they, they’d reminded me of any sort of baby, slightly ugly at first glance, but oddly cute when you paid attention. Of course, that was probably just instinct kicking in, but I watched all of it, because I didn’t want to look away and because Rachel didn’t seem to care about the grossness of the whole thing.

Of course she didn’t.

The puppies, once cleaned up, were tiny little things that dozed in between going for their mother’s teats. Rachel had to lift them up carefully to remove all of the soiled blankets and replace them with clean ones.

I looked at these nine little puppies, and tried to imagine caring for one of them. Rachel was still going to stay up yet later, even though in theory we had a mission to monitor Coil still waiting sometime late in next… this, actually, now, morning.

“Rachel,” I said. “Cassie and the shelter people can probably take over.”

“Gotta watch the dam,” Rachel said. “If anything’s wrong with her, or she’s too tired…”

“I get that,” I said, nodding. “I’m sure the shelter can care for the puppies until they’re ready to go to a home. How long will that take?”

“Nine weeks. No less,” Rachel said firmly. “But you should come here to interact with them. Cuddle them, talk to them. Bond. Become known. Let them sniff your hand. Let them get used to you.”

Nine weeks. It felt, in some odd way, like a very long-term commitment. “Are you going to take one of them for your own? I assume you won’t empower a puppy.”

“Nah. Share ‘em out,” Rachel said, with a nod, giving me a warm look. “Now, can you help me out a little around here before we sleep?”

So I was exhausted and without sleep when it came time to meet with Parian again. She’d made more of her stuffed animals, large bears and giraffes, beings that I knew she could animate with her power, and use as a weapon. Her whole room was now, in one sense, a trap. As many stuffed animals and thread and needles as there were, there was no way that stepping in wouldn’t end in some serious pain. All she really had to do was spread them out, and she’d have a sort of network of attackers. Minor brutes, to add to the people that Charlotte was trying to talk around into being semi-common recipients of power.
She was part of all of this too.

Parian was looking as impeccable as ever behind her mask, which hid anything at all that might make one a little more relatable in the tired, grouchy mood I was in. But I could see from her posture that all wasn’t well.

I’d barely slept three hours before dragging myself up to start it all over again. “Hey, Parian.”

“Hey. So you wanted to talk about costume designs?” Parian asked. “Good. Let’s talk about them.”

“No hello, how are you?” I asked.

“Bad. Flechette came around. She asked if I wanted to date. Just came out and said it,” Parian said, shaking her head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What did she say?”

“I said I don’t…” she said, trailing off and sighing. I’m just glad that you were asleep, so you didn’t get to watch it. Like you watch everything.”

“I can hardly help it,” I said. Though now I was wondering whether that was timing on Flechette’s part.

“Lily’s just so frustrating. I’m not in the mood to get started on any of that, but she just asked me like she knew the answer, like she knew me.” Parian grit her teeth, and I filed away the name for later use. “Like she assumes she knows best and I just need to put the signature at the bottom of the date.”

I hadn’t gotten that feeling from her earlier. Or at least, she’d seemed like she wasn’t completely sure, but I didn’t know what to say. They needed to communicate, that was important, and I didn’t know why they couldn’t just work through things and understand that a little better. “Ah,” I said. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

“I didn’t say no. But I don’t want to say yes if that’s what she expects. Maybe I want her to kiss me, and we could just go from there, but I don’t know. My family’s only a few doors down. They have to know by now, I’m not subtle, but that’s not the same thing as me having casual sex. My aunt, my mother, they…” Parian shook her head. “Here I didn’t want to talk about it, but I thought you’d understand, with your father.”

“Go on?”

“They’re only somewhat okay with it because I’m helping people, and because they expect me to make something out of it? Like, I don’t know how to describe it. First they wanted me to eventually settle down and marry a man and have kids, now they want me to settle down and marry a woman and have kids.”

“Ah,” I said. “That? I don’t think Dad’s really hinted at anything like that. But I do think he’s more comfortable that our relationship is… formalized? Have you been talking to people about my Dad, to know so much?”

“Yes, I have been. I’ve been asking a lot of people about you. And Rachel. They mostly have good things to say,” Parian said. “Speaking of good things to say, here’s my idea for Artificer. Grey, steel grey for the body suit, with black, red, and gold to color outward in a sort of flame pattern, but not quite. I have sketches, for that. A tool-belt around his waist. Once he gets armor, we can get rid of the belt, and the boots too.”
“Boots?” I asked.

“Big, thick black boots. Workman’s boots. Since his name’s Artificer. At least one of the tools on his belt should double as a weapon, so that he can interact with Amp. And he should have an open-faced helmet of some kind. Not closed, not until he gets his actual suit.” She frowned and said. “I’ve actually done a lot of thinking about costumes in the last few hours. It’s not my job, but I can always help out that way. Though your and Bitch’s costumes are pretty much good? I can’t think of how much I’d want to add to them. But Pelter’s costume could use a bit more broadening? Once she can lift heavier things, then…”

Oh, right. Amp meant that what we could do and how we’d be ‘themed’ would be different, wouldn’t it? I didn’t see why the fuck I cared that much about it, and about image, but she had a point. I just was too tired to think too much about it. “Sure, that works. Sorry, tired.”

“Why?”

“Was up all night watching puppies being born,” I said.

“Oh, really?” Parian asked. “I know a few people in this building who might want new puppies.”

“It’ll be two months until they’re really ready for going to new homes.” I nodded at her. “The puppies won’t be coming immediately.”

“Will there be a camp in two months?”

“I hope so,” I said. “I won’t let Butcher--”

“That’s not what I meant. We’re re-opening the apartment buildings that aren’t unsound, and eventually won’t everyone be in a building, and the flow of refugees stop? Then what?” she asked.

“We protect the buildings. The green will still be there, and I’m sure that we could work something out. If it reaches that point, it reaches that point, but there’s no point talking about it now,” I said. “Not when we still have so much to do. And you’re helping us with all of this, so sorry if I sound grouchy.”

“Didn’t get a lot of sleep?” Parian asked, sympathy evident in her voice.

“No, not really…”

Parian nodded. “You should try relaxing, just because… the E88 are still going to be there, and so are the Teeth, if you just take a few hours off to do something you find fun.”

“I can rest when they’re dead,” I said.

Parian nodded, “Hmm. Now that’s certainly a mindset.”

“It’s the way they think about us… in general and in specific,” I said. “Why not fight back?”

“I can get behind that,” Parian admitted. “I want the E88 to suffer. I want them jailed... dead. Uh, not really?”

“And I want the Butcher captured and thrown down a dark hole. The birdcage should be made for people like her. Instead of some of the people who wind up thrown there at the first mistake.”

I realized I’d raised my voice, and shook my head. “So, are you going to show Greg this drawing?”
“Of course,” Parian said. “You think he’d like it?”

“I think that he’d like anything that looked cool,” I said. “Just go for it.”

Parian shook her head. “Is that the advice you gave Flechette?”

I shrugged, not answering either way, looking at Parian, her hair and her mask and the room filled with cloth and dolls, and just considering Flechette’s odds of recovering from her mistake.

Lower than I thought, perhaps.

“Well, it wasn’t bad advice, but it wasn’t good advice. Sometimes you have to not say things. I think?”

I nodded, more to indicate I was listening than anything, and after a little more chatting about menial details, I was gone.

Time to spy on Coil again.

*******

Something big was going down. Something so big, and so major, that I knew that it had to be bad news. Accord was out in force with a half-dozen super-powered gang members in all. I could recognize some of them, but not others.

Three men and three women, and I could only recognize a few of them other than Accord, who was hard to miss.

There was Citrine, one of Accord’s main people. She was tall and blonde, wearing a yellow gown, with a mask that covered her face. She smelled of subtle, hypo-allergenic perfumes, and her mask was studded with gems that I guessed were Citrines. Her powers were something of a mystery except that she’d been seen cancelling other Parahumans’ powers, and there’d been stories of her messing with gravity and temperature. Accord tended to run a tight ship, and it was sometimes impossible to figure out what his capes even did… besides win fights. I knew, from stories, that Citrine had been the one to consistently shut down Night back when she was in Boston.

I recognized Othello, who was another of the old hands of Accord who had accompanied him on this expansion venture. He wore a suit and had a black and white mask, and not much else was known about him, but his power seemed to involve teleportation and attacking people from a distance. Not much else was known.

The third cape, at least, I knew something about. His power was known even on the Parahuman wiki. Arturas was dressed like an odd combination of one of the three musketeers, with a medieval knight. He had a plumed hat, and shining silver and gold armor. His weapon was a rapier, and he was supposed to be deadly and accurate with it. He was stronger and tougher than a normal man, though not that much, but the difficult trick about him was that he seemed to always know when and how to strike. Some sort of power that allowed him to see weak-points.

The other three, though? One was a slightly plump looking woman wearing an evening gown and a featureless mask, another was a short man in a purple and black bodysuit, spangled with feathers, and with a mask that had hundreds of painted red eyes on it. And the third was a tall, blocky looking woman with only a half-mask, wearing dark clothes with a short cape that made me think of a magician. Her hair was as perfect as Citrine’s, and her makeup was equally subtly done, though her face itself was more plain than anything else.
Three new capes, and I had no idea what any of them did.

“I hope that’s all of them,” I muttered to myself. Rachel was pressed up against me, her fingers brushing against my stomach like I was a dog, clearly trying to distract me.

“Taylor?” Rachel asked.

“Yes?”

“What’s happening?”

I leaned back a little, right into her. I was on her lap of course, but I wasn’t really thinking about that sort of thing. “A huge meeting. Whatever this is, to bring all of these people out here, it’s something big… and I can’t even look in, because I bet Coil would be watching for even a single fly.”

“Oh. So nothing’s happening?”

“Everything’s happening,” I said. “I just can’t see it.”

“And won’t, even if you watch?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“So. Wanna fuck?” Rachel asked, growling a little in my ear.

I shivered, but shook my head. At a time like this? There were other, more important matters. Dinah was still held captive, in a small room. Shivering. I could see her, but there was nothing I could do to save her yet, and I assumed that he’d have counters for it.

“No, not right now. I’m a little too busy, maybe later,” I said, nodding to myself and leaning in a little more to watch.

“Kay,” Rachel said, with a shrug. Slightly tense, but there’d be time some other day.

I kept on watching for almost two hours, until the meeting was done and they filed out.

Something big was coming.

Chapter End Notes

Things are changing. Taylor’s so busy now. One wonders what the cost is for such things.
I was woken up on Wednesday morning by a hand on my shoulder. I blinked, confused and tired, having spent another two days in desperate preparation and nervous anticipation of an attack that hadn’t yet come. “Rachel?”

“No,” the voice said, and I recognized after a second that it was Stefanie. “I hope you don’t mind me stepping in, but Rachel got up and went to the shelter about an hour ago. She wanted you to sleep in.”

I don’t know how I didn’t--

Oh, right, we’d not found time for anything last night, either, which meant we slept in separate sleeping bags, and she must have been really trying to be quiet, to get herself and two dogs up without a sound. I rubbed at my eyes, and then asked, “What is it?”

I wasn’t dressed in much, but I didn’t really feel that modest, and I began rooting around for clothes to change into.

“You should get into your costume. According to Flechette, something big is going down in E88 territory. She wanted to ask you to go and check it out.”


“She… she said it was a big split in the E88, and that you could help with a few things.”

“Why talk to you, and not me,” I said.

“You were sleeping, and it’s just that high of a priority,” Stefanie said. “It’s apparently vital. The whole Protectorate, and the Wards, are out in force… and split in two.”

“In two?” I asked.

“Flechette said that half of them are going to set up somewhat near the camp,” Pelter said. “Can you see them yet?”

“I don’t know,” I said, grouchily, as I began to change right in front of her. Eh, it wasn’t as if she was anyone to feel awkward in front of. “Give me a sec to get all the bugs out. Why are they supposed to sticking around here?”

“It’s insurance against the Butcher spreading out right in the middle of the crisis. I don’t know what the crisis is, she just said that…”

“What?”

“That you and as many people as you trusted should hurry over there just in case it turns into a bloodbath, because Kaiser was dead.”

Well, holy shit.

*****
Rachel, Pelter, and I arrived via dog an hour later, or so. It took time to get through the wreckage, and Rachel for her part had scowled at me for a moment before nodding, clearly not wanting to leave her shelter behind.

But on the way out, my range had extended far enough to see that Battery, Bryce (I still didn’t know what his new cape name was), Kid Win and Velocity were all stationed near one of the ruined buildings, in their own form of camp. I almost wanted to stop to talk to them on the way back, but hopefully they’d still be there when I swung around, because I needed to see this.

Of course, with the range of my bugs, I didn’t first see it with my own eyes. “Oh, oh fuck,” I said, as we raced along a partially repaired road. “Oh fuck me.”

Kaiser was hanging from a lamp post, disemboweled, mouth open and gaping, and something that smelled like shit dripping down from it. Probably was shit, I thought. A message. His corpse was an ugly thing, nothing of the king there, and hanging on the lamp-post along with him, their legs and arms chopped off, were the twins.

There was police tape around the whole area, and I could see Miss Militia, Chevalier, Flechette and Weld all spread out around the area, holding back a terrified crowd of people.

There were no other capes, at least in costume, anywhere within blocks of the place.

Someone had murdered Kaiser and two of his enforcers, and they’d done so in a way that was meant to send a message.

What had happened?!

“What is it?” Pelter asked.

“Kaiser’s dead,” I said.

“Good,” Rachel said, bluntly.

“Maybe not.”

The neighborhoods we entered to get to the street where Kaiser had been hung up were very familiar. They were just a few blocks from where I’d lived with Dad before, and I bet that Kurt and Lacey weren’t all that far either. It was at the edge of the traditional E88 territory, the kinds of areas where there was sympathy, or at least anger that the E88 could use, but not enough for them to stick their tendrils into the area.

Maybe that had changed, I thought.

The houses were still wrecked, and only a few lots had been cleared. It was a complete mess, and more indication of priorities. Places like this weren’t going to be the first to be fixed up. Not the last, I didn’t think. But it was sad, and also nothing I could do anything about. It was hard enough fixing up two buildings without structural problems, and even though it’d been weeks, it was still going to be a work in progress.

Finally, we reached the bodies. Brutus and Judas smelled them first, barking at the scent as we rounded the corner.

This was a strip mall sort of area, or rather the old stores that were too ‘historical’ to be called a strip mall, but in essence were.
Chevalier was patrolling the outside area, carrying around his massive blade and looking carefully about, but I could have told him not to bother. The E88 had retreated out of this area entirely, one way or another. All that was left were huddled, terrified citizens.

"Arachne!" Flechette said. "Good that you’re here." She advanced on the dogs, clearly in a hurry.

"Brutus, kneel," I said, and the dog did, allowing Pelter to step off.

"Judas, kneel," Rachel said, and then tossed herself off, just a second ahead of me, and looked around at the area. Her face was hidden by the mask, but I could imagine the frown on her face as she took it in. I was disgusted, but I doubted she was quite as hard hit.

"I am. So what happened?" I asked.

"Late last night, someone outed the names of all of the E88 online. Their real identities, I mean," Flechette said.

"Oh. That’s bad, right?" I asked.

"Bad, it’s a disaster. And then this morning, there’s this.” It was barely past dawn, and so if this was how the day was starting, I couldn’t imagine that it’d be getting much better.

"Infighting, or something else?" I asked, glancing over at Miss Militia and Weld, who were talking in a quiet voice.

"They’ve gone to ground," Miss Militia said. "That’s my evaluation."

"Maybe, but they can’t afford to, can they? The reports we’ve had…" Weld said.

"We think infighting. It looks like Night or Fog’s work. But we can’t be sure," Flechette admitted, shaking her head. "Either way, I actually called you three here because we need to find where the E88 are. We have their identities, but with the city destroyed, it’s not as simple as calling their jobs and ruining that. Plenty of them are homeless and displaced, and that means less… hooks in them.” Flechette winced a little, her voice getting a bit quieter, as if she were guilty of something. “This isn’t a good thing, though. We’re leaving them without options but to lash out.”

I frowned, and then said, “They were already lashing out. Look at Parian,” I said.

"Right, right, but this will just make it worse," Flechette said.

Maybe she was right, but I wasn’t sure. If they were murdering each other, that was better than them standing united, as long as we could keep them from taking it out on other people. Now was the time to up the pressure, higher and higher, until they fucking cracked.

It was harsh, but they deserved every second of it… but who had done it? My first thought was Coil, and who else could it have been? Butcher would have just attacked and started murdering them, doing something like a complex plot to reveal their identities? It didn’t make sense. But it could be the Undersiders too. If it was Accord, then that had to be what the supervillain was telling Coil, about his plan… which made it Coil anyways, in effect, by letting it happen.

“So, where do I come in?” I asked, glancing back at Pelter. “Also, who else is out?”

“New Wave is pushing them from one side,” Flechette said, sounding doubtful. “Director Piggot has insisted on a vigorous response to eliminate them as a criminal element in our city.”
“As a class of criminal,” I said, with nasty satisfaction.

“You could say that,” Flechette said. She glanced over at Miss Militia and Rachel. “The idea I had, was if you could identify their…”

“Dens? Warrens?” I asked.

“Hideouts,” Flechette finally decided on. “We could mark them for later attack, and if they retreated from them, then we could just keep on pressing them. We don’t want to fight now, but we have an offensive planned this afternoon. If we can hold New Wave back. It’s strange what’s going on with them.”

“What is that?”

“We have reports of Panacea fighting on the front lines, or at least hurrying ahead after gang members, and they haven’t been coordinating with us.”

“And you hoped we’d be comrades in arms for this? Helping you in a non-combat way?”

“Yes. And in exchange, we protect the camp while you three are away,” Flechette explained, glancing over at Weld and Miss Militia. “We don’t need you to fight or do anything other than just provide us information.”

“I think I can do that. But only if we hurry,” I said. “There’s a lot more going on in the camp then just… but.” I bit my lip, glad they couldn’t see the hesitation. A chance to hurt Nazis, to help bring them down, wasn’t something I could pass up. “Rachel, is that alright?”

Rachel shrugged.

“Pelter?”

“I suppose. I…” Pelter shook her head. “I don’t want to sound too eager.”

To her it was rather more personal than it was to me, rather more pressing, I knew. I turned to Flechette and said. “Well, that’s that. We can help you out. So how do you want to do this?”

“You should talk to Miss Militia about it. There’s other information we have as well. On another matter.”

“What matter?”

“Hellh- Bitch,,” Flechette said.

“What about me?” Rachel asked, angrily.

“The charges… and some other matters,” Flechette admitted.

*******

That left me in a bad mood during the whole exercise, inventing a thousand ways that this all might have gone wrong. It wasn’t hard, was the important thing. My panic and worry only increased my range even further, and on dog back I could see large parts of the city without even really getting in trouble.

We kept back, Miss Militia riding along with us, and others fanning out behind us. She didn’t complain about the rough saddles, or about the way the dogs smelled, or anything else I’d expected
from someone who had spent their time in the aftermath of the disaster in luxury and comfort. Someone who hadn’t been camping out for the last few weeks and coping with disaster.

She just dealt with it as I built up a picture of two camps. Night, Fog, and a still-injured Purity were joined by Crusader in a warehouse near the docks, and in fact near ABB territory in general, if the ABB still existed. I didn’t know where they’d all gone, really. Surely there had to be some gang-bangers still left, but maybe they’d been absorbed by the Merchants, who had always cared a lot more about profits than skin color.

And then, further in, at a house in one of the newly-all-white neighborhoods, there were the rest of them. The new cape, Alabaster, Stormtiger, Krieg, and Rune. Victor was surprisingly absent, perhaps out and about.

The men were not evenly divided either. Almost three-fourth of them seemed to be clustered around various houses and street corners towards the Krieg side of things, whereas Purity’s forces were a lot smaller.

Still, all in all, the fact that the E88 was reduced down to two squabbling factions that totaled ten capes was a good start. And they didn’t seem to notice the bugs I sent to carefully look, in part because they weren’t expecting it from ten blocks out. Plus, I was using a different sort of trick this time.

One that took way too long, but it was pretty simple. I sent only a few flies, and then slowly scouted out the area. I couldn’t see everything at once through that method, but I didn’t need an exact position on everyone, because it wasn’t as if we were going to raid them right then and there. So I cased the joint, and before I knew it we were riding back to a street corner to part ways.

A few hours had been used up, but I knew that if there was a fight with the Teeth, it’d have gotten a lot more attention. Miss Militia had a word or three for me, and we climbed off the dogs. I was sore from the trip, but I wanted to hear what she had to say.

Away from Rachel. It concerned her, but I needed to protect her as best I could. She might say something that could make things worse, I knew that much. I trusted her, just… not necessarily with social things. So I moved away from Rachel and Pelter, who continued to talk about the state of the city. I’d seen enough to know that repairs had only really begun in the parts of the city that were under Protectorate control.

No matter what lies the E88 spouted about caring for the white race, they’d let down everyone of all races within their territory. Only a little rebuilding had happened, and I knew that once the E88 was out of the way, things would at least speed up a bit. I knew that the docks, for instance, were almost repaired at places. And were far more active now, what with the repair work going on on the one hand, and the fact that driving supplies in for stores was a lot harder: which meant that it made economic sense to ship it in.

I almost wanted to stop and see the boardwalk and docks, because I bet they were in better condition than anything I’d seen.

“So, lay it on me,” I said.

“The various agencies have agreed not to press charges for manslaughter, assault and battery, aggravated assault, theft. Some of them,” Miss Militia said, her voice as if she were reading a report. “Are almost or already beyond the statute of limitations, but many of them aren’t. And we cannot know for sure whether a future elected prosecutor might change their minds.” Miss Militia shook her head. “But we’ve been talking with the PRT of the areas, and they’ve managed to convince them not
“Well, good,” I said. “Bitch is a hero now, even if she’s not a part of the Wards. But she wouldn’t be a good fit, would she?”

“She could be. We have dealt with difficult cases before,” Miss Militia admitted. “And you have helped us out quite a bit. But our analysts suspect that any possibility of doing so is long past.” She shook her head. “As long as you remain a hero team, then I can’t gainsay what you are doing. Though I do fear that you will go too far.”

“Too brutal?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Can’t be worse than what Shadow Stalker did,” I said.

Miss Militia frowned slightly. I could see it in her eyes, even though her mouth was closed. The frown was that visible, that obvious. “What did she do that you’re referring to?”

“Second degree murder, or perhaps a far more serious type of manslaughter. Vigilantism. And activities as a civilian. But I don’t want to talk about that shit. After she became a Ward.” I glared at her for a moment, fierce and heroic in my fury at this injustice.

“Yet you ask us to forgive Rachel her trespasses,” Miss Militia said mildly. Politely, but firmly. “Director Piggot was reluctant to do so, but I pointed out that we’ve…”

“Done worse? Rachel didn’t mean to--”

“There are people who lost functionality in their hands from where her dogs bit them. There are people in therapy even now.” Miss Militia shook her head. “She was reckless. I’m glad that she’s now fighting to help uphold law and order, but we cannot stop people from filing civil suits. Several have expressed interest in doing so.”

“Suits? For what?”

“Damages physical, emotional, and financial,” Miss Militia said. “If she were a Ward, our legal department would handle it, and I do not believe that suit has been called up yet, but it will be coming eventually.”

“It’s all bullshit,” I said, firmly. “Rachel stole to eat, to live.”

“This is true… mostly,” Miss Militia said. “We chased after her, and she had to constantly move. She was a topic of interest among analysts. But the suits are not bullshit, and I suspect that your best bet would be to settle for some of them.”

“Settle? For what? A person got his feelings--”

“A man was bitten in the leg and partially mauled. He limps to this day, and has lost some sensation in that leg. He planned on suing for both physical and emotional damage, as well as financial damage, as the destruction of the smash and grab and the medical costs led to him having to sell his gas station.” Miss Militia said it all so cleanly, as if she were reading from a report. I winced: not at the thought of a little mauling, or at least if it were a… but then, wasn’t that the same justification that Sophia used?

I’d thought that they were something alike, and then concluded they were nothing alike: and I still
stood by that. But if I couldn’t forgive Sophia, then why should I expect some of the people Rachel had hurt to forgive her.

But then what was I supposed to do, I thought, feeling sick. The lawsuits hadn’t been filed yet, but I assumed it’d be tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars demanded: maybe even each. It’d be this huge weight and I didn’t even know what would happen if we couldn’t pay. Some sort of repayment plan?

I bit my lip, and then bristled. “This is your plot, isn’t it? You guys are trying to just fucking force us to join the Wards, so you can ‘protect’ us from shit that you started on your own. After we’ve put ourselves out there every day, against the Merchants, the Teeth, and now the E88!”

“No. We did nothing of the sort. We didn’t have to tell you about the upcoming lawsuits, and there are indications of about three or four, but we felt that it would be a good sign of trust. We believe despite Rachel’s past actions that you are now doing work that complements the mission of the Protectorate.”

Again, so formal. It pissed me off: it reminded me of Principle Blackwell, evenhandedly giving out suspensions, as if she were Solomon. I wanted to rage, I wanted to punch someone or hurt something, but instead I nodded, my teeth bared. “Sure, great.”

I couldn’t see whether Miss Militia’s were bared for her part, but--

Bared? Fuck. No. If they were, it was because she was smiling, that’s all. I didn’t need to be hostile and Rachel-like right now. “Listen, thanks for the heads up. We’ve helped you out, you’ve helped us out. And thanks for the camp watching. But we aren’t going to participate any further in this anti-E88 activity unless we have a reason to. You can withdraw your people in a few hours, once we’re settled back in and ready for the Teeth attack.”

“We were thinking it could be a partnership,” Miss Militia said.

“Well, that’s clearly not going to work out. We have our own problems to deal with, including economically. You know how much money we fucking spend, keeping the camp running?” I asked. “Too much. We’re not making a profit here, on saving people, and we shouldn’t. It’s disgusting to think that people do particularly, beyond what it takes for them to live and do what they need to do. But that means that lawsuits like this could lead to the collapse of the camp. So thanks for the information, but I have no idea what the fuck to do with it.”

“I’m sorry that it comes as such a shock,” Miss Militia said.

I shook my head. “But there, you have the E88 pinned. Don’t let them get away. We’ll take care of things on our end.”

******

“What was that?” Pelter asked.

“Nothing,” I said, not caring that neither of them believed me. They didn’t have to believe me. I was the one who’d have to find some solution to this: probably need to talk to Cassie and Pelter, and maybe Charlotte. Cassie for online access, Pelter and Amp for leadership, but also because Stefanie’s parent worked with non-profits. Perhaps there was a way to hide the money, or separate it from what we had together?

Personal poverty was fine, as long as it didn’t fuck with our mission. I think. Maybe. I wasn’t completely sure, but I could work with it. We rode along towards the camp in silence, and I was glad
when we were close enough to see that no attack was in progress. “Rachel,” I said, already having
resolved not to talk to her about it until I had to. Sometimes it was best not to press an issue if it could
lead to a bad confrontation. It was just common sense. “Can we swing around to talk to the
Protectorate people for a moment.”

“Sure, Taylor,” Rachel said. She sounded tense, and I knew that she wanted to know what had
happened. But how was I going to ask her about all of the things she’d done? I’d already found out
that she wasn’t a murderer, but... but. But I didn’t know what that was supposed to actually mean.
Was it hypocritical that I still was thinking of excuses in my head for her, that I still loved her?
Would I have been her enemy in some other circumstances, not understanding what she was doing
and why she was doing it at all?

Maybe. I bit my lip beneath the mask as we veered off.

They were huddled in a half-ruined building, the floor creaking even when it was just us, and not the
dogs, walking along towards where they were standing.

Velocity raised a hand in greeting, and Kid Win perked up. “What’s happening?” Kid Win asked.
He was dressed differently. His armor was a little sleeker, and while he had his hoverboard off to the
side, he also had what looked like a long, thin, science-fiction type of gun. He seemed tenser, his
eyes harder beneath the visor. Clearly he’d had a rough time of it, but so had I. So had everyone.

Bryce, on the other hand, was crossing his arms as Sierra tried to talk to him. He was in a white
bodysuit, with a short, flowing cape that looked odd on him. His bare hands were splayed out, and
the parts of his skin I could see seemed to phase in and out of reality just a little bit with every
second. As if he was struggling to contain himself.

Compared to that, Battery was neither friendly nor nervous. She just leaned up against the wall, not
moving at all, staring at the far wall and waiting. That’s the feeling I got, that she was waiting for
something to happen, conserving herself for some later date, as if someone was going to come
busting through that far wall.


Sierra said, out loud, “Phantom.”

“Yes, check up with Phantom and everyone else.”

“Oh, good,” Kid Win said. He let out a breath. “This place makes me nervous.”

“Don’t want to fight?” Bryce asked, a little snottily.

“Well, Phantom,” I said, and then stopped myself. It was true that I still didn’t like Bryce, and I still
wanted to be as far away from him as I could be, but Sierra was here, and that was enough that I
didn’t want to offend anyone. “I hope you’re settling in well with your teammates.”

“He is,” Velocity said, in plain defiance of the evidence of how poorly Kid Win and Phantom were
getting on. “It is nice that you were concerned, and we’re glad to have you here, but--”

“Nobody is coming,” I said. “If the Butcher was on the way, I’d start getting blind spots. Her
strategy worked before, she’s going to do it again.”

“What strategy?” Battery asked.

“She has a cape called Animos that can cancel out powers. It tells me where she is in a rough way,
but then so does leaving it up, and leaving it up allows me to attack her and her allies.”

“Oh?” Kid Win asked.

“Yeah. She’s tough and she has a strong team of capes,” I said. “I don’t expect holding her off will be easy, but… if Phantom really is doing well?”

“He’s learning.” Sierra said, finally breaking her silence. I could hear Rachel snort behind my back, but I didn’t turn to look at her.

“Good. As always, feel free to stop by our camp on your patrols. We have food and drink for anyone who shows up,” I said.

As if I were a tour guide. I really was rattled, and I’d planned on saying a lot more to them, and… oh, one more thing.

I turned back. “Oh! And we have a tinker now, Artificer. So if you want to show up sometime Kid Win to talk shop, I’m sure he’d like that.”

“Huh,” Kid Win said, as I left on that hopefully high note.

*****

Cassie looked almost startled when I flopped in front of her. She was staring at the fire as if it was doing something to her, and she was nervous, even though she had to have heard me approaching. People muttered as I moved, a whispering train and honor guard that my bugs towards me was mostly complimentary. I’d been spending a lot more time talking to people. I could see that the people around her, George, Amal, Teddy Harrison, were people who were important when it came down to the current focus, which was getting as many apartments ready for people to get into as possible.

The fewer people in the line of fire except those ready to stand and fight the better. Not that being in the apartments would save them if Butcher won, but it would at least force her to work for it, instead of just scything through the camp and killing people by the score.

“Hey,” I said, waving at Amal especially. One of the people who had come with Parian, actually. He had experience with repair work, and plumbing.

Everyone backed up a little bit, except Amal, who nodded. “Hey. What’s happening with the E88?”

Of course he was wondering. I’d be wondering if I were in his place. “They’ve split into warring factions. The Protectorate is going to try to destroy them.”

“When they’re gone, can some of us leave?” Amal asked, glancing over at George.

I knew there’d been talk like that, and I knew just as well that there was nothing I could do to stop it. Nothing I should do: the vague possessiveness that I got when I thought of them shouldn’t be a guide for anything. Even if it did feel like they were MY people just like it was MY team.

“... yes, of course,” I said. “Of course you can. Nobody’s forced to be here. We’re doing everything we can, but eventually this is going to have to split apart.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Right now I’m trying to live it one day at a time.”

They all nodded except for Cassie, seeming to buy what I was saying. And it was true that I was just trying to make it past tomorrow at this point: but sometime I’d have to do more than that. Sometime
I’d have to think about what the future would be, and how we were going to get Rachel out of the mess the lawsuits would make.

We had to think about what the team meant, and how it would work. Which would be even harder considering how different we all were, and the fact that we didn’t really have a system, or even a name. We just were the team, and that was probably not a good thing in one sense.

In the sense that Cassie no doubt understood. She was coming back and forth from areas that actually had internet. Even if she was spending so much time with Rachel and the camp that it seemed like she barely had a life outside of her mission, she did: enough of a life that she had something that I didn’t.

A network.

“So, Arachne, were you just coming here to talk?” Cassie asked.

“No. Yes. I need to talk to you, Cassie. Very briefly. It’s not a major problem, but it’s something that needs to be addressed.” This was a lie, and I was sweating already as Cassie nodded and we stepped away from the others.

“What is it, Arachne?”

“You can call me Taylor. How would you say things are going in the camp? And outside of it, online?”

“You’re attracting a lot of support and attention,” Cassie said. ”Most of it is positive, though there’s this group of trolls, I can’t remember her name right now, but it’s been bad, but it doesn’t matter. That’s just the internet. The camp is interesting, and I’m seeing a few things that kinda concern me.”

“Like what?” I asked Cassie.

“Well, not concern, but Amp and Pelter… they get along alright, yes, but they do seem to have different priorities. But Charlotte seems to be getting her way most of the time.”

I bit my lip, glad she couldn’t see my face. “Oh? Is Rachel infecting you with her suspicions?”

“Rachel gets along with everyone but Amp,” Cassie said. “Were you the one that threw her and Greg together? It doesn’t make sense that they do alright, but I guess…”

“They’re both a little socially awkward,” I said, fondly. “But there’s differences. I’ve been thinking about talking to Charlotte and her group, but there’s not much I can do about the priorities. She cares about working for me and making sure that things work out.”

“I… guess so,” Cassie said. “But what was the real reason you called me here? It can’t just be that, though I think you’re still doing a good job. We’re raising a lot of money, and that’s partially thanks to Pelter. You should talk to her more about… well, just funding in general. Her parents would be perfect if you wanted to do something more after the camp.”

“Yeah… that’s something. So, is Rachel doing well?”

“She seems worried,” Cassie said.

I’d noticed that too, but it was just sulking. I knew that it’d fade over time if I just focused on what’d be best for both of us. I had to see the bigger picture, the picture of the team I was sorta-kind leading. “Maybe, but… there’s more to worry about. There are lawsuits coming. Civil lawsuits over
some of what she did on the run,” I said. “I need to figure out what to do with that. Can you ask
some important figures if they know anything about lawyers or asset protection or… just how much
we might have to pay if we settle it?”

“Oh,” Cassie said. “I might know about some of those. I’d need to check, but how many are there?”

“I don’t know. But we need to start brainstorming what to do to undo the damage Rachel could…” I
bit my lip, realizing that that came out wrong. “To deal with the problem that Rachel’s past actions
might have caused. It’s not her fault, she was trying to survive and get by, but people were really
hurt.”

“Are you okay, Taylor?” Cassie asked, leaning forward.

“I’m fine,” I insisted. “It’s fine. We’re fine. But right now, you’re right. Talking to Pelter, talking to
Amp, talking to people you know… we need to get this contained without disturbing Rachel on this.
She’s… I mean.” I waved him hands. “We should be doing other things, but instead we’re so busy
getting ready. But it’s going to pay off, and I know that she knows this.”

“Pay off how?” Cassie asked.

“She cares about this camp, and about the teammates. With the possible exception of Amp. There are
puppies on the way, and she’s agreed to start interviewing people for getting dogs, hasn’t she?”

“Well, yes. But there’s always going to be something in the way,” Cassie said.

“There won’t,” I said. “Just let me handle my own affairs. But thanks for the concern. I do appreciate
the spirit it was expressed.” I tried to be diplomatic, but I was too rough around the edges. Another
thing I needed to work on… or at least needed to learn to compensate for. “I’m going to be reading
with Rachel tonight,” I said. “We can relax then.”

“She talks to me now,” Cassie said. “A lot more than she used to. I’m sure you hear some of it,
though she’s… aware?” Cassie shrugged.

“Aware of what?” I asked.

“Of the presence of bugs. But, you know I want what’s best for both of you—”

“And I want and have always wanted what’s best for Rachel. Ask around online, and get back to me
as soon as you have news either way.”

I gave it like a command, because I was sorta in charge, so why wouldn’t I?

“I can do that,” Cassie said.

******

The next morning, I was in a better mood. Rachel and I had read well, and while there hadn’t been
time to do anything before I had to be called away to help Charlotte talk to a feuding couple, who
just needed to be talked down… I felt as if there would be soon.

We were waiting for the hammer blow of Butcher’s attack, and it wasn’t coming.

Instead, Citrine and two other Accord followers showed up at the edge of my bug-assisted vision,
holding what seemed to be a small white flag.

A truce?
The moment I saw that, I raced off through the camp to gather people. If this was a trap--two women and one man were showing up, one of the men a new Ambassador, and I knew that Accord always found good talent--then I’d want to have as many people on hand as possible.

We presented a united, if harried and hurried, front. Rachel and myself standing there, her arms crossed in hostility, with Amp and Pelter behind, and Parian’s confusion and sleepiness hidden behind her mask. And Greg… well, Greg was still in his workshop. He’d apparently had a breakthrough, and, “Can it wait just five more minutes?!”

I’d decided that we could do without him, temporarily. If it came down to a fight, there was little he could do at this point, after all.

Approaching us were three people I’d seen before with bugs. There was the woman in the plain mask who I hadn’t known, who was slightly pudgy. There was Citrine, looking as perfect as ever. And then there was the strange man in the cape and mask. Two unknown powers, and one I barely understood. Great.

“I told you that they would anticipate our arrival,” the one man said, his voice cold and tinged with a faint accent of some kind or another.

“Were we discussing it?” Citrine asked. “I remember that you were merely talking to the air,” Citrine said, and then she smiled and approached. “Greetings, Arachne, Bitch, and all other capes here. I come as an emissary of Accord, for I wish to discuss something with you.”

“What?” I asked, aware that I should have waited. I could feel Charlotte opening her mouth behind me, no doubt having planned to politely introduce herself.

“Is everyone here able to speak of the matter?” Citrine looked around. “Or should we talk in private?”

I sighed. “Please tell me what you mean.”

“We know that you have stumbled across items of worth and value,” Citrine said. “Gained from the Merchants.”

I tensed. The vials?! “Oh? You know something about them?”

“They were ours, before we lost them. We would prefer to have them back, and if not, we’d like to discuss the possibility of deals based on our mutual interests.”

“What are our mutual interests?” I asked, since nobody else seemed to be speaking up. “Also, who are the two capes with you?”

“I am Codex,” the plump woman said.

“And I am Masque,” the only man said.

“Ah, very well. Are either of you Masters?” I asked. “Do you have any talents that you are using right now?”

“At the moment, no,” Masque said. “I can promise this.”

I took a breath, crossing my own arms along with Rachel, whose mask no doubt hid bared teeth. “Okay, so go on: interests. Mutual.”
“We both have reason to distrust the E88. Just last night, Purity went on a rampage in response to being driven out of her territory. Five people are dead, and it is just the beginning. The E88 is foundering, but in the aftermath, we need to prevent,” Citrine argued, “the rise of the Butcher.”

“Oh?”

“It’s basic geopolitics reduced down to the scale of a city. You are a neutral but heroic party, an entire camp of refugees, occupying a key position,” Citrine said. “You’re a collection of Parahuman strength impressive enough that Accord thinks you could be part of a long-term balance. But if the E88 collapse and the Butcher takes over those areas as well, you might be surrounded.”

“Words,” Rachel spat.

“Words make the world go round, and our calculation is that we both need each other. If you want to use the vials well, we can counsel you on how to look for people, and what to expect from each vial. If you want economic support against all possible future costs, we can discuss a trade, vial for support. There are many ways we can achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.”

She sounded like she was some corporate executive, and maybe she had been. “These vials… I don’t suppose I can learn where you got them? Does Accord use them himself?”

I glanced at the two new capes that I’d never seen before. That might be indicative of something. Maybe they were vial capes too. But then, why were they there.

“You can discuss that after we come to an arrangement,” Citrine said.

“And why were they here? That’s just as important, and makes just as little sense,” I said. “I think we can discuss things, but not if… yes, Amp?”

“I have a thought,” Amp said.

“Yes?” I asked. Pelter was glancing at her.

“It should be Accord. If we’re negotiating, it should be person to person. Right?”

“That’s a point,” Pelter admitted, “But would he approve? We have Wards coming here at all hours.”

“Just call a truce,” I said. “If Accord would be willing to meet to hash out the details more… later, however. We don’t have time right now, but if he’d like to talk sometime within the next few days, the Teeth are our mutual enemies.” I shrugged. “But right now’s not the time to make any decisions.”

Plus, if Greg’s breakthroughs came through, we might be in a better position to trade with him… or at least to figure out what his plans were. I suspected that he was using this meeting to find out more about us, as part of a scheme: but two could play at that game.

“Very well, we will report this to Accord,” Citrine said. “This demand.”

“I have another demand,” I said. “I promise not to spread it around to PHO, but I’d like to know what the powers of the two members you brought here are. As part of a safety policy. Call it a tax for getting here and leaving with more than a boot.”

“Codex is a Blaster, whose attacks do damage. Masque can create realistic illusions,” Citrine said. “Is that enough?”

No, no it wasn’t, but after a moment I nodded. “Actually, if you want to keep in contact, there is a
way. But I think that’ll be more significant soon.”

“Something the Tinker is making?” Citrine guessed.

I shrugged. “Either way, do you have anything else to say?”

I’d learned a lot, and I wondered what Purity was even doing. The E88 were being squeezed down, and I hoped they’d be gone soon… which would leave Accord, Coil, and the Butcher as (beneath the lie of the Undersiders) the only major villain factions in town.

Talking about it as if it were global politics sounded stupid, but it was true that the situation was changing rapidly.

For the moment things were going decently… but what was the Butcher doing? What was she planning?

They left us with more questions than not, but what could I do either way to deal with that?

I just had to figure out what to do next. Watch and wait, trapped by the need to protect the camp. But there were worse traps, I thought to myself as they left the range.

I had too much work to do to worry.

Chapter End Notes

Ahh, politics and street level conflict. Is there anything more beneficial to maintaining a healthy romantic relationship?
I found Greg the next morning, slumped over his desk. If he had gone to bed, I hadn’t been awake to notice it, and I’d stayed awake a lot that night, wondering how or whether to broach the subject, questioning what to do with Rachel in general. Wondering, in all honesty, about what I was even supposed to do next. After all, I was in a ‘good’ position and yet I felt no safer or more secure than I had before I’d given Greg powers.

There were so many people here, and I couldn’t help all of them. It was a lot, listening to them, knowing what they wanted, knowing they relied on me. I had more on my plate than I’d ever had before, and so I kept on considering whether it made sense to confront her. There was enough to do to fill a week of days of hard work, and Greg certainly seemed to be adding to his own burden with his tech work.

Still, he seemed happy, and I couldn’t interpret his all night binge of creation as anything but the same sort of spirit that had led him to stay up all night playing a (sometimes dumb) video game. I couldn’t really blame him for it, or at least I decided I didn’t want to, and he was almost sorta cute, in a childish way, drooling on the work-bench surrounded by what looked like phones, radios, speakers… and notably a huge backpack battery that was attached by a nozzle to what looked like a long, thin tube. Which ended in… was that a shower-head? It looked a lot like a shower head, and on one end of the silver tube there were several buttons. He also had begun to use what looked like a bunch of scrap metal to try to make a more traditional looking pistol.

It was ugly and lumpy, and only halfway complete, and besides that wasn’t plugged in, but when I carefully picked it up, I could see surprisingly delicate circuitry beneath the junk.

I whistled, loudly enough that he snorted, his dreams breaking, and yawned. He really could use a shower, I thought, stepping back as he sprung up, briefly looking at me in panic before settling down. “Oh, Taylor, I, uh… I’ll get back to work in a--”

“Hey, calm down Greg. You were working all night. Can you tell me how it’s going?”

“Well, I have three gun plans, and I need to figure out armor or the build will be unbalanced, and I also had an idea for a set of rocket boots, but I don’t know if the stabilization…” Greg talked very, very fast, and I had to hold up a hand.

“Okay, as far as the rocket boots go, save that for a secondary thing after you get everything done. That’s an order,” I said, with a nod. “Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Greg said, subsiding a little as I looked over the mess of things.

“So, did you get the speakers done?”

“Mostly, uh. I still have a few to do, but I got distracted cause it’s really boring once you figure it all out. It’s like level grinding. You have to do it, but it’s lame so you put it off. I promise I’ll get to it!”

“Don’t worry,” I said. I’d seen Greg miss assignments before because he got distracted, but he’d been doing actual work this time, so I wasn’t going to push him. He looked up at me sleepily, with the same odd gleaming look he always had. Like he believed in me, though I didn’t know what that even involved half of the time. “Okay, so work on that when you are feeling a little more up to it.
“Well, this one is kinda like a laser flamethrower sprinkler?” Greg said, pointing to the shower-head looking one. “It runs off the power of the battery, and it sprays molten plasmic-energy on a target from up to… I’m not sure. I haven’t tested it yet. But it should go at least twenty feet or so. It spreads out the farther it gets, so it’s sorta like a firehose shotgun? Best for close up. The other one? Uh…” Greg picked it up and prodded at it, his brow knitted as if he was trying to remember things after some epic bender.

“Looks like a pistol,” I said. “What does it do?”

“I’ve been thinking. Solid shot is so inefficient. I figured that if I could use something like… a capsule, or set of capsules that are then shot out as the container for the energy so it doesn’t spread out.” Greg frowned, deep into techno-babble that he was managing not to say to me thus far. If he had started on actual details, he would have already lost me, but because he was talking to me like that, however annoying, I could follow.

What I followed, as he talked, occasionally mentioning ‘phases’ or ‘quantum displacement’ was that the shell of the shots on this pistol were basically meant to serve the same purpose as a paint-ball, almost. You could shoot someone from just as far away as any pistol, with practice, though the pellet didn’t drop at all over distances… in theory at least.

Where I lost him, staring at him for a full minute, was when he was starting to try to talk about how much damage it would do.

“Okay, sum it up for me here, Greg. Can it damage the Butcher?”

“Uh, probably not. But she’s going to have a bunch of subordinates, and once I figure out how to make it, I could possible create a larger rifle version, though the power use will be so hard I’ll have to reroute the main-drive.”

“The… what?”

“The main motor that interacts with the quantum information storage that gives instructions to the machine and the circuitry in the right order for it all to work,” Greg said. “I explained this already, Taylor!” He waved his arms. “Are you listening to me?”

“I am,” I said, firmly, and just as quickly as he’d had his outburst, he seemed to wilt a little bit, clearly not meaning to yell. “But that doesn’t mean I always understand what you’re saying. I don’t have your Tinker powers, you shouldn’t assume that everything will always make sense. Okay, about the boots.”

He was looking at me like a kicked puppy, and so I needed to throw him a bone to encourage him. “You need to finish the armor first in general, and the weapons… and the speakers before any of that, but I talked to Kid Win the other day. He has a hover-board. Perhaps you could talk shop with him and figure out how he balances it. It can’t just be skill,” I said. “There has to be some sort of mechanism he’s using to keep it from tipping over, right?”

“Yeah… yeah,” Greg said, enthusiasm restored. I needed a target for him, something he could do. I was about to leave, having properly inspired him in a few words and now having the entire rest of the camp to work with, but I saw, through my bugs, Rachel approaching.

She was holding a game system and some games. I stretched out slightly, uselessly dusting off my shirt as if she were going to comment on how I looked. I still wasn’t up for telling her until I knew
The page is a continuation of the story where the protagonist Greg is interacting with Rachel. Greg is trying to understand the emotional state of Rachel as she is talking about a game they played. The conversation is light-hearted, but Greg is also aware of the potential danger Rachel is in. The interaction is set in a camp environment where Greg is trying to protect moments of peace.

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**Hey, Greg, got your games.**

**Oh, right! Did you like ‘em?**

**They were alright,** Rachel said. **“Kinda hard.”** Rachel frowned a little. **“Plot was dumb.”**

**What about it?”** Greg asked.

**“Just… stuff,”** Rachel said with a shrug.

**“Do you mean like the romance, or the alien plot to overthrow the Five Guardians of Earth? Or…?”**

Greg began, trailing off a little, looking almost personally hurt by the idea that a game he liked could be less than amazing.

**“The romance kinda sucked,”** Rachel said, with such a big shrug that I knew she hadn’t paid it much attention. **“But… eh.”** Rachel wasn’t very articulate, but she was very firm.

I almost wanted to stop and start talking about this random game, but I had other things to do. **“Well, are you at least glad you played it? I’m going to have to get going, Rachel.”** I squeezed her hand again. **“I need to look into a few things, and I need to talk to Parian about her building.”**

**“Oh,”** Rachel said.

**“It shouldn’t take too long, we can eat lunch together,”** I insisted. **“Don’t worry. There’s some meat, and I’ve heard that this one Greek place donated some near-expiration pita-bread, so we could even have gyros.”**

Rachel nodded, seeming a little mollified by that. Gyros and talking about the danger she was in? No. Now was maybe not the time. I didn’t want to ruin the moment. She looked to be in a good mood, and I liked that. It was what I was trying to protect, in the camp: these moments of peace, these moments that were okay.

They made all the effort worth it.

*******

It was something of a comedy of errors, watching Parian and Flechette from afar. Flechette, who stopped in right about when I was heading for Parian’s building and walked around the camp, helping out in small ways, frowning and smiling as fitted, but clearly not really there, trying to figure out what to say and how to say it.

Flechette was in dire need of help, but honestly I didn’t think I really was any sort of expert on romance. She was nervous, and in fact smelled of it. The more I used my bugs, the more things I picked out, and many of them were the kinds of things I could have stood to not know.

For instance, I knew how frequent, or infrequent, people washing their hands after using the
restroom was. I knew that within the nerves and the sweat, there was just a tinge of displaced desire (or more bluntly, arousal) there. If I was trying to be poetical, I’d call it longing, but perhaps she was merely thinking of what might happen if this time she did something right and Parian agreed and perhaps gave her a kiss.

I was starting to be able to tell when people were sick by how they smelled, for bugs really did have a decent suite of senses, even if they had no context to interpret any of it in a human way. Bugs didn’t go around knowing about sexual desire, but they could smell it, or at least some bugs could.

Another thing you started to learn when you’d had insects at your command as long as I had was, first, a lack of squeamishness. I had flies clinging onto Flechette’s knee, the better to track her steps. To track, for instance, a slight limp that must have come from the ongoing fights against the E88, which all reports mentioned was still raging.

I’d put my bugs basically anywhere. But… what also came with time was discretion. Sometimes it was best to pull the bugs back and not see and know all, if what was being seen and known was, for instance, two teenagers, one of them a new refugee to the camp, fucking in a half-fixed-up apartment that we were about to rent to a family.

It was a dumb move, and one that maybe their parents had to hear about, but I didn’t keep my bugs around and watch. That’d just be weird.

More than that, I could have hurt people. I knew secrets that could ruin lives, I knew the way people lived, and they were my people, people whose lives were fragile against my knowledge, and the power it represented. I felt the weight of their lives, I knew their sorrows. I watched everything, or chose not to.

So there was Flechette, and then there was Parian.

Where Flechette couldn’t hide how obsessed she was, Parian talked a much better game.

“Okay, so, I can make some clothes if that’s what you want.”

“Charlotte suggested it,” I mentioned to Parian, as we walked around yet another apartment that we were going to open up to deal with the flood of refugees. “I think it’s a good idea? At least as a symbol? Even just a few shirts would help, since they’ve had to run without anything at all.” Indeed, the people fleeing the Teeth often didn’t even have the clothes on their backs. The process was only accelerating over time, because the Teeth didn’t seem at all concerned with having a territory to govern.

Even the E88 were, though in their case that apparently meant small-scale ethnic cleansing. The Undersiders were apparently holding territory, Coil was holding territory, Accord was holding territory… and all of them acted as if they intended to be in the game for a long, long time.

The Teeth, on the other hand? There were stories of random executions, or children being taken away from their parents for… what reason? I could think of reasons, but I wasn’t sure if they were the right ones. People babbled the stories about how powerful the Teeth were, and how dangerous. People in the camp were listening to the stories, and there was nothing I could do about that.

“Ah. Well it’s not a bad idea,” Parian admitted.

“It’d really help. Artificer is currently putting down the speakers. So that part is ready, and Charlotte’s picked her group of… minions?” I shrugged, not sure what to call them. “We need to keep in contact with the Protectorate, because in case of a fight, what we’re hoping for is mostly
“You say that, but that’s not what Pelter’s acting like,” Parian said. “She came by this morning, and she had some ideas. For throwing my dolls around to move them, or our powers working together…”

“Huh,” I said. “That is a thought. So she thinks we can beat the Butcher, somehow?” That’s what mattered: once Butcher was gone we’d all be safe, Rachel, myself, and everyone in the camp, to make a life together.

“I’m… not sure.” Parian just shook her head. “But she at least doesn’t think it’s hopeless.”

“I guess it might not be. Speaking of hopeless,” I said, trying to change the subject, “Should I be telling Flechette that it’s hopeless and that she should just not show up any more? I could tell her that.” I shrugged, trying to sound understanding. I wasn’t someone to give relationship guru advice, even if I’d lucked into something good.

“No, no. But also don’t talk to her about… I don’t want to just spill out what I want and see her arrive with a checklist,” Parian said. “But I…” Parian shook her head and took off her mask. “Can we talk?”

“Of course.”

“I like being in control. Socially? Romantically? I liked the feeling of being in charge of all of those people, but I wasn’t ready to help them. I… don’t want to be subordinate or owe anything to someone I’m going to be romantically involved in. Listening to the rest of this… weird pack you have going on here, that’s fine. Even if it does feel odd to be older than everyone else here.” Parian bit her lip. She was shorter than me, and the dolls could often make you forget other things.

“Oh?”

“It doesn’t feel the same. Her being in the Wards is sorta okay, because it’s separate from that, but authority and control, I…” Parian looked troubled. “I don’t know. I want to be in charge, I want to have the power in the relationship, but that’s not fair, is it? That’s not supposed to be what a relationship is, one person having making all the decisions, right?” Parian didn’t look like she knew, but finally she nodded, before I even got a chance to answer. “So I want something I can’t possibly ask of her, because she’s her own person with her own life. But she wants something, she assumes something, that I can’t possibly say yes to because I want to be the one in the kind of position she’s trying to usurp, or…”

She could talk remarkably fast when it came down to it.

“I don’t think that she wants that,” I said. “I think that if you talked to her, she’d be more willing to bow and bend than you think. And maybe that’s not okay. I don’t know?” I shrugged a little, not sure what to think. “But maybe if you just… but at the same time, you shouldn’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“You know, you’re not great at advice,” Parian said.

“I know I’m not,” I admitted, crossing my arms, trying not to bare my teeth. “I’m trying, though. I should go soon, there’s a little more for me to do, but… just think about what you want and then try getting it.”

“Try getting it? Is it that easy?” Parian asked.
“It can be. I don’t know,” I said, with a shrug. “But Flechette…”

“Yes, I get it. She really wants… but that strength of want, isn’t that usually also strength?” Parian shook her head. “Now I’m not making sense.”

Actually, I sort of got it. She’d had bad experiences with those with power over her, and wasn’t desire a sort of power, wasn’t passion something that could drive you? Anyone who was so passionate, how could you be sure they didn’t want to possess you, to take what you are and bottle it and control it because of how much they wanted it.

Or at least, I could see how she’d think that, and had Flechette ever done anything to make me completely sure that that wasn’t what she’d do?

Not… necessarily. I didn’t know either way, and it was entirely her right to decide not to risk it.

So I left her to it.

*****

I ate almost-stale pita bread and meat with Rachel. Sort of roll up sandwiches. Brutus tried to beg, but Rachel was far more resolute than me, and we were relaxing. It felt like we were just about in the right mood, and I was just starting to think about all the things that one could do with an afternoon, cuddled into her arms, when Pelter began to rush towards the tent.

She’d been kneeling near a wall, though I hadn’t taken a good look at what she’d been looking at.

“What is it, Taylor?” Rachel asked, noticing the shift in my mood.

“Pelter’s coming here. She must have a good reason. I should go out and see what she wants.”

Rachel made a little noise, but when I turned to look at her, she moved her hands. I needed to maybe get a little more on. Such as a bra. And a shirt. And maybe shoes.

We’d been getting closer as we ate, first cuddling and then…

Brutus was barking, annoyed at being ignored and sensing the tension, but I tried to focus on getting ready. Still, I was groaning and moving slowly, wanting to let the moments linger. “I’ll be right back, Rachel, after this is all sorted out.”

I stepped out of the tent a moment later just as Pelter approached.

“You know,” I said. “Since I hear everything, you could have just told me to come, rather than panicking me.”

“Oh, sorry,” Pelter said. “But you have to see this. Someone left a note for us. On a far wall of one of the apartments.”

“A note? Like how?”

“A written note, and we didn’t even notice them showing up,” Pelter said.

I frowned, that was very, very suspicious. Some sort of parahuman?

I spread my bugs out over the room that she’d been talking about, and I indeed found the note, though reading it was a little beyond me. It was hard for the bugs to really get a good view of these things, and so it wasn’t until we’d both hurried into the apartment that I could see it.
‘Ar, this is Ls. If you place a note here within an hour of seeing this or so, I can reply. Set up times for a drop and we can communicate secretly. This is very important. First fact: Ac+Co=Vial. Please continue to refrain from acting.’

“Oh,” I said, quietly. “Shit.” I glanced over at Pelter. “Hey, can you go tell Rachel that I might not be able to come back immediately? Uh, what would her going to see me do? Would I get too distracted?”

“What do you mean?” Pelter asked.

“Remember when there were four vials and one disappeared? Now a note has shown up despite, I assume, nobody being seen to do it. I would have noticed if it was being put there. Which means it could be the same person.” I took a breath. “Working for the Undersiders… and against Coil. Which means we have a mutual enemy, but if he stole one vial, then why not other things? Why can we trust this? So, I’m going to stake this place out, send a message and see what they do.”

“Ah, right. Maybe you should have Rachel there, then. Maybe one of her dogs might smell something?”

“That’s an idea,” I said. Then I paused. “Uh, but.”

The truth was, if she was there, and we were alone watching the room, with no interruptions, I’d get distracted. It’d been too long since we’d actually done anything, and I needed to not drift off. I needed to secure this camp so that I could secure time with her. That’s the way it had to work: we weren’t an island, and I hoped she’d understand.

“What?”

“Can you maybe tell her what’s going on? That it’s really important. I promise I’ll…” I frowned, trying to think of when I’d next have time. “Tonight. We can read together, and then tomorrow, maybe…”

“Arachne, I don’t want to give you advice,” Pelter began.

“Thank you,” I said. “For not giving me advice.”

Pelter frowned, hands on her hip. “Alright, then,” she said. “I’ll go tell her that.”

“And tell her it’s not for long. Once everything settles down, there’ll be more time. Tomorrow definitely. Tell her definitely tomorrow.”

“Okay, Taylor. You know we’re friends,” Pelter said. “We don’t talk a lot, or hang out much, but you saved my life. Just know if you want to talk or set down some of that burden, we’d understand. This began as you and your girlfriend, so nobody would blame you for spending time with her.”

The camp was in danger: I was in charge of this team. I had too much to do.

Even with my bugs, I couldn’t do everything by myself.

*****

My message: ‘Were the vials for sale to Coil? What are their plans? Should I meet with Accord? Also: what is the power of this new cape that’s apparently leaving this message, and if it’s not a cape, how did we miss you sneaking in? Finally: proof that this is you on the other end, please--A.’
It was almost an hour later when Cassie came up to see me, and I was still staring at a wall, watching for any sign of anything at all with my bugs, who were crawling over just about every inch of the walls both in this room and outside of it. And the floors, though they parted when they I Cassie.

She looked a little disturbed as she opened the door. “Hello, Arachne?”

“Yes?” I asked. “Sorry, I’m trying to make sure I don’t miss anyone coming in.” I took a breath. “I think there’s someone who will be showing up at any moment, but I don’t know if I trust them to reveal themselves politely if I don’t force it.”

“Oh, alright. So I’ve been online like you asked, and it’s sorta exploded. The person I was talking about earlier released information about the potential lawsuits, and details of some of the cases. The profile says she’s female, and her name is M_B. Some other known associates are Mad_In_Here, whose profile says she’s sixteen, Truth_Man, who is in his thirties… just a collection of characters.” Cassie shook her head.

M_B. Emma. Barnes. That’s the only thing that made sense, especially since Mad_In_Here could be Madison, somehow alive after all of this. After all, I’d not seen any signs that either had died, but they’d been out of reach. I hadn’t had the internet, I hadn’t had school, and I hadn’t really cared at all that she might be badmouthing me. It hadn’t mattered.

Rachel never gave a shit about what people said about her.

Now that was looking like it might be a mistake. Might. “Is it getting traction?”

“Some? I’ve talked to some lawyers online. They wouldn’t promise that their advice would be… they couldn’t give binding legal advice, because then if we follow it…”

“I get it, I get it,” I said. Emma’s father was a lawyer, after all. Though she’d always been so disinterested in what sort of lawyer that I hadn’t paid it much mind. “So, what do they say?”

“Some of these can be fought down, but with a lot of them, what actually matters is one of two things. First, if you think that there is a chance, arguing down the case, but that’ll be expensive. The only reason to argue down a case is if the settlement would be too high or if you want to stall. Because I did talk with Stefanie—”

I’d seen that part. “And she thinks that there’s some chance of moving assets donated into a specific charity? A non-profit or something designed specifically to fund the camp?” It’d mean the same thing in effect, because it wasn’t as if we were making money off of this that wasn’t going to either feeding us or helping the camp.

Or the dogs, but that could be its own charity thing.

“We’d need a lawyer, but we could do that,” Cassie said. “I mean, you could.”

“I think we is the right word,” I said. “You’re part of this too.”

“Yeah, I am.” Cassie didn’t smile at that, but I could see the happiness on her face nonetheless. I suppose she was learning not to show the wrong things.

“But, as far as it goes, we also need lawyers to at least tell us what too much to settle for is, and we probably don’t have assets to actually pay it,” I said. “Do we?”
“Not if all of the suits get as much as they possibly could,” Cassie said. “You’d have to have a repayment plan. It’d basically…”

“Fuck,” I said. With feeling. “I assume we can’t really know the totals of what it’d wind up as unless we see what’s being demanded?”

“No, not particularly. The oldest is relatively shortly after she triggered,” Cassie said. “Which is almost enough that it’s beyond the statute of limitations…but not quite.” Cassie shrugged, frowning. “You know what my opinion is? This is bad, and we owe them compensation, but it’s being overblown. I bet they’re going to ask for way more than they think they can get. We’ll see.”

“So do we know who they are? Should I call them? Talk to them? I…”

“The one claimant you mentioned is actually online, with M_D. He wrote a post outlining the damage he said he had. He listed tens of thousands in medical bills, thousands in the damage done to the gas station, and then talked about how since he’d lost his gas station because of his injuries making him unable to do his work, that’d be another $200,000 on the tally, though I’m not sure if it works that way at all. And emotional damages.”

I winced. “What’s he saying?”

“Oh, talking about how she deserves to pay every cent of it, how he doesn’t believe she’s gone heroic. He’s really, really angry,” Cassie admitted. “Rachel really needs insurance, but that’s not something we can fix.”

It was all depressing news, though I was pretty sure that the man was just throwing everything against the wall to see what would stick. But even if he was, that was still probably tens of thousands of dollars in probably-legitimate claims.

The fact that he’d tried to shoot her with a gun might be a mitigating factor, but I had no idea how much of one because I wasn’t a lawyer. It wasn’t my area of expertise.

I… wait. Where was the note? I turned to look at the space on the wall. “What?”

“What is it, Arachne?” Cassie asked.

“Someone took the note. But how?” I hadn’t remembered my bugs brushing up against anyone at all. I didn’t know how that was possible, but that meant that it wasn’t just invisibility. If it was, that’d be far easier than what I was dealing with instead. It somehow was able to fool my bugs? They, rather. It was a person, I was sure of that.

The most obvious solution was that they were somehow immune to all senses, not just sight. But if that was so, then how was I supposed to catch them? Because spatial sense was pretty basic. Even if my bugs shouldn’t be able to sense him, shouldn’t they have flown into him?

Wait. Unless it was invisibility and intangibility. It’d be a useful power, but then how had he picked up the note? Maybe he could interact with objects like this? But then if so, couldn’t he just stab all of his enemies to death without being at any risk?

I didn’t know. I didn’t understand it.

But I still was going to keep watch.

“You didn’t see anything?”
“I don’t remember doing so,” I said. Remember because for all I knew my mind was being played
with right now. How was I supposed to trust anything at all when things were like this? When
money was being demanded everywhere, where one of my potential allies was a criminal, and where
apparently I couldn’t be safe in my own tent because at any time they could murder me.

I didn’t know what their power was, and the truth was I was probably in a lot of trouble just sitting
here.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No. But keep an eye out on the situation, and tell me if anything changes. And I’m going to see if
they reply.”

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They finally did, almost two hours before. Which did tell me, I suspected, that Lisa wasn’t quite
nearby. This was a very slow method, but it did get some results.

‘Y. Can’t talk. Maybe. Me on the other end: You’ve met Grue only once in a friendly way. Only it
wasn’t so friendly. As for the cape? Don’t care about a name, but they can become undetectable.
And forgettable. Hard to notice. She means no harm, though.’

I frowned, glancing around the empty room. I’d spent too long on this. I was going to have to head it
off.

‘Can talk later,’ I wrote. ‘We should meet. I need to see this cape of yours. Danger and a threat.
Prove to me she didn’t steal one of my vials. Prove to me that she’s not going to start murdering
people in camp if I don’t go along with your plans. Prove I can still trust you.’

I didn’t know what else to say, but I left the note, and hoped that there’d be a good answer.

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I stared at the circle of other women, hoping that the look on my face wasn’t too nervous. I’d been
talking a lot lately, as part of taking charge, but that wasn’t the same as just… talking to new people
who weren’t just residents of the camp.

Not that these women weren’t. Charlotte, Anna, Suzanne, Isabella, Himeko, Bonnie… I glanced at
them, trying to remember their names. There were more that weren’t here right now, and they’d all
talked, and I’d listened, trying to figure out what to say.

Himeko had talked about her experience under Lung’s watchful gaze. Never directly, no. But her
parents had always been worried about her going out and about with friends, because they reckoned
her pretty and were afraid she’d fall in with the ABB sort of crowd, or worse.

Charlotte had been molested and… rather worse by the Merchants, as had all of them, to differing
levels. Some quite brutally. Some drugged. Some smashed on the head with bottles and then--

The stories poured out. The difficulties they’d faced both before the calamity that brought them all
together and after it too. I listened, and didn’t know what to say. What was I supposed to say? I
hadn’t ever had anything like that happen to me. It’s not that I hadn’t faced hardships, just not…
those kind. It made my own seem a little less bad.

Though of course, they talked about more than that. About parents who never even began to expect
that they’d go to college, about racism they’d faced, about… honestly it seemed all sorts of problems,
from the minor to the major.

So when it came around to me, I frowned and wasn’t sure how to say what worried me. “I admit,
I’m not sure what to say. I haven’t been through as much. Or at least, not the same things.” I bit my
lip. “But I felt as if I should come here. Because I know you have a lot you’ve gone through.”

“You don’t have to share,” Himeko said. She was tall for her age, which was… eighteen I think?
And pretty in a very sharp sort of way, perhaps in need of a little more food. “Thank you for coming
and listening.”

“You don’t have problems?” Suzanne asked, frowning, tapping her fingers on her jeans.

“Not those sorts. I was bullied in High School by another girl, and some of what she said was kinda
homophobic and other things, but it’s not the same. And most of my problems have come from
people trying to beat me black and blue, and for reasons that have nothing to do with being a
woman. And I’m in a relationship, and--”

I stopped myself, because what I was going to say was that the problems were ones that had nothing
do with gender. She was in danger, they could be coming after her, the lawsuits, the lawyers. Male
or female, it didn’t matter, the situation was bad and only going to get worse. I wished she hadn’t
done what she’d done, and now I just had to figure out how to help her through it.

“And?” Bonnie asked.

“Any problems don’t really have to do with the fact that we’re two girls,” I said. “I’m a little busy
lately, just trying to keep all of this together.”

“I’m sorry that it’s so much to be on your plate. I didn’t mean to encourage that so much,” Charlotte
admitted.

“It’s okay,” I said. “You were right in that I needed to step up. But the challenges there, aren’t like
Bonnie’s.”

Bonnie, who had been promoted to a manager’s position at a local grocery store (she was in her early
twenties), but had been dogged by rumors and sly innuendo when they thought she wasn’t listening.

“I don’t see how they can be,” I said, “There’s all of one guy cape in the entire team.”

Charlotte nodded. “But that doesn’t make the struggles any less real.”

“I know,” I admitted. But I didn’t have a story. I didn’t have a narrative to frame my whole life in.
Even my identity as a hero… I was talking with villains, considering negotiating with villains, and
my girlfriend had once been a villain. There was no clarity to it, as I tried to talk about it, and they
eventually moved on to talking about how they were doing recently.

Plans, ambitions, and of course, the ever-present talk of preparation. Some of them were part of
Charlotte’s squad, and that meant that in the case of a fight, they’d be on the front lines.

I just listened and tried to feel a part of them. To try to be connected to them, as I’d tried and maybe
failed with others in the camp.

I went to bed too tired to stay up and play with Rachel.

I looked at her, laying like a lump in her spot, and considered crawling in with her. But I didn’t want
to wake her up. She looked so… almost delicate, and I didn’t want to disturb that moment either.
The next morning, only minutes after I woke up, the Butcher attacked.

Chapter End Notes

Just a build-up chapter, in some ways. It's going somewhere soon, though. Very soon, really.
The morning began simply enough. I woke up, grouchy and still tired, and changed into my costume. I went around in it a lot more than I used to, just because it was a safe precaution.

Of course, the suit needed to be washed again, and I hadn’t taken a shower the day before, so I probably smelled a little strong. I’d do it in a few hours, I told myself, getting up and heading towards the camp-fires. There were kitchens that were sort of functional in the apartment buildings, but relatively few of them, and most people were happy just to have running water and electricity back: giving them brand new stoves was rather beyond us, though we did have a bunch of microwaves that we used to heat up a lot of instant food.

Which was a decent investment, because we got a lot of donations that were like that, that couldn’t really be said to be very healthy, but were quick and easy.

For my part, I sat myself at a chair near one of the cooking areas and looked up at the sky, which was slightly overcast.

Rachel was up and about, headed for the shelter, and I thought that after I got breakfast, maybe I could eat lunch with her, and this time I’d ask her about the lawsuits. And see whether Cassie had any good news. Or see what was happening. It was a lazy Saturday morning, and I felt tired and yet ready for something.

Maybe I’d see if Dad could come by again. I really did want to talk to him again. We’d gotten closer, yes, but we’d also been so busy, the both of us, that I hadn’t really heard much from him at all after my birthday.

That was a shame, and one that I could do something about.

So when my bugs started dying, I was taken aback, and then panicked, standing up and calling out. “Butcher incoming!”

I couldn’t be sure, of course, since my bugs couldn’t see it, but they could hear the screams from Animos.

That got people’s attention. They started running, as the word spread, people repeating and yelling it as Pelter came out of her tent fully dressed. Charlotte was asleep, and I raced towards her tent. She needed to get somewhere safe and out of the way of the fight to give orders… or maybe somewhere close to the fight where…

I cursed the fact that we hadn’t done drills, though I was glad we had a walkie-talkie. We could request readouts from her.

The poles were here and there, and already people were starting to gather near them as I began to make my bugs crawl over Greg to wake him up. He’d need to get out of the way of a fight, because there was nothing he could do yet. No matter how much work he’d done, a few puny laser shooters weren’t going to fix anything.

The people were hurrying in a swarm towards the apartment buildings, those of them who weren’t one of the people Charlotte was going to be potentially working on.
Potentially, because she was asleep, and because if the Butcher came we might need her to focus all of her power-up efforts on a small group of people. Namely, the Parahumans, so that we could be tough enough to stand up to her.

“Whuh?” Charlotte asked with a yawn.

“The Butcher’s coming,” I said. “Get in costume, and then take something to listen in and get to one of the apartments.”

“Oh,” she said, leaping up. Charlotte looked like a bit of a mess as she got ready. I watched her, half-naked and all-panicked, as she got ready. The Butcher was already closing in, and Parian was suiting up, and gathering her dolls.

“I repeat: Butcher is coming,” Pelter said into her by-now-decaying communication device with the Protectorate.

And I, meanwhile? I was swarming Rachel with bugs so that she knew what to do. Rachel and Cassie were both there, and Rachel was storming about, powering up three of her dogs as the circle shrank.

Five blocks, four blocks… three blocks. They were going rather slower than expected, honestly, as if the Butcher wasn’t the main thrust of the attack, though I couldn’t tell what was going on except by negation.

Charlotte became Amp as I strode towards Greg’s tent, throwing it up. “Greg! You need to get out of here!”

“Okay, okay! It’s the Butcher, right? The things should be working, and I have my guns. Maybe she wouldn’t realize they were a threat, or her danger sense wouldn’t include them?” Greg looked like a complete mess, and he was talking so loud and so fast that I had to hold up a hand.

“The guns won’t be enough. But just in case, can you go find Charlotte? That way if something bad happens, or someone tries to attack her, you can stop it.”

Two blocks.

“Right, right, can do!” Greg said, happy now that I’d given him what was in some ways makework. I stepped outside with him, glancing in the direction of the advancing wall of invisibility, and trying to track when it would show up.

Pelter was in costume and headed right towards us, and with a crackle, the speakers all started working too. Parian was about down at the ground floor of her building, and that meant she’d be here at any moment.

Artificer and Amp were hiding, as appropriate. Rachel was just a half-dozen seconds from arriving.

“Attention,” Charlotte said. “Prepare for the attack. Arachne and Pelter, please touch your noses.”

I touched my nose as it got within a half-block, and felt the strange tingling that came with the extra toughness and regeneration that was almost enough to shrug off one of the Butcher’s bolts. Almost wasn’t enough, but we wanted to have a group up in case…

Huh.

The first sign I saw that this fight was going to go differently than expected was when a man in
ripped jeans and without a shirt flew around the corner, a patch very clearly on his arm. Then came others, on foot, almost two-dozen patched capes in all, as I gathered my bugs, on the lookout for Animos.

Pelter began throwing things at them already, and I watched as they advanced, heading right for us, hopefully not paying attention to the way that Rachel was racing with three dogs towards the fight.

Animos wasn’t the only cape there. He was leaping into view, vicious and grotesque, but he wasn’t really a threat except for the way he canceled powers. With him was a woman who was somehow already soaked in blood, her costume a disgusting mash of ideas without any sense or reason. I assume that the other three, half-blinded capes, were either not taking part in the fight, or weren’t there.

I backed up, trying to get out of the way of any attacks, as Pelter peppered them and dodged the laser bolts and fireballs that were being thrown everywhere.

I took a breath, aware that twenty-something pseudo-capes meant that we were badly outnumbered, but only two or three of them could fly.

Which meant that when the doors of the apartment behind them burst open and a giant panda bear plushie started slamming its body into people, they couldn’t just laugh it off or get away. I found a spot behind a tent, and knelt down as Pelter retreated to join me.

It was complete chaos, as people were still screaming, and all of the windows were filled with people trying to watch the battle as the enemy advanced, split between fighting against Parian and charging forward.

Pelter was forced to split attention between trying to stop the wave of enemies charging forward, some of them changing shape as they did, some of them blasting lasers, others of them glowing sickly…and the flying enemies.

“Clap your hands, Group D!” Charlotte ordered, as one of the groups of her volunteers surged forward with supernatural strength and toughness, and the two sides collided.

It really was something like a full-on battle here, considering that the number of fighters was now beyond easy tracking.

Aminos screamed, temporarily shutting down Parian’s control over her dolls, as the monster surged forward.

I was trying to do what I could with bugs, but it was a chaos of bites and stings, and I tried to carefully ration out the flies and other creatures that had diseases to make sure I knew where they were as they flitted among the enemy, trying to get closer to the one in costume who was leading the charges, and who seemed to be lashing out with weapons made of blood.

It was a baffling fight, one far too little like the struggles I was used to, but Animos was so distracted in surging forward, that he basically missed Brutus roaring in and biting at him.

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And as Pelter fell back, skin singed from lasers that had hit, that’s where, for a very brief moment, the fight seemed to stalemate. Rachel and her three dogs fought against Animos, and Parian tried to get her dolls up and running, even as Animos kept on screaming but found himself more and more hurt as he tried to fight.
Meanwhile, the flying capes had blown a few holes in the apartments, and the fight in the center of
the camp was a bloody trade, the lasers, the sudden knockout-touches, the half-assembled pieces of
tech that broke apart as quickly as they were used… all meeting Charlotte’s forces, which poured in
with each loss, replaced just as quickly, and met their match. My bugs were doing their work, and
over the two-dozen seconds of chaotic fighting, it seemed as if perhaps Butcher wasn’t going to
show up at all. I couldn’t see the Protectorate coming in, though for some reason Cassie was leashing
almost a dozen dogs and hurrying down the street…

But of course, that was the point, wasn’t it?

The Butcher wasn’t stupid, she’d always had a plan and I almost missed it in the destructive fighting
in which I could at most play a small part. Animos was a part of it, but the other part was that they
seemed to be fighting smarter. They knew at least enough about their powers that I was glad I wasn’t
in the mix fighting, because some of them were even working together in a way that the Merchants
never managed.

It was bad news, but even through all of that, we were winning in a way we might not have, before
Amp joined.

Then the Butcher showed up.

Oh, not immediately, I wasn’t that unaware, but she came from behind, from the ‘safe’ direction,
teleporting with bug-killing explosions the whole way that ate up the distance in a matter of
moments.

“Head’s up!” I yelled into the walkie-talkie. “Butcher’s coming!”

She just appeared, after her last jump, right in the middle of the assembled fighters, stabbing out with
what looked like a katana. Three people went down in as many seconds, one of them bleeding so
badly I wondered if she’d die.

My gut tensed as I realized it was Bonnie. Fuck. Rachel was still finishing off Animos, and the other
cape was still alive despite all of the bug bites I was giving them. Pelter was in full retreat, but not
fast enough for the Butcher not to pull out a pistol and shoot her repeatedly in the back before tossing
it aside as soon as it was unloaded.

Without the toughness, Pelter would be dead. As it was, she shuddered and tumbled slightly, rolling
around and throwing a rock at the Butcher from her pouch.

It sailed through the air right at her, and the Butcher exploded, teleporting over towards Animos as
she slashed out at Rachel and her dogs.

Judas, though, bit at her, and she disappeared in another harmful explosion, this one actually sending
Animos hurtling back.

I realized two things at the same time as I crouched behind that tent and tried to plan my next move.

First, Pelter was right: the Butcher was relying way too much on her teleporting. As if she was afraid
of being hurt at all. It meant that she couldn’t consistently stick around one place and hurt people.

Second, her power didn’t really work that well with the rest of her team. Animos was on the ropes,
and if he was taken out, I’d be more able to surround them on all sides with bugs and wipe them out.

Of course, the third point was that she had just teleported right in front of me with the rapier, and was
slashing down.
“Taylor, duck!” Amp yelled.

I tried, but the rapier bit into my arm as I tumbled, and then--

I blinked in sheer shock. The Butcher seemed to be moving slightly slower. Not a lot, but whereas before she’d been a furious force of slashes, now she was doing it almost lazily.

I glanced left, confused, only to see that everyone was fighting with the same casual slowness, and that Amp, over the Walkie talkie, was talking so slow she might as well have been trying to do it…

Which meant that this was some sort of power. I dodged backwards, just barely, out of range of the swings, as my bugs buzzed… huh. My bugs were moving just as slowly as Butcher was, and everyone else was, roughly.

Which meant that what was actually happening was that I was moving faster than usual.

The Butcher grunted as my bugs tried and failed to sting her, and gave up mid-swing, teleporting away again as I backed up, taking a breath.

“Caaaan Yooouuu Heeeerrrr Meeeee…”

“Yes I can. Did you do that? Super speed?” I asked, confused. If she had done it, then that had been something she should have told me about before.

Then the world started moving back as fast as it ever had.

Parian was bringing her dolls around at the same time that Cassie jogged up with more dogs for Rachel to use, I supposed, a parade of dogs to help push the Butcher back.

The rest of Butcher’s men except the two capes were fleeing, and I sent more and more bugs after the woman wielding that strange blade made of blood. It was grotesque, the way she moved and what she was doing, but the more bugs stung her, the less she could do.

The Butcher was popping here and there, shooting this, that, and the other person, but even Pelter wasn’t down, just moving slower and more carefully as she peppered the one flying patch-user, and continued the push back.

Tons of tents were knocked over, there were fires all over the grass that were burning themselves out, but the Butcher hadn’t yet killed any of us, and she didn’t seem to have brought her crossbow with her. Just a katana, a set of guns, and what looked like a fireaxe.

Though I didn’t want her to turn her blade on us, I thought, as Rachel started pumping up more of the dogs.

Overhead, Charlotte ordered her people back, as part of their own retreat. They’d done all they could do, and considering how badly injured some of them were, I didn’t blame their retreat.

But as long as we had Amp, it meant that we could just repair any damage short of death. At the same time, we hadn’t done any harm to her, and now she was starting to use her secondary powers, warping into the line of wounded and slashing down or simply being there and causing screams of panic and pain. A single good slash could kill some of the people on the ground, which meant we needed to stop her. But she wasn’t making it that easy.

In fact, she seemed to ignore the half-dozen colorful stuffed animals, ranging from gorillas to giraffes to penguins, in favor of causing pain, suffering, and destruction.
Cleo raced right at the Butcher, but instead of dodging, at least then, she waved a hand and Cleo turned on Judas, who was moving to support him and started lashing out at random, slobbering and biting with blind fury at anyone in range.

Fuck.

The moment I’d thought things were going well, she turned things against us, though I wasn’t sure that we’d ever really been in control. I kept on backpedaling, my bugs going after her, and Pelter threw more and more rocks, this time the pointed ones, that she thought might serve as an even deadlier projectile, in order to drive the Butcher back. It worked for a matter of seconds, but each explosive transport meant that the downed fighters were suffering more.

Some of them were crawling away, and a lot of them were healing now, healing through the damage, but I didn’t know if it would be fast enough, and I definitely didn’t know if it would be able to stop her.

The only good sign of news was that I could feel Flechette, Kid Win, and Velocity hurrying along, though nobody other than that, each of them trying to race ahead to reach us in time. If their efforts would even help us.

Which is when I felt Greg start to race downstairs, guns in hand.

“Artificer, you…” Charlotte yelled, in a moment of high emotion as he went racing down the stairs.

My bugs tried to provide a cloud of cover as he burst out, firing lasers in the Butcher’s general direction with one hand, while spraying a shower of energy with the other… and none of it with much accuracy. “Unhand them, villain!” Greg yelled, with far too much drama.

If Amp had somehow provided the power to see things in slow motion, it wouldn’t have been any more obvious what was about to happen.

Butcher appeared right next to Greg, and shoved the rapier right through his chest. And then yanked it out. He collapsed in a shower of blood.

“Greg, roll over!” Charlotte demanded desperately, as I broke cover to try to distract her.

It was all falling apart as I raced forward, my bugs mobbing her just to try to force her to leave. But now, for once, she was ignoring everything, just grinning as my bugs tried and failed to bite through her skin.

She frowned, annoyed but not feeling any pain, when they tried to burrow in her nose and ears, or go through her eyes, which were tough enough that the bugs couldn’t quite pierce, at least the flies I was trying to go for.

I stepped slightly too close as Greg rolled over, trying to crawl away as he healed, the blood still flowing so fast that I couldn’t stand to watch it.

The Butcher, with a snort, waved an arm, and my world was reduced to pain.

I couldn’t follow the rest of the fight, I just ordered my bugs to attack as I fell to my knees.

The pain had a character, it had contours. It was like the strongest pleasures, something that had a reality so pressing that there was no room for anything else. You were in the middle of it and all there was ahead of you and behind you was more of it. More moments of it, and you couldn’t stand it, though at least with pleasure you loved that you couldn’t stand it, you loved that there was nothing
Pain, though.

Pain lingered. Pain screamed and scratched and bit like a feral cat as I shuddered, my bugs doing their best, but their best wasn’t enough.

I’d lost the plot entirely, and I didn’t know or care what was going on anywhere else. The pain was too great, and I couldn’t distract myself at all using the bugs. Every time I tried to focus on the movements and sensations of the bugs, the pain seemed to only grow stronger and stronger. Even my hearing seemed to be replaced by pain and the feeling of my heart. It felt as if it was beating fast, far too fast, straining to pump blood, straining to do anything as she approached.

I knew she couldn’t kill me with pain. Not like the first Butcher, it wasn’t that strong. But it felt as if she were about to kill me with pain, and there was nothing I could do to stop it, nothing I could do to push away the sensations that only seemed to grow stronger with time. I gasped, as she advanced on me.

Boots thudded on the ground. She was taking her time, confident and in control, which had to mean that Rachel and Parian were being held back.

She reached me and lifted me up.

I was floppy, broken, too in pain to do more than writhe a little as she pulled out a knife and began to slowly, almost methodically stab me. Once in the stomach, a slash across my chest, the cuts being resisted a little by the armor and a lot by the power that Amp had put into me, but it was still enough that I could feel the bleeding, though not the pain, because there was just too much of it.

Too much pain piled on top of itself, more and more until all there was was a scream that couldn’t quite come out. She smirked, looking at me, clearly enjoying my pain. Where was everyone? What was…

She raised the knife. Up, up, up again some more. I’d been almost afraid she was going to lower it, to slash at my tendons, to tear at my body, to do… but the moment I saw the knife coming up—and it felt like it took forever but it was really a matter of moments—I knew.

She turned the wicked, disgusting looking knife over, flicking the blood out of it, as bugs bulged in and out of her nose without doing much. It was grotesque, but then everything about her was grotesque. Everything about her was monstrous and wrong, a being that hated and killed and didn’t care about death, just kept on coming back endlessly, driving people mad if they didn’t comply.

And I could do nothing as she pulled back.

She was going to take my eyes out. That’s what this whole visit was about, or at least what this was about.

Vengeance.

I did something, she did it back.

It was so simple, so spiteful, a game that nobody won, in which everyone was blinded. But fuck it. I screamed out, spitting in her face as she moved to stab me.

And then she stumbled. I dropped out of her hand, and I saw that a piece of diamond had torn into
her arm. That’s the strongest thing Pelter had, and from the way she stood as she threw more, she knew it.

I was hurtled back, the pain only starting to fade after I’d rolled, as the Butcher retreated back, but I wasn’t done.

I was going to fucking kill her. My bugs swarmed the Butcher, the ones with diseases biting at the insides of her skin, where she’d been given a relatively minor wound. It was less deep and less serious than even a single stab wound, but it was the first time we’d hurt her, and I stood up slowly, regenerating already, gritting my teeth and baring them at the Butcher as I stepped forward. She had to dodge a half-dozen dogs running at her, and she couldn’t do all of that and fight back, not when the rest of her team was running.

My bugs spread out, still trying to find purchase to hurt her further, now crawling in the wounds, and crawling out of them, or trying to push their way down her arms and down her veins.

I would kill her. Or at least fuck her up.

She teleported right next to Parian and backhanded her, the Butcher clearly in retreat mode as she dodged bugs, dogs, and dolls alike, firing off a perfect one-handed shot that caught Kid Win, who had just flown in, right in the elbow.

The boy fell, from twenty feet up, as Flechette yelled, “Parian!”

But the Butcher was exploding again, teleporting out of the way of the bolt that would have taken her right in the neck. Another bullet hit Kid Win on the way down, and then the Butcher was retreating with her men, leaving dozens severely injured or possibly even dying.

No. Fuck that.

Rachel reached me, astride her dog, and I said, “Rachel! Let’s go fucking end this!”

We’d almost lost, we’d almost died, but Rachel’s vicious bared-teeth grin seemed to tell me she felt it too. We had to fuck her up. We had to not let her get the last word. She was running, and that meant we’d won.

I’d almost died, I was in no condition to fight, healing or no, but I’d do it. Because she was already diseased. We could finish off her men, and make her pay for what she’d done.

Maybe it’d be a risk, but I looked at Rachel and I believed we could do it. I believed we could stop her.

“Don’t!” Amp said, through the walkie talkie. “It’s a trap! She’ll turn around and attack us. Don’t do it, I don’t want to almost lose someone else.”

I frowned, pausing and looking up at Rachel. I shouldn’t do it, I decided, because it probably was a trap. The fury was melting away already, replaced by the common sense that Amp was dealing out. “It is a trap, Rachel, maybe we shouldn’t do it,” I said.

Rachel looked at me, her eyes hard, unsure of what to say. She spluttered slightly and slid off of her dog, glaring at the walkie talkie and then stalking off towards some of her injured dogs, leaving me to watch her and wonder just what her problem was. I understood if she didn’t like the choice, but it was my choice, and it was the right choice.

I tried to focus on pulling everything together. There were people to be healed, there were tents to
put back up. There was a lot of work to do, and Greg almost died. I had people I needed to protect, now. I didn’t want anyone else to suffer.

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“Greg, don’t ever do that again,” I said.

“I’m… shoot. I think that maybe you’re right,” he admitted, quietly. “That didn’t work like I thought it would.”

“None of that did,” I said. We’d managed to win, but at the same time, if she hadn’t been trying to kill me, or at least blind me, in that dramatic way of hers we’d never have even touched her.

Nobody was dead… but plenty were hurt enough that without Amp, they would be dead. Civilians had fought capes, and it’d gone on as well as could be expected.

At the same time, I thought, heart racing: we’d won. If we’d done this once, we could do it again, especially if the Butcher started to get affected by the drugs I’d inflicted on her. She’d lost a few of her men, though they probably didn’t know much, and she’d gained absolutely nothing.

Of course, I told myself with a sinking feeling as I looked at Greg, and then over at Stefanie who was trying to comfort some of the Butcher’s victims, it wasn’t as if she hadn’t done damage. And she could repeat this as often as she needed until she got the right result.

Except… we were getting stronger too, weren’t we? Whatever that weird time-slowing (or rather me-speeding-up) trick she’d used, I needed to figure that out. Because if I could, then Amp’s power would be that much more impressive. It was annoying how she had to give an order before the power started working, but other than that, it was… it’d sorta saved all of our lives.

I’d need to thank her for that. I really do.

“But we… survived,” I said, trying to keep positive.

Flechette was approaching. My mask was off, and I was trying to give a big grin, but honestly I was a little out of practice, there. It felt slightly odd to do. I’d been kinda avoiding smiling in general for a while: even when in other’s company because of that 24/7 feeling to it, always around her, always with her.

Always trying to understand her. And whatever she was being bugged by.

Sometimes it was tiring. Sometimes I was exhausted. I knew what I’d do: I’d talk to her soon. We could have sex, that’d fix things. And then we could talk about whatever her problem was. It was probably not a big deal, just… jealousy or something. Things were going too well for it to be anything else, I tried to tell myself.

I tried to be optimistic, because I didn’t want to feel trapped again. I wanted to kick my way out, but now I was in a place I wanted to be. I’d found my own locker and picked it. It had pictures of dogs on the inside, it had pictures of quite a few friends, it had bugs… it had all sorts of amenities, but I wondered if Rachel felt the same way.

Constricted, just a little bit, by the same things I wanted, by the same things that I was choosing to accept. The responsibilities and the burdens. It was more than just us, and I understood that. It had to be that way. No man was an island, and two men—or two teenage girls—couldn’t be that way either.

“Hey,” Flechette said. “I’m glad everyone was okay. Thank you for seeing to Kid Win…”
“That was Amp,” I said, absently. He hadn’t died either. He might have, actually, if Amp hadn’t been there.

“Well, call us again if anything happens. Purity’s gone, did you know that?”

“What? Where?”

“She fled town. The last of her followers got got. The E88’s basically done,” Flechette said. She sounded really happy about it, of course. “Just four or five members now.”

Four of five, of a gang that had once been able to fight every other gang combined. That was really something… just another reason to be positive.

Just another reason to hope. Once the E88 were out of the way, of course the Teeth would be the next priority. Hopefully?

But then, how had the Butcher gotten around everyone like that? Without anyone noticing?

What about Accord, Coil, and the Undersiders?

“Ah, right. She’s gone?”

“Yes. Couldn’t take the heat,” Flechette said quietly. “If only I’d hit the Butcher… wait, then if she died…”

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course, we only barely managed to hurt her at all. But we’ll do better next time.”

It had to be.

*****

It was a few hours before I could visit Rachel. She was checking up at the dogs at the shelter… including the puppies. I should go see them soon, I thought. As soon as I got less busy, I could spend an hour or two getting to know them.

...hopefully it’d be soon.

Rachel was crouched down, watching the dogs play.

Stiff, her back hunched. She was a lump, almost, but my heart still skipped to see her. My breath still hitched as I remembered and imagined--and the two were not all that different--the things we’d done and the things we could do.

I remembered that time, after a fight, when she’d asked me a question I wasn’t expecting. I remembered it, and I wanted to take her in my arms and lose myself in pleasure the same way I’d almost lost myself in pain and rage.

She felt angry, or at least a little frustrated, but I walked up to her and crouched by her, breathing in. She smelled so strongly of dog it was almost distracting… though in an odd way the scent was comforting.

“Rachel,” I said, quietly.

She turned to look at me, her face impassive, her eyes careful. She wasn’t revealing anything, and I thought again about all of the things I had to talk to her about. The lawsuits, especially. Cassie hadn’t yet gotten back with any more advice or information. We needed to lawyer up, we needed to ask her
about the incidents.

I needed to say something. I needed to…

No, what I needed to do was relax. With Rachel. What I needed was to taste her, to touch her, to run
my hands over her body, the sweat and the muscles, what I needed was for my lips to meet hers.

We’d talk about it after we’d… just. It’d work, I knew, it’d worked before: if I hadn’t ever agreed to
start having sex with her, we wouldn’t have gotten closer emotionally.

“Hey, Rachel,” I said.

“Yes?” she asked, turning to face me.

“Wanna fuck?”

She looked at me, and for a moment I was sure that she was going to say yes. Then her mouth turned
down a bit, her eyes hard. She opened her mouth, briefly, then closed it again, and said, “No, not
right now. I’m a little too busy, maybe later.”

I recognized the words, just as she recognized the words I’d said.

I knelt there as she stood up and walked over to the dogs, who had started a fight over a toy, yelling
out orders, leaving me to stand and watch her, and wonder what the hell her problem was.

Chapter End Notes

Trouble in paradise.
The weird thing about her disgruntled state was that it didn’t, at first, seem to change anything. Or rather, it didn’t change the fact that we slept in the same tent, even if we weren’t… doing anything. I even asked her how she slept the next day and she answered, “Just fine. You?” It wasn’t that sort of chill, it wasn’t a fight, it was just something shaped a lot like a fight.

But while I did have to ask her about it, and while it was smart to do so, I shouldn’t give in… or at least, it seemed as if maybe it’d get better on its own. There was a distance, still, but I went and helped out the dogs on Sunday, and she didn’t seem to push me away, like I knew she could have.

But neither did she draw me close. She kept herself cold and closed up, and when I did see her open up, I don’t… there was something hurt about it, something that made me feel guilty even though there wasn’t any reason to. I hadn’t done anything wrong, and yet she still seemed hurt.

It was a look on her face, it was a way she carried herself, and I hated to see that, and yet I didn’t know what I was even supposed to do? Apologize for something I didn’t know I’d done? And why apologize if I hadn’t done anything wrong?

If anything, I was the one who was having to deal with…

No, I told myself, trying to get through another Sunday, terrified that the Butcher would be back, and that this time she’d not stop until we were all dead… I needed to just let it lie. She’d get over it, eventually, and then we’d go back to the way we were before. I knew it’d happen, I felt it.

So I tried to walk the camp, talking to the injured, relaxing and easing myself back into the temporary peace of a hard-won victory. I knew she’d attack again, but hopefully Butcher was also dealing with the ailments the bugs were going to give her: she couldn’t feel pain, so how long would it take for her to realize that something was wrong?

I didn’t know how it’d affect her, but we’d see there. So while we tried to prepare and I tried to deal with the withdrawal of not being close to Rachel, the world spun on.

The E88 was falling to pieces, and I wondered if the Teeth would try to go east and just try to push through the docks instead of going after us. Certainly, it was true that there wasn’t any particularly great reason to go after us now that the entire E88 territory was opened up… or rather, potentially open, because I knew that Accord and Coil would both be making their own moves to take it over.

What would she do about that?

I spent time on Sunday staring at a map of Brockton Bay and starting to draw all over it. Trying to imagine just where one territory ended and another began. Coil, Accord, the remnants of the E88, the Undersiders, and the Teeth.

That’s all that was left now, at least as far as I could tell. Nobody had any word of Skidmark… but they also didn’t have word of the Merchants at all, which was probably a bad sign when it came down to it.

So, the Teeth had only a very few reasons to go after us. The first was revenge: obviously we’d hurt them, and obviously the Butcher wasn’t someone who believed in the principle of charity. We shared
that in common: we didn’t turn the other cheek. We struck it. I’d proven that when I’d gotten suspended, and nothing about that had really convinced me that I was wrong to do so, even if Emma was setting herself up as my internet nemesis.

The second was, of course, slaves. If they were the assholes the Merchants were, this was still a huge collection of people to rob, imprison, and otherwise make miserable. But the third one I only ever thought of when it was pointed out to me.

By Lisa, through her little… parahuman friend.

‘She might have. Trying to keep them from Coil’s grasp. He wants them, but now that the Butcher has Dose, that means that she’ll know about it. And want it too. Everyone wants it. You should talk to Accord.’

‘No,’ I wrote. ‘First your cape.’

Then I’d waited and watched to see who came. When I was touched on my shoulder by a younger teenage girl just a half-dozen minutes after my hasty reply, I nearly leapt out of my skin.

There she was, in front of me. She wore a demon mask, a little like Oni Lee, actually, which set me on edge, and a black bodysuit with a black scarf. I couldn’t tell much about her, but something about the way she bristled did make me think of it. “Heya, I’m Imp. I did kinda steal your vial, but don’t worry. I mean, we’ll pay you back. I’m sure TT will think of something.”

“Imp?” I asked. “You’re new.”

“Not like you’d remember if I wasn’t,” Imp said teasingly. “So, uh, I have a… one sec.” She pulled out a list of notes. “She did this cool, uh, detective thing where she wrote down a huge list of answers and words and stuff.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Predicting what you’d want to know,” Imp said, with a shrug. She spoke in a slightly high-pitched voice, and the suit left relatively little to the imagination, at least when it came to revealing her curves, which made me revise her age up slightly, closer to mine.

“Alright, then, why are you taking the vials?”

“To use, duh. Eventually or something. Uh, cause we want to continue working with Coil or something without him, uh, abandoning us. Or something like that? There’s some stuff I can’t read, and you know what? They never tell me anything. It’s lame.”

“I can understand that,” I said. I had a feeling that it was more as insurance once Coil was down, but maybe Imp wasn’t allowed to know that. I didn’t want to push too hard, not when I was getting answers. I wish I had paper and a pen to write it all down.

“So, yeah. We’re getting vials, Coil wants some, maybe to replace us, maybe to add people to our team? And then Accord has all of them. Selling them from someone or something.” Imp shrugged.

“They’re really expensive!”

“Powers in a bottle,” I said, carefully. “Of course they’d be.” I was frustrated at the fact that they’d stolen a vial, but at the same time I didn’t know what I could do without giving them away. “I’m going to hold you to paying it back.”

“Sure, I dunno how, but TT always knows something. She’s sorta, like, taken over, almost.” Imp
shrugged, and I could almost imagine a pout beneath that mask. “Anyways, so like, she wants you to meet with Accord and give him a phone. And then… um.” Imp bit her lip. “Uh, what if someone happened to steal one of your weird Tinker-phones? Ring ring ring,” Imp said, talking faster now. “Would you hate them forever?”

“Are you asking permission to steal something from us again?” I asked.

“Uhhh… kinda.”

Oh. Okay. So, I didn’t know what to say to that. If she wanted to get in contact with Accord, that seemed like it’d be really important. But at the same time, I knew I was part of some sort of game, some sort of contest between two masterminds, evil or otherwise, and that was a shitty feeling.

It made me feel like I was the moron that was being talked over and around by people with clever tongues and nimble minds. As I were…

I grit my teeth and squared my shoulders, but I resisted any violent impulses. Hitting her wouldn’t help, and yelling wouldn’t help either. Besides, I wasn’t strong enough to actually hurt her even if she couldn’t just apparently make me forget she was even there.

I wasn’t Rachel, with her big, strong, handsome muscles, I wasn’t… I shook my head and pushed away those thoughts. That longing that couldn’t be fulfilled. “Fine, whatever. One radio. And I’m going to write it down, so that if you steal more, then I’ll know. And there will be a reckoning and a price for all of this.”

“Sure, sure, I’ll tell her that. Uh, what else. I had something else I needed to say.” Imp shook her head, and she hunched slightly, as if she was retreating inside of herself to look for an answer. “Oh, TT says that she’s monitoring the whole lawsuit situation. Oh, and that Butcher’s likely gonna be busy for a while. Not, like, forever and stuff. But she’s not going to attack just yet, unless something goes wrong.”

Did that mean that she wanted me to attack Coil, if I had free time? I didn’t know, and I knew that I could only wait so long. Dinah was there and I was fucking around, thinking of plots and schemes instead of taking the fight to the enemy. Any of the enemies, in fact. I was being held back, but if I’d followed Rachel we’d just have been hurt. If it was about that, then surely she got it?

If not, I didn’t know how I was supposed to tell her without sounding like I was making fun of her or something.

Yet another reason to be careful around her. Just like I needed to be careful around Lisa, and around this Imp. All for different reasons. There was the Butcher, too. A lot of very, very dangerous people in my life: emotionally, intellectually, and then physically twice.

“Well, that’s good. Do you use your power to go into Teeth territory?”

“Yeah, it really sucks there. Slavery and murder and all sorts of bad shit,” Imp said. “Makes me wanna bring knives and stuff there, but Lisa says no, and Grue is all like, ‘It’s too dangerous, Ai… Imp.’”

She glanced away. Okay, so, her name was actually--

Wait, what was I doing?

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I eventually remembered and eventually figured out what had happened, which I assumed had something to do with her powers? But it was confusing and it definitely did the trick in getting me to stop pressing her.

Ai something. I’d keep that in mind, and go from there. From her hands, which had been dark, it wasn’t something like Aiko.

Beyond that, who knew? I knew she was probably a natural trigger, because the vial had been stolen afterwards. That wasn’t much to go on, really. Nothing of this was much to go on. I still knew nothing about how these vials had been created and where they were, except that if they were meant to be purchased before everything happened…

It meant that Dose definitely had absolutely nothing to do with it.

Which was interesting, and raised a lot of questions I couldn’t answer.

But there was one thing I could answer.

I wrote a note and put it back into the apartment that we’d temporarily abandoned fixing up.

‘Hey, Imp, can you tell Accord that I’ll meet him Monday afternoon?’

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Time passed, as time usually does. Greg was spending all of his time playing video games or working in his ‘lab’ and not always in that order. Stefanie and Charlotte still had to deal with keeping the camp running, Parian had to pretend not to be pining after Flechette, and Rachel had her shelter work to do, work that kept Cassie busy and kept me away, for the most part, except when I came to call her in for dinner. We ate together, but the warmth of the stew we were eating this time didn’t really lead to any warmth in other ways.

We remained cool, but not frozen.

Monday came, another day in a routine that felt like it had been going on for far longer than it really had.

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When Accord came, it was not a surprise. He had no real way to fool my bugs, and so I knew his approach when I saw it, and I wondered at his timing. The Protectorate patrol team, Flechette in tow, had just left when he started in towards our camp, or at least when he reached within ten blocks of it, or maybe a little more: my range was only getting better with time, and the cold, strange mood only helped that, if nothing else.

Accord walked with half his team. Codex, Citrine, and Arthuras, each of them moving carefully and watching the area. I wondered whether he suspected a trap. If he did, he moved heedlessly into it, one of his men holding a white handkerchief. Arthuras fluttered it in the direction of clumps of my bugs, and I could guess that he had more backup, if all else failed. But instead of going on into camp, he stopped about three or four blocks from it, and then turned up towards my bugs and said, “Arachne, I am ready to meet. You may take as many as three or four of your associates with you for this meeting. This is a safe area. I know you have it monitored. Thus, I know that you know that this place is safe.” He said it with disgust in his voice, looking around at the shabby setting.
It was one of the apartment complexes that had not been stable enough. The top floors had collapsed, and the only part of it I’d feel safe being in was the lobby, which was where he was staying. But indeed, I moved my bugs around and didn’t see anything odd, though who knew with Imp. Then I let out a sigh and went to go get Stefanie… and then after a moment’s thought about the stolen walkie-talkie, Greg and some of his tools.

Greg was babbling the whole way. “They said that Kid Win’s going to show up tomorrow, is that right?”

“Well, that is what they said,” I told him, distracted as I watched the team. We had just three people, but we had Amp on call too, and that meant that if it came down to a fight, we’d probably win. But because it was in range of the camp, if this was part of an excuse to attack us, we’d get back in no time at all.

So when I stepped up to the door inside with two capes at my back, I felt surprisingly safe, for all that most accounted Accord a madman, someone who wasn’t very stable and wasn’t very trustworthy.

I opened the door and stepped in, trying to ignore the detritus and debris that hadn’t been cleaned up at all.

Citrine was sitting on a table in the lobby, while Codex was leaning against a far wall, and Arturas was posing right next to Accord, looking as if he were ready for a fight.

“Arachne, greetings. I hope we may negotiate. You brought two others. Good.”

“Huh,” Greg said, looking at them, and then opening his mouth.

“Artificer, please don’t say anything.” I could imagine him commenting on some fact he’d seen on PHO, and I didn’t have time for this.

“And this is Pelter as well, hmm?” Accord asked, looking her over. “Her costume is rumpled.”

He said it the way another person might accuse someone of being a thief, or a nazi.

“I apologize,” Stefanie said, bowing her head. “I was in a hurry. I wasn’t told to expect the meeting today.”

“Lax,” Accord said, and I could see the frown behind the mask, almost.

“Some things need to be carefully hidden,” I said, with a shrug, stepping forward. Hoping that he didn’t try anything dangerous. “Such as the vials themselves, beyond what I had to say. You want them back?”

“This would be preferable.”

“What would you trade for that?” I asked. “Because I’m not sure I’d be willing to part with the vials unless there was something rather impressive offered.”

“There are many things you want,” Accord said, just as carefully. “I could give you a plan to take out the Butcher, to eliminate her without allowing any of your people to become the new Butcher, and which would lead to minimal losses. I could also give a similar plan to deal with the lawsuit problems that I have been informed you had. As well, if you had one vial, I could counsel you on who best to choose for the other one.” He spread his arms. “And of course, if you needed help running the camp.”
I held out one of the radios. “Besides the vials, there’s something else I could trade. This. I don’t know why you want it, but I assume there might be reasons.”

I knew there were: if Imp had passed the message to him successfully, then it’d be bizarre if he didn’t know about who else held a radio. About who else he could be working with. There was a lot going on here.

“Ah, yes. Though I would not be willing to trade a plan to eliminate the Butcher for it. Perhaps ways to deal with the lawsuit with the minimum possible harm?”

I wondered if it meant something: at the least, apparently the Butcher was a bigger obstacle than the lawsuit. Which wasn’t that surprising, really. I bit my lip, glad that my mask hid more than that, as he watched me.

Dealing with the lawsuits would be a burden off me. Maybe it’d help with talking to Rachel if I had a way to sweep all of that aside. But… I shouldn’t have to have this sort of problem.

“I have an alternate idea. I shall give you this walkie-talkie. And I will promise not to use either of the vials for the next while. We can see about future deals, but in exchange for holding off for now, and the possibility of a deal later, you need to tell me more about the situation on the other side. What New Wave is doing, what’s happening to the rest of E88 territory, and I’ve been hearing things about this Coil and the Undersiders expanding. If need be, once the Butcher is dealt with, I’ll have to deal with them too, won’t I?”

“Deal with them?” Accord asked, glancing over at Arturas, as if indicating that he should be careful if this was the first step to an attack. It might be, and I could see the benefit of betraying and capturing him. I think I could do it, or at least it was possible, but I didn’t know whether it’d benefit me any. The Protectorate, yes, but I wanted more than that.

“Yes, probably. I want a favor. I want to know what there is to know about conditions around your area in general… and I want your assurance that if the time comes when I decide to get rid of the Butcher for good, you might be able to provide aid. Such as updating whatever plan you have for taking out the Butcher as more information comes in. If you’ve made it, then updating a plan so that it survives contact with escalating events would be important, wouldn’t it?”

“My plans are far more careful than that,” Accord said, snippily. But he said, after another tense moment. “The price would still be one vial.”

“I can pay it then, especially if you factor in this: would you be willing to use some of your assets for such a thing? Loan them to me? In exchange, you could get a vial, potentially two depending.”

“I could consider this, as long as you made sure not to get rid of the vials,” Accord said, carefully.

When I pictured taking the Butcher out, I pictured a huge network of people, I pictured the Undersiders and Accord and my own group all working together. Everyone finally pulling together, including Rachel getting herself together.

“Very well then,” I said. “You can have the walkie-talkie, then. And then tell me more about what New Wave is up to.”

“They have split, divided themselves. Panacea is a vigilante in her own right, and those that support her work with her, while those who don’t try to encourage her to be safe. However,” Accord said. “She does not want to be safe. She has changed her costume, to one more gaudy and less… pacific.” Accord sniffed and added. “She has already been seen pushing several limits, and there are worries
about her actions. Specifically about whether she was doing something to the criminals she captured.”

Accord shook his head. “Either way, New Wave is not nearly as effective as they once were, and I am not worried about them. It is you and your group, your… organization that is a worry.”

Neither Greg nor Stefanie were talking. They were deferring to me, I was in charge, I thought, trying to psych myself up and get out of there. I’d learned what I needed to, almost. “What business do you do in your territories?”

“Business, mostly. Protection, the selling of illicit substances, a number of other sources of income which should be of little concern to you,” Accord said. “Are you done with your questions?”

“For now. Thank you for all of the help.” I felt as if his own nerves were starting to fray, from the way he was looking at me. Was I doing something wrong? Saying something slightly off. I stepped towards him with the device, and then handed it to Arturas, when he flinched slightly away from me.

Had I not washed recently enough? I didn’t know, but then I stepped back and Accord said, “You should leave now.”

Almost a warning, but not quite. I was confused, but I backed off a little more and said. “Thank you for the meeting. I hope we shall meet again.”

Accord said nothing as I hurried out, making sure to keep my bugs in the area in case anything happened.

The only hint I ever got as to what was wrong was when I was almost back at camp, and Accord muttered: “Something is incomplete about her wardrobe. And herself.” Then he shook his head. That was it: my clothes didn’t quite fit his stupid standards and so he wanted me to leave immediately.

Well, I thought to myself, that was Accord.

*******

Kid Win came in flying low, as if he hadn’t fallen not that long ago, his facial expression hidden as he buzzed right over the camp, so low that people looked up in alarm, only relaxing once they’d figured out he wasn’t one of Butcher’s capes. I’d been temporarily a little agitated myself, staring up as my bugs had almost swarmed him before they saw who it was.

Then he’d landed down in front of Greg’s pavilion, and opened the flap. He was sweating heavily, and smelled a little odd to my bugs’ noses. “Hello, anyone in there? Oh, hey, Artificer…”

He stepped in, and I decided to at least get closer in case I needed to help anything.

Greg had been working on the suit and the lasers pretty much the whole time. “Oh, hey Kid Win! Uh, sorry about the mess but I swear there’s some room, and I’ve been looking at something, maybe.” He gestured vaguely towards the backpack with the power pack, the one that he had been working on. It looked slightly bigger, and when I saw the nozzles, I understood why.

I thought he’d been making rocket boots? Or did those not work out?

“Oh, is that a jet pack?”

“Energy rocket-pack, but there’s two problems I’m dealing with. First, the conversion flow of the thing is faulty.” Greg frowned, pouting. “So that it sometimes shoots out laser energy instead, which
could hurt someone. And the second thing is that the balance is impossible! I just can’t stay up for long enough…”

“How much have you practiced with it?” Kid Win asked, stepping forward, board under his arm.

“Just… thirty minutes? Last night, once T… Arachne had gone to sleep, because if I messed up… though now she knows.” Greg said, realizing that of course I was watching him.

“Oh, right. I wonder, is it a little odd that she’s listening in on everything? I mean.” Kid Win shrugged, and I knew what he meant. The tone in his voice wasn’t condemning me, but it was aware that I was always there.

“You sorta get used to it! I mean, I do. I do need more time to practice, but I don’t want to be seen messing up, you know? If I’m going for some sort of super-duper honest thing like Law, then that’s what it is,” Greg said. “Arachne and Bitch and the others too, they’re all so awesome, and I’m… uh.”

I frowned, wishing I could go in and tell him it was alright, though I didn’t know how I was going to do that. He had messed up, but he’d also done his job at least well enough that we hadn’t all died. Yet if he’d died… what were we supposed to say? His mother dead, nothing else in his life, and he ran out into a stupidly obvious death.

Should I forbid him from fighting again? Should I tell him off? But for that matter, should I tell Rachel off? And if not one, then why the other?

“Oh,” Kid Win said, frowning as he looked closer at it. “I think the nozzle is kinda tilted.” He pointed at it, frowning. “Maybe we could just…”

I listened for a little longer as they danced around topics. Neither of them talked about how they’d both almost died. It wasn’t important, or at least it wasn’t what they focused on. Instead, they were getting their hands dirty showing off their technology and talking about it. They switched the topic constantly, and it seemed like Kid Win knew a little of everything.

They’d almost died, and yet instead they seemed to just be bouncing off of each other and exchanging ideas rapid-fire. They seemed to be building up to something, but every time I thought I was about to hear something entirely new, they veered in the other direction. For instance, Kid Win was very knowledgeable about the laser technology in general, and he had a few pieces of advice on how to work with limited resources, and how to better get through Brutes. Because a laser gun that did nothing more than hurt a few gang-bangers wasn’t good.

Which got into talk of this gun.

“I need to find a better medication, because it’s not working, or it wasn’t. But I made an Alternator Cannon, and it was amazing. Just plain sweet,” Kid Win said, clearly bragging. “But… it wasn’t working out. In other ways. I almost wish I could have kept on taking it, but…” Kid Win bit his lip. “So I’m forced to struggle ahead with the stuff I have. I could come and show you the cannon soon… if I could just get permission to use it. It’d be pretty cool, right?” Kid Win smiled, and Greg seemed to fall further into his power.

“Yeah, I… I’m sorry that things suck.” Greg said, biting his lip, looking as if he had a lot more words to say. But he was sometimes learning that it was best not to say things, that it was best not to do things. “I’m struggling too. There’s not a lot of equipment around.” Greg paused and then added, “I wish that I had a few spare weeks without having to panic and stuff, but I wonder if I’d just--”
Greg shook his head. “Anyways! Wanna see the Jetpack?”

“I’m not sure if I have time right now,” Kid Win said, sounding a little nervous. His heart was racing slightly faster, in a way that surprised me. He seemed suddenly a little bit taken aback, a little bit uncertain.

“It’ll just take a minute or two,” Greg insisted.

I knocked on the flap of the tent.

“Oh, hey, it’s Arachne!” Greg said, as Kid Win tried not to let out a sigh.

I stepped in and said, “I hope things are going well. I know you have to go soon, but Greg, if you want I could watch? Or we could take a video?” I frowned a little. “I’m sure we have a camera-phone around here somewhere, though the reception’s pretty bad. But we can find a way to show Kid Win later.”

“But why? We could just do it now and it’d be amazing and cool and!”

I held up a hand, as he was almost bouncing around. In fact, his windmilling arms had almost clobbered Kid Win, and he looked as if he was only going to get more and more hyped up on the idea of being able to finally show off to someone who could appreciate all of the nuances of what he was studying.

And there were a lot of them, truly. I hadn’t understood half of what he said, but I’d understood what he’d meant. I’d understood where this was going. “Artificer,” I told Greg, “Let him leave. It’s good that you’re enthusiastic.”

Kid Win smiled at me. “Thanks for… the other day.”

The other day, when we’d saved his life, when he’d fallen off his hoverboard, shot and then hurt worse than that.

That’s what it was about: and it made sense. When someone was hurt, of course they didn’t want to watch something like that too close. He’d been sweating, and that meant something, I thought. It meant that the stress had been gnawing at him, had been getting to him.

And Greg hadn’t seen. People missed so many things, so many… I tried not to make it more than it was, but I wondered. “I hope you’re recovering well,” I said.

He smiled. Not bared his teeth. Smiled. I needed to think of it that way, I thought. To do otherwise… I don’t know. “I am, I think. I shouldn’t be here, but… wanted to see the new Tinker. I look forward to coming back here, and seeing what else Artificer has to show off! Next time.”

Next time. Not now.

Greg nodded, and waved Kid Win goodbye, leaving the two of us. I turned to him. “Greg, can we trust you in another fight?”

“Why are you asking me this now?” Greg asked, sounding a little confused.

“Because I was reminded of it.” Because talking to him and figuring out what was wrong with him was easier than talking about everything that… Rachel could improve on. “And because it matters. The Butcher will show up again. This isn’t it, they aren’t done.”
“We won.”

“We survived, and now we’re locked up here, protecting these people,” I said. “Trapped and pacing around waiting for the shoe to drop.”

“Trapped? But we’re the good guys,” Greg said, in a voice that was pure whine.

“Yeah, yeah we are,” I said.

“Is something up with you and Rachel? She doesn’t mention you when we’re gaming… or she didn’t…” Greg said, frowning.

Wait. Really? I was pretty sure that everyone had noticed the chilling a long time ago, but apparently it had only just been evident. “Why would you say that?”

“…yeah, it is kinda silly. You help her out all the time, and…” Greg flushed.

“What?”

“The way you look at her. Uh. Yeah.”

I hadn’t noticed that, and it didn’t matter: I felt the chill, I felt the uncertainty. I felt the way that I had so many things I wanted to confront her with, but then what would happen if it all failed? I shouldn’t be afraid of a fight. I knew that if she were in my shoes she wouldn’t hesitate for a moment to say what was on her mind. Right?

She was bold, nearly fearless, blunt and handsome and gruff, and yet… also violent. Also not very verbose. But… she’d asked me. She’d been the one to push it. She’d been the one that made it something more, and I loved her for it.

So what was… I don’t know.

This was just so frustrating.

But I knew that if I found out a little more, it’d work. I just needed to find out how to solve this problem without involving her, and then it could go back to normal. To the way it was supposed to be, to the average.

We’re O.K.

*****

Flechette came by on Wednesday, and didn’t even talk to someone. She just paced, nervous and sweating, and then walked away. She didn’t even eat anything while she was there. There was just that feeling then of waiting.

That feeling of waiting for the locker to open up and the world beyond to be seen. I’d gone… not mad, no. But I’d gone frantic, I’d stopped thinking, I’d seen too much and knew too much at the same time and I’d had to be taken to the hospital for monitoring.

At the time, I hadn’t known when it would stop, or whether it would get worse. It had dragged itself onward, those shambling, dark, grimy moments when I’d first felt what bugs felt, and known what bugs known.

And now I watched a camp in the same place.
Cassie helped out Rachel. Neither of them mentioned me as she shoveled shit and robbed the dog’s noses and looked over the puppies, who were still so young and adorable, full of hope and dependent. In their first home. What did Cassie do, besides this? What was her life like other than this? She wasn’t old enough that there shouldn’t be parents asking where she was. But then, was it any different for Rachel and I? I wondered: what wasn’t being said. Would Cassie know how to make this better?

Stefanie ran the camp, mostly just checking in with me on the rare occasion where she needed help. I was ‘in charge’ but she was the one who made the decisions. Who reported to her parents and handled the money. I wasn’t really any more responsible: and for all this, she asked no salary, and asked for no explanations on which I wasn’t around Rachel.

Charlotte had her groups, and she was still researching and studying her powers, and trying to think of better ways to use them. Better ways to save everyone. She’d almost lost people, and she was driven, charming… if she had any desire to lead, I had a feeling she’d wind up in charge, somehow or another.

Sierra, who came by once, just to check with Charlotte, talk to her about what had happened, try to find some peace. She had her own life, and this life was now centered on trying to fix her brother, who had done bad things. Though whether any of them still were numb in their legs after years…

Greg, studying and working and obsessing, alone and brooding. Greg who clearly hadn’t learned anything, was clearly plotting to have his super-suit ready for when the next fight came. So that he’d be able to go toe to toe with the like of the Butcher. He never learned. Ever, it seemed.

Parian, who frowned and worked and sewed and didn’t take even a few steps outside her door, even when there Flechette was, hurt and hopeful, wanting at least… I don’t know, did she deserve anything? Wasn’t that not how it was supposed to work. But I wanted it to work: but I could hardly blame her for not wanting to push the issue, to want it to go away on its own so that she didn’t have to say no again, in a different way. Perhaps in even trying a second time, in even not just accepting it, Flechette was making it less likely that she’d actually get the girl. And maybe better for her. Nobody deserved… the thought trailed off, it ended like I was at the end of a long chain, and beyond which I could only bark at the world past such a thought.

Rachel. Rachel Rachel. On Wednesday night I went to sleep and I dreamed of her, of her mouth and the smile of her eyes, of her breasts and her arms, wrapped tight around me; it wasn’t a dream of her mind, but maybe it should have been, firm and confident, but instead, no, instead it was her body I longed for, her touch that I needed, and so that is what I dreamed of: I dreamed for the purpose of having what I wasn’t having, and woke up sweaty and embarrassed, to look at Rachel’s face--I’d woken her up, in my sleep. My face red as I stumbled out into the morning. Thursday.

And then me. Myself. I.

******

“Hey, Taylor,” Charlotte said, dressed up as Amp, talking to me from across the camp, her words thrown to a set of bugs. “I need to talk to you. I wanted to test a few things. With the new powers.”

I didn’t have anything else to do. I’d taken the shower, I’d refused to talk about it--not that anyone asked--and so now all that was left was to just pace around. Perhaps Flechette would come too, and I could pace next to her.

I didn’t have any plans, that is to say. So I walked through the camp, glancing at the jars of bugs I had here and there and everywhere. There were a lot of them as I passed, signs that this place had
become where I was. The bugs were all under my control, and ready to be unleashed if there was another attack. I didn’t expect one today, but then wasn’t that just the time to be afraid?

I suspected that the Butcher would have her hands full with her continued expansion, and I also had to wonder just what her plan was. She didn’t have a home, she didn’t have somewhere like this that she was chained down to.

What kept her from just packing up all of her men and riding out of here? Or driving or walking? Was she really going to stick around here for months at a time? She’d already been here for too long, by the standards of her previous actions. It was out of character for her, something that didn’t fit.

That meant that something had to be keeping her here. And of course I knew what it was. But what happened when what was in this camp wasn’t enough to actually keep her around, when the risks outweighed the rewards?

She was stubborn, I’d admit to that, very, very stubborn, and very vicious, willing to hurt other people all the time.

I felt like she wasn’t ever going to stop until I stopped her, one way or another.

“Hey,” I said, when I jogged up to Amp.

“So, I was trying to think of ideas, and I thought you’d be able to help,” Amp said, her voice calm and thoughtful. She was sitting down at the corner of the camp, under the shadows of a building, and she looked tired. “Being able to go fast, and also strong, means that if I got the right combination, someone could go right up to Butcher faster than she could teleport…”

“Could they?” I asked. Then I realized I’d raised my voice and said, softer, “I’m not sure. The Butcher teleports out of the way pretty fast. It was just luck that we were able to do anything at all to her. So the answer is maybe. I wonder, could Flechette do anything against her? I don’t actually know what her power involves, precisely…”

Which was embarrassing to admit, but while I’d heard a little about what she could do, the specifics were the kind of thing that a lack of internet access made it hard to deal with.

“Yeah, true. I also don’t know how fast it can make you. Can I test it out on you for just a moment?”

“Sure, of course,” I said.

“Taylor, clap your hands.”

I did so, and the moment I’d finished clapping, the world seemed to freeze. She wasn’t moving. I stepped backwards, and then began to walk away from her, looking at the world. In movies the world lost color when it was frozen, but instead everything was as it should be. And, when I looked closer, it was moving. Just so slowly it seemed almost not to matter. I tried to figure out how long was passing as I walked right back towards our tent and then turned around to walk back.

I glanced at a person who had slowly been raising the soup ladle to his lips. He’d only moved less than an inch closer to actually sipping it. I didn’t even know how to define how fast that was, except that of course this was the maximum.

This was putting all of her power into making a single person really fast. If she divided it into four or five… and of course, I couldn’t really control my bugs like this. They were there, and I could order them to move, but they could react only so fast.
So they just slowly crawled along.

This, surely this was fast enough to catch the Butcher? But then again, I’d need to cut it with strength just to do anything other than touch her.

So I wasn’t sure. Still, it was incredibly fast. Probably faster than the speed of sound, easily. In fact, I wondered if my movement was going to leave--

The world sped up again, and Amp looked at me, blinking owlishly. “So, what happened?”

“I wonder, what would happen if I caused a sonic boom? Or would I? What did you see?”

“I saw you disappear into a blur that… moved places? Even then, it kinda feels like I was just looking for you. I could give you some healing and strength to go with it. You could test out how that feels.”

“I could,” I admitted. “But I’m not sure what I’d use as a target. I’d need to hit something to see what happens.” I frowned and said. “What about your team?”

“I don’t know if I want to risk them.”

“You have to risk someone,” I said. “So why not me? That’s the logic?” I tried to smile, before realizing I was in my mask, and didn’t have to bother.

“Uh… a little, I suppose, Taylor,” Charlotte admitted quietly. “But how likely is it that she’ll come back? Certain. And we need to know what to do when it gets there. I don’t have any ideas for finding different chords right now, or vibrations. Speed, strength, healing, toughness… that’s about all I could think of.”


Charlotte frowned and then asked, “Are you taking this seriously?”

“Yes, I am. If we were able to fly, that’d certainly help with hitting the Teeth again. I wonder if we shouldn’t go all-in on them. A series of raids, maybe ask for Protectorate backup.”

“Don’t do that, please,” Charlotte said. “It sounds like it’d end in disaster.”

I frowned, considering her words. She was probably right. But how would I know? “Maybe I won’t,” I said, deciding to drop the idea for now. “But she has to be dealt with, you agree with that, right?”

“Yes, it’s just… everything has a risk.”

“I know,” I said, crossing my arms and stepping forward to stand by her, looking her over and trying to figure out what she was going to say next.

“And that includes you not making up with Rachel.”

“Can we talk about anything else? We’re not even fighting.”

“Maybe you aren’t, but….” Amp sighed, a soft sound, and she said, “Well, how about we walk a little way away and start wrecking a building that nobody’s using?”

“Actually… maybe that’s a great idea.”
It should be a lot more fun, tearing down a building with my bare hands. Catharsis and all of that. But instead I just got more and more frustrated, left alone with the work and my thoughts, even with Charlotte to talk at me.

I was just punching up against a wrecked apartment building, doing real damage that I… was it any different? Would someone sue me for the damages? At the least, the building wasn’t in any decent condition already.

“Taylor, I think you should talk to her. Just present your position, state it clearly and honestly, and figure out what’s wrong. What is wrong, anyways?”

I sighed, staring at a wall I’d been about to hit, and then turned. “There’s her attitude, there’s what she’s done in the past, the lawsuits that we’re facing, there’s… so much to say.” I shrugged my shoulders. “But I’m not going to ruin a good thing.”

“You wouldn’t be ruining it if you just got down to it, talked to her, and worked through it.”

“Nah,” I grunted, baring my teeth. “Not going to do it.”

Charlotte took a breath and then walked over as I slammed my fist into a wall, punching a hole straight through it. “C’mon, Taylor, just do it! It’ll be over quickly, and then you can make up. I believe in your relationship.”

“Oh okay,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

Charlotte looked baffled, “You… will?”

“Yes, of course,” I said. It just made sense to go and talk to Rachel, and I didn’t get why she had a deepening frown on her face. “I could go over there right now and sort it out. You’re right that it shouldn’t take long, just telling her what I think and that’s that.”

“I… you should at least get changed first, and not rush into things.”

“Allright, I can do that,” I said. She made a good point, I shouldn’t be too hasty in rushing into this.

“Well… good,” Charlotte said, then coughed. “Uh, are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“Yes,” I said. “Why?”

“Just curious,” Charlotte admitted, though my bugs could notice that for some reason she was sweating a bit. I didn’t know why, but combined with the tone of her voice, it was a little odd. Not something worth worrying about when I had things I must do.

I was still changing when I felt Amp’s powers expire. Not that it mattered, I wouldn’t need strength to talk to her. Or at least, not that sort of strength. My costume was dusty and ruined from the random destruction I’d let out, the testing of just what her powers could do, and how little it took to break through a wall.

Of course, we didn’t know what it was that’d help us beat the Butcher, and it probably wasn’t just super-strength.

But I tried to ignore that and focus on changing for talking to Rachel. Jeans and a shirt, of course,
and a shower first, but not more than that. I was trying to talk to her, not negotiate a surrender. Though I did hope she’d show sense when I talked to her and figure out a way to help me with this, instead of just… just getting in the way.

But that wasn’t the same as asking her to surrender. We’d all be better off if she learned and we grew together, after all.

But I was also prepared for an argument. If we were going to have one, then I needed to win it. I needed to make things work the way they needed to work if us, if this camp, were going to keep working.

It was that simple.

Rachel was taking care of the dogs, and I could just see her. Literally. It really was odd, or at least hard to imagine, how being monitored at all times might feel. Well, pretty much all times. I tried not to allow my bugs to show any of my agitation, but it did feel as if they were buzzing and moving a little faster as I positioned them to watch Rachel.

Then I jogged to meet her. I was well within the range of the camp, I could see so far in every direction it wasn’t funny. I wanted to turn back. But I’d said I’d do it, and I supposed I had to follow through. She was right, after all. You couldn’t just let something fester like I had, you couldn’t just assume it’d get better.

Hadn’t that been what Dad had done? If he’d confronted me, or at least talked to me about it, weeks before…

Maybe it would have gone better. Maybe things would be more okay. We got along alright, but not in the same way that I needed to get on with Rachel.

I jogged into the shelter, and then slowed down, taking a deep breath and talking my way through the people who worked at the shelter.

She interacted with them. She talked to them, and managed not to alienate them. Surely we could work through it.

She was kneeling and petting one of the dogs when I stepped up. They’d gotten too used to me to bark when I was around, too used to people, and the dog she was petting was one I’d seen here and there. Natasha, I think she was? She was a big husky, and slightly greying, and as far as I knew, she’d never been used in a fight. She was just a good girl that liked napping rather more than she’d ever like fighting, and when you had an embarrassment of riches like Rachel had with dogs, you could afford to bend in very specific circumstances to their instincts and age.

No doubt when Brutus, Judas, and Angelica got older, if they needed to they’d be retired, in favor of other dogs.

I liked that she cared for her dogs, but there were people here too.

I’d tried and tried… and I hadn’t always failed, had I?

“Rachel,” I said.

“Yeah?” Rachel asked.

“You’ve been avoiding me, and I wanted to talk.”
Rachel frowned, and I could feel Natasha get the vibes from Rachel, understand that there was something to be worried about. But the dog was confused about what it could be. I knew her, I’d fed her treats and considering her personality, that made it doubly confusing as Rachel rose up to her full height. “What about?”

“I’ve been avoiding talking with you,” I admitted. “But Charlotte’s right, I need to just confront this now.”

“Charlotte,” Rachel growled, baring her teeth at me. “She talked to you?”

“Yes? That’s what people do to communicate with each other. She’s an important member of our team,” I said, my voice raising slightly as I tensed, feeling as if I were about to attack… or perhaps be attacked.

“She’s… doing something! With her words!” Rachel blurted it out. “She just talks and you do what she says.”

“That’s called convincing people,” I said. “Just because you don’t like talking to me about anything!”

“Then talk,” Rachel said. “It’s just words. What matters is…” Rachel trailed off, angry and inarticulate, and then I saw something I didn’t expect. She backed down slightly, untensing just enough to tersely ask “What’s wrong?”

“…there are lawsuits being directed at us. For what you did before, the people you maimed. I don’t even know what we’re going to do because they’re going to be demanding everything. We’ll go broke trying to pay it all out. This camp will go under, and I don’t even know what I can do. I need to talk to you on which ones are true and which are lies, but I don’t even want to know because I know you’ve done bad things before. I know you don’t even regret some of them, do you?”

“I do,” Rachel said, with a shrug, and I knew what she meant, and it only made me angrier. She regretted it the way I regretted not reading a book, or being a little too angry, or… I knew she didn’t regret it the way of...

The way… and I’d been there, defending her, and it was true that she got a worse rap than she deserved. A worse rap then she could have been given. But that didn’t mean she’d been innocent, and had she really changed? If this camp didn’t matter to her, did I matter? Because this was what we were doing together, as heroes. The two were the same, weren’t they? Everything I did for and with the camp was for her as well.

To protect her from consequences, to redeem her in the eyes of the world that, even if she didn’t care about it, could hurt her. And yet, had I been the only one changing?

She wasn’t any less violent: people had fought the ‘bad guys’ while… but then, wasn’t she different? She wasn’t Sophia, she wasn’t any of the people my mind slipped to. “A little bit, that’s all? It could ruin all of this for us. It’s bad for the team, it’s bad for the camp.”

Rachel crossed her arms. “I didn’t ask for the team. I didn’t ask for the camp.”

“I’ve already done so much,” I said firmly. “I’ve changed, I ran away from my Dad, I’ve stuck around you, I’ve done plenty, and what have you…” I bit my lip, seeing the switch flip in Rachel’s eyes, as she struggled to hold back the rage.

“You think I don’t do enough?” Rachel asked, looking confused as I stalked forward, a little closer. “I’ve done plenty.”
“What?”

“Read books with you. Be a hero. Talk to people.”

“Were those all just things you did to win me over? Things that you didn’t even like doing?” I raised my voice just a little as I said it, but then stopped, feeling a cold sort of chill stealing over me as I thought about it. What if she didn’t even really like me? If she didn’t like doing things with me, if the reading, if the heroism, if everyone else were all things she tolerated, then what about me did she actually love?

As opposed to lust for. We’d started with sex, and gone from there, so what if it was all just shallow desire?

I felt like I’d bridged the gap with her, but apparently not enough that she couldn’t see what she was doing as doing things. As if she were paying her goddamn taxes, just doing things to earn me without really meaning them.

I knew I wasn’t being fair, but I didn’t think I was being wrong.

“I love you,” Rachel said, firmly.

I was almost slapped by the words, almost stumbled back, but did it matter? “What about me? My taste in music, in movies? In books? I love you too, but I don’t know if what you…”

Rachel frowned, stepping forward. “Can we just stop fighting and fuck?”

“And there it is! My body. There we go. Ding ding ding, I’ll take ‘Things you shouldn’t say right now for five-hundred!’”

At some point I’d started yelling loud enough that the dogs were congregating, and I tried to take a breath. I was the reasonable one here, trying to discover if literally everything I’d based the last few months on was founded in nothing. “I like having sex with you. I like fucking you. That’s not important right now. You’re talking about little sacrifices like learning to read as if it’s just something you had to do. Did you even--”

“I,” Rachel began, brow furrowed, confusion mingling with anger. "It's Charlotte's fault."

“You think that Charlotte is doing... what, exactly?”

“Saying shit. Separating you from me with all of this camp stuff, this team stuff.” Rachel gestured wildly. “I know she’s doing something.”

“Bull,” I said. “Bull. I’ve spent plenty of time with you! Just because I’m not spending all my time with you doesn’t mean don’t I love you. Didn’t love you.”

Rachel stepped back, and somehow she caught the words I hadn’t even intended to say. Even I realized I’d almost gone too far, but it also felt like I hadn’t gone far enough. “Are you going to leave because I don’t spend enough time with you?”

“No.”

“You’ll leave because you get tired of me, because what do we have in common, because--”

Rachel bared her teeth at me, and I returned the gesture. That gesture and only that gesture. We were different people, it felt like. How had I thought it could work? I could see it, I could see that she was
through and I was through.

It wasn’t going to go any other way.

“I won’t,” she insisted. “Charlotte’s…”

“She wanted me to come here and make up with you. If she was really winning me over with her words, then I’d be forgiving you right now.”

“For forgiving me? For what?” she asked.

“For hurting people. For causing us all problems and…”

Rachel’s eyes were hard, and I knew what I was about to say. That she was the problem, that if it wasn’t for her the rest of the team would be… but then, wasn’t the.

No. No. But the words came out anyways.

“For.” I paused. “For being a problem! You--”

“Get. Out.” Rachel said it low, her voice a growl, her shoulders tensed, and for a moment I almost imagined confronting her. I imagined tackling her, subduing her, talking to her to get her to understand how absurd she was being, how she just needed to change a little and things would be better. How we needed to talk through her problems and then she could fix them.

But would she listen? I knew she wouldn’t.

“Fine then!” I said, turning on my heels. “If you won’t even be reasonable, if you’re just going make these, accusations, going to treat me like...! Then…”


I turned on my heels, and I took my bugs with me. I didn’t want to see what she did. I didn’t want to see her go back to dealing with the dogs, who were agitated and worried and some of them already barking. I didn’t want to see what I’d just done and what she’d just done.

She hadn’t said it, but did she need to say it, I thought.

Did she need to say the words ‘break up’?

They were spoken in the lines of her body, in the way she’d tensed. In a thousand little things.

So that was it then. I stopped outside the shelter, leaning into the wall. My hands shook, but I was still angry: she was wrong to smear Charlotte, wrong to imply that it was such a hard thing I was asking her to do, wrong to offer sex as if it fixed anything, wrong to demand I get out when I was just telling the truth.

Despite all of that, despite being completely in the right, my eyes were wet. My vision blurry.

Funny. Wasn’t it?

I had my bugs. I didn’t need to see through a veil of tears to make it back to camp.

Ignoring everyone. Ignoring everything.

I got into my tent, and I didn’t leave for some time.
I was right. I knew I was right.

So why did I feel so sick?

Trapped. Yet again: this time by myself.

Chapter End Notes

Taylor is in fact terrible at relationships. It's basically canon, romantically speaking. Her thing with Brian started out as friendship and a lot of lust, and then they had sex and it was not that long before it all fell apart. They didn't even really act like a couple in the, like, going on dates, spending all time together way. In part because there wasn't really time.

Rachel is closer to her than Brian was in canon. They're in each other's business, they just hang out and do date stuff. But. But they're also in a relationship that began with sex, and Taylor has compromised a lot, in her view. She's shaped her whole life and future around Rachel, ran away from her Dad, spent time and money defending her again and again, etc, etc.

So she makes a mistake, and they have an argument. It's an argument about commitment, as much as everything: the idea that this means less to Rachel, or that she might just get bored one day and leave, that this is too one-sided, is... something I've been getting at for a while.

Just as Rachel's side of it, of Taylor pulling away and getting busy, of Taylor being the one who asks so much of a girl who, you know, has trouble with this but loves Taylor more than she's ever felt for any other human being before. They're both messed up sixteen year olds, go figure.
Taylor needs talking to, if she's going to actually figure things out. By everyone. And even then, will it be enough?

Most of the camp didn’t even realize the world had changed, had fallen apart. Because of course it didn’t matter for them right now. When Rachel left, as I knew she’d do eventually, maybe even by tomorrow, then where would we be?

But they couldn’t know it. It wasn’t their business to keep up with the love affairs of the parahumans protecting them. Maybe they talked a little too much about it, but… I wasn’t going to let them see anything here.

Rachel could have her stuff, I’d give it back to her, or pass it on to her, and then I had work to do. She was at fault, and so I wasn’t going to spend more than one afternoon crying about it. I told myself that, but then…

We weren’t going to care for the dogs together, we weren’t going to just sit and relax by each other’s side, we weren’t going to have sex, and that surely cleared up hours of my week…

Nevermind what we weren’t going to do. Because it didn’t matter. It was over and done with, and good riddance.

But who did I want to talk to. Charlotte? And mention the silly accusations against her?

Stefanie? Maybe, with her parents too, if I could make sure they didn’t talk about it.

Greg? …I liked Greg, but I wondered how he’d feel about one of the people he played video games with leaving.

Parian? Ah, yes, because that would go well. Her, her parents, her life that was revolving around its own love problems.

I had a ton of friends now that I didn’t have before, people that were willing to work together with me… but I knew none of them quite as closely as I knew Rachel. No, as I’d thought I’d known Rachel.

So I pulled my costume on on Friday and just walked the camp, checking in on everyone. When I got to the campfire, they were looking at me, clearly aware of something, I didn’t know how.

They included Stefanie, in her Pelter costume and yet looking young and vulnerable as she said, “Arachne, we should talk.”

“No thank you, Pelter,” I said. “Thanks for saying that, but I don’t think I’d like to talk about anything except running the camp. Are we good on food?”
“Yes, of course,” Pelter said.

“That’s good. What about medical supplies.”

“Well, we are, but–”

“But what?” I asked, leaning forward, aware that I was on edge, and just as aware that my voice had increased slightly in volume.

“N-nothing,” Stefanie said, and she looked hurt. It was easy to forget that she was two years younger than me, most of the time, considering how she stuck to the background doing all of the work. But I could see it now, and it hurt.

I took a breath and tried to find something nice to say, something that wouldn’t lead to another fight. “You’ve been doing a good job,” I said, leaning forward, stretching slightly as I stood up. “I appreciate everything you’ve done to help out around here. Maybe I should do some of that work myself. So as to not burden you too much.”

“You could look it over,” Stefanie suggested, hopefully. No doubt she’d be looking for a way to talk to me about Rachel.


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I took my time, too. I ate slowly and carefully, I didn’t have to rush to go see how Rachel was doing, or worry about her dogs. I had all the time I needed, and it was more than I wanted.

Finally, I walked with her into the nearby apartment building, going up to the third floor, walking slowly. My bugs could see all, so I knew that Greg was playing video games rather than working on the suit, though it was true that he’d probably been working at least some of the night. Parian was sewing in her room, and it wasn’t yet time for the hangdog routine of Flechette showing up and then not going to see Parian because she didn’t know what to say.

We sat down in what looked like a living room, messy clothes and all. I could hear her Mom hustling around in the kitchen, and her Dad was down in the camp, looking over a few things. I just leaned in and relaxed on the couch, trying to focus on the words in front of me.

It was all quite simple, really. In theory. You had the amount you invested into something, the amount it cost, and the benefit, and you then tried to balance the two so that it worked. We weren’t a business, we didn’t get money directly from feeding people, but we did get donations, and according to these numbers, those donations had only increased over the last week or two.

I assumed it was sort of a show of support? One that hadn’t ended just because there were rumors of lawsuits inbound. I supposed that was good, but the truth was that we were burning through money really fast. We hadn’t touched the money Rachel and I had brought here. Or rather, we’d replenished it, and it was even a neat little tally mark, now that I was looking.

A column where if we had to dip into that money, it was immediately put back into, though apparently we’d only had to do that during the first week where it actually mattered, keeping track like that.

“You know how to balance a book,” I said.

“You learn these things,” Stefanie said, trying to play it off. “Balance is key, and…”
I looked at her, and waited to see what she’d say.

“Whatever you fought with her about, surely it’s not… how serious is it?” Stefanie asked.

I took a long breath, trying to push back my anger at Rachel to focus on saying what would work best now. “It’s very serious. We’re through. It’s bad that we’re through, but that just happens when one party can’t see sense, and insists on insane conspiracy theories and…”

Stefanie was looking at me. “What conspiracies?”

“That Charlotte was turning me against her,” I said.

“Well, that’s just not true,” Stefanie said, quietly. “And what?”

“I think, maybe she was just pretending to like me and this whole camp because she was attracted.” I took a breath. “Let’s not talk about this.” It hurt, that kind of thought. I didn’t want to believe it. But.

“We can do that, I’m sure we can.” Stefanie said it hesitantly. “And in the meantime, why don’t we take a look at this line here. It’s the food, and it’ll go up if we ever get the economy back started up: there’s only so long people can donate food, so I was thinking that we might want to find someone to make a deal with. Or rather, order in bulk? It wouldn’t be that hard, really. And going through third-hand…”

There it was. Practical concerns with practical solutions. Math and careful analysis. This was what I liked to do. I was my mother’s daughter, and that meant making the smart moves. It meant knowing when something, or someone, was a lost cause, and finding ways to deal with it.

It meant being an adult. I was sixteen. Even with Rachel gone, even with all of that chapter over, I was going to get a GED and leave this all behind. I was going to… I didn’t even know. I should have a plan. College? A job? But I couldn’t think of anything. The future felt vague, trapped and hidden away, in some dark place filled with bugs and silence.

The bugs hadn’t buzzed or made noise. No bees, and the flies themselves were silent, that was one of the first thing I figured out. How to make it stop… slightly. How to make them not do something. Stillness, silence, darkness, and vulnerability.

I talked to Stefanie, while not being there at all. I talked to her without feeling the words hit my head. I was a hollow thing, my rage and doubt stuffed inside the dark crevices of my body, slimy and gross and defiled by their presence.

Poetry finally came out, and it was as gross and maudlin as I’d expected it would be.

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Dad came by, after an hour or two of talking with Stefanie and then patrolling the camp. He came on a truck, which took him all the way up to a block away from the camp before it decided, apparently, that the going was too rough for the rest of the way. Maybe its tires were weak.

Either way, there he trudged along, head held high, unaware of what had happened. Unaware of a lot of things.

I sighed, looking up from the papers and the charts, the plans and the diagrams whose contents I almost couldn’t remember, and said, “Dad’s coming. I should go talk to him.”

. I could talk to Dad, and pretend that nothing had happened. It’d be better than some of the options
out there, and hopefully he’d leave none the wiser.

He was right the whole time about Rachel, and I didn’t want him to have time to gloat, or tell some sad story about his first crush. I didn’t need it, I thought, breathing heavily, trying to brace myself for a conflict that I wasn’t sure if I’d actually win.

Not that actually winning had seemed to help much. No matter what I won, it didn’t end anything. I didn’t know when any of it would end.

Dad stopped at the edge of the camp, and I approached, stalking through the camp slowly, my bugs gathering up, and then dispersing when I realized that I was preparing for a fight, not a talk with my Dad.

Finally, I reached him, and pulled my mask off and gave the best smile I could manage.

Dad winced, looking almost unnerved. “Hey Dad! I don’t have much time to talk, but I’m glad to see you! So, how has it been going with the rebuilding and the port? I’ve heard a lot about the E88, are they really all cleared out? If so, great. What about Coil, the Undersiders, and Accord? Are they giving you any problems? I think—”

“Taylor,” Dad said, holding up a hand, his expression grave. “‘Wag the Dog’ sent a message to me online.”

“Wait, you get online?”

“Yes. Taylor. I get online. The port is doing well, and things are coming together, the E88 really are gone, and both Accord and Coil seem content to just monitor the situation. Maybe they’re selling drugs or bribing people, but I’ve seen neither. And the fight you had with your girlfriend. She told me about it last night.”

“Already? And she’s not my girlfriend anymore. You were right. She was bad news,” I said, all but growling the words out.

“That’s not the story that Cassie told me about you two. Or about the argument,” Dad said.

I stared at him, “You too? She was in the wrong, she told me to leave, we’re broken up, you were right, you win. So what are you even playing at?”

“I care about you, Taylor. I shouldn’t have to say that, but I don’t care about winning an argument with you. I care about your happiness…”

Dad looked at me and sighed, pushing at his glasses in a nervous, uncertain habit.

“Yeah, I’ve seen where that goes,” I said, and then bit my lip. “Okay, that came out wrong.”

“I’ve fought with your mother before,” Dad began.

“You weren’t there. That was it. It was over,” I said. “And you were right the whole time. She was bad for me.”

“Cassie told me what she heard, and it wasn’t the end. It was a fight, and a bad one, but—”

“Oh come on, don’t tell me you’re taking her side!” I said.

“I’m not taking a side at all. I’m Switzerland,” Dad said, smiling slightly as if he were remembering something. Maybe he was. “But I think that there’s more to this. Maybe she’s wrong about Amp, but
if she feels left out, maybe you could talk it through with her. I’ve had fights with your mother before. Once, I even thought it was done with, that we were through. We didn’t talk for almost three weeks, and I felt as low as could be.”

Despite myself, I wanted to know. Now because he was right, because he was wrong: a fight almost implied that one party wasn’t completely and totally wrong. And that party wasn’t me. I was right, she was wrong, and that meant that it was less a fight and more me realizing the truth of how little she actually cared for…

For everything I’d done for her, for every way I’d tried to connect to her, for everything I cared about, except perhaps my body.

“And then you got over it. But Rachel’s not like that,” I said. “She’s blunt and open about things.”

“Did she break up? Did she say: it’s over?”

“No, but I know her, Dad. I know she meant it. And… a relationship is mutual sacrifices. You’ve said that before. I have, haven’t I?”

“And she didn’t sacrifice?” he asked.

“Some, but a relationship can’t be a bunch of grudging sacrifices, especially when one party does it more.”

“Did they feel like sacrifices?”

“Not at the time,” I said. “But now they do.”

“Taylor, I don’t know if you should talk to her right now, but I think you should consider that maybe you’re reacting too strongly,” Dad said. “I don’t want to be your life coach, but I think…”

“What?” I asked, crossing my arms.

“I think she’s been more good for you than bad for you. Even with the fight you got into at school. You’re happier and more driven now. Or you were. I made peace with all of this when I ate dinner with her. I… don’t know if I can say I like her, but I approve of her. But I also understand if it doesn’t work out, that can happen. But don’t assume it won’t work out, and don’t assume that she’s to blame. Or even that you’re to blame. Sometimes the blame just… exists.” Dad frowned and admitted, his glasses slipping down his face slightly. “I don’t know if I am making sense, but I had to come. I just…”

“You can go now, if you want,” I said. “I’ve heard what you had to say, and you’re wrong, but I’m sure you love me and I’m sure you mean well. But I don’t need you to awkwardly blame me for this.”

“I’m not blaming you…”

“Maybe you aren’t,” I said, lowering the tone of my voice. “But you’re taking her side? I just don’t want to talk about it. It’s over. It’s done with. You’re wrong, but you were right when you worried. You were right.”

“No,” Dad said. “I don’t think I was. Even if it fails, don’t let that destroy the moments you had. I don’t…” Dad frowned. “Think of what you enjoyed. Learn from it, if it’s really over.” Dad shook his head. “I also wanted to come to check on the camp. There’s a lot of talk about the team, you know.”
“My team,” I said, even though really, it didn’t matter. Being in charge, being the leader. But Charlotte was right when she said that someone had to lead.

“People mostly talk about you and Bitch,” Dad said. “And Parian. The others, most people don’t know much about them. But everyone talks about them in the same breath as New Wave.” Dad smiled wide, “You’ve achieved something. Don’t think you haven’t.”

“All of those people saved, and it’s just…” I hesitated. “You won’t think I’m a terrible person if I tell you?”

“Yes?” Dad asked. “I mean, no I won’t.”

“It feels like it’s trapping me. Maybe that’s how she feels. I have to constantly be on guard for a fight, and if I lose then hundreds of people will be enslaved and hurt. I feel like I’m stuck in place, I feel like something has to give, and soon. And I don’t know what. So maybe everyone talks about us, but out here, it’s different. It’s its own little world, and I don’t know.” I sighed. “I can understand how Rachel might want to leave. Even if it’s not something she should do, that anyone should do.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Dad said, with a shrug. “You can hand off responsibility, but you have a task in front of you. You have to do it, even if it’s tough.”

He was right, of course. But I’d seen where that led: to the world breaking your heart, if someone else didn’t do it to you first. To strugglingly valiantly again and again until it started looking less like bravery and more like folly.

But then it was his folly: I’d been startled and worried when he’d given up on it, and so could I really blame him? If it was a behavior that, when stopped, was a bad sign? “Yeah,” I said. I turned away and said, “Is there anything else?”

“Stay safe, Taylor,” Dad said.

“I know.”

“I love you.”

I sighed, trying not to sound tired as I said, “I know that too.”

“Well, I’m going to keep on saying it, until you hear it,” Dad said. “Until…” he waved his arm a little vaguely, as if indicating some distant future that he was striving towards. As if he had a plan, when in truth I wasn’t sure if he did. He was just waiting and seeing whether things changed. Would they?

Thus far change had been painful, uncertain, and not always good, and never simple. So I wasn’t going to hold my breath for it, honestly.

“I’ll do the best I can,” I said. “You do the same. Hopefully the Butcher takes her time in coming back.”

******

On Saturday, the freeze continued, as I caught up on all of the work that was done. I had time, even, to start reading all sorts of books that I hadn’t been able to get to when Rachel was there. After all, I’d had to teach her, so I couldn’t do books with vocabularies that would lead to endless questions. It was simple, and so of course it was much, much better when I didn’t have someone holding me down.
But the first book I chose was boring, too dull and conversational, and more than that, too willing to
digress, to move away from the point rather than just stating it outright. And perhaps a little sexist, or
at least, I didn’t really buy the romance at all.

Dashing hero and princess, pah. They’d probably get divorced once they found out they shared
nothing in common except chemistry, and the way that the princess was entirely useless was
annoying too, and so I abandoned the book with a groan and tried another. ‘

But that one was too cheery and optimistic, too hopeful that the main characters could all just talk it
out, and come to some sort of happy ending, as if that’s how the world worked. So I ditched that
book too, and was about to try on a third when there was a scream.

I couldn’t see anything immediately with my bugs, but when I hurried out the door, I saw them in the
sky.

One was a woman, dressed in chains and leather, holding what seemed like a huge supply of
grenades. The other was a man in baggy pants and a rock T-shirt, his body pierced so many times I
wondered if he woke up in pain. He had nothing more than his bare hands.

Both of them flew, so fast that the swarm of bugs I set out couldn’t quite catch them, and the woman
lobbed grenades downward.

They hit the ground, scattering around.

Unsure what to do, I had my bugs pile on top of the grenades, because I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to
lift them up with the bugs and do anything useful at all.

The man, on the other hand, shot out laser blasts that hit several of the tents and set them alight.

A second passed as they turned around, still a blur, though I made a screen of bugs so they couldn’t
see past them, and yelled, “Scatter!”

Bug guts coated the ground as the grenades exploded, each sounding like a deep, loud drumbeat.

Shrapnel went far as people screamed and ran and they came around again just as Pelter ran right out
of the apartment building, stone in hand.

But as fast as the rock was, hurtling towards the man, he was just able to dodge it. Artificer stepped
out with his laser gun a little too late, pouting at the missed opportunity as the woman threw the rest
of her grenades, and the man set four or five more tents on fire, smoke now filling the air as they
raced off the way they came.

People scattered away from the grenades just in time, for the most part.

The explosions didn’t hurt anyone, but another tent collapsed, and we remained there, tense, as
Charlotte and Parian hurried out of the apartment across the way, each of them ready for a fight…

They didn’t come back immediately. I didn’t know how to put out the fires, really. Parian’s dolls
could perhaps smother them, though, I thought. “Parian! Can your dolls put out those fires?”

I turned to someone, “Bucket chain!”

The man startled, and then yelled, “Bucket chain!” to someone else, and we got to work on putting
things out.
They didn’t come back immediately. We’d healed the few people who were injured, we’d saved the tents… or rather, some of the stuff in it, at the cost of a lot of electronics and all of the tents that had been set alight. We’d picked up the shrapnel and calmed people down, and were just assembled and ready for a fight when they came around again.

The same two people, though they were flying even faster this time, and seeing us all ready and gathered, waiting for them, they threw the grenades in our direction.

“Arachne, Pelter, Parian, Artificer, duck!” Amp yelled, running away from the grenade. We did, and were engulfed in the explosions of several grenades.

It stung, like someone was slapping me across my entire body, but nothing more than that, as the man shot a barrage of lasers at two more tents as they turned around, headed away.

They were going to keep on doing this, I thought, until we were worn down. Unless we could find a way to stop them. Rachel was still in her shelter, but even if I brought her here, I was pretty sure there wasn’t much that she could actually help with. They’d learned something, the Teeth had.

That was that we had fewer answers to flying enemies, and that the more time they gave us, the worse things would get.

So the Butcher had devised an easy, simple, low-cost way to kill us with chip damage alone.

Except, of course, it’d become predictable if they did it a third time. Or a third time the same way.

“Pelter, Amp. I have an idea. But we’ll need to do some work. Both of you go up on the building, then Pelter gets super-speed, and throws a bunch of rocks, shotgun it and keep on throwing them in their path.” It was a generalized idea, but I could picture it in my head, and I bet it’d work.

Pelter held up a hand, as if we were in class. “But what if it kills them?”

“That’s a good concern, but they’re attacking this camp. I’m not sure how we could actually save them. I suppose we could have Parian…” I glanced over at the girl, her emotions hidden under her mask. Nobody she directly cared for had even been in danger. They still seemed to be operating under the impression that the camps were where most of our people were.

The thing was, I thought, taking a breath, was that they were right. Just barely right, but there were more in the tents than in either of the apartments, just because of how many people were still streaming here as refugees.

We were doing our best to make houses for all of them, but by now we had so many hundreds that I was wondering if it’d slip into the thousands. Probably it would, if this lasted much longer. “Stay in the tents? And then have her stuffed animals ready to catch them. They’re soft, at least, and aren’t likely to be hurt by catching someone.”

“I guess…” Parian said.

“I’ll try to keep in the area and keep an eye out,” I said. “And can someone tell Rachel to be careful?” It’d make sense for them to attack her, I thought, wincing at the thought. Because surely the Butcher didn’t miss that she meant… had meant, rather, a lot to me. That hurting her would be a good way to hurt me, and hurting her dogs would be a good way to hurt her.

Not that she could do that much if they really did think of attacking the shelter, since she was sorta helpless against flying attackers. But I didn’t want her dogs to die, even if we were broken up.

Pelter bit her lip, and then glanced at Parian, who looked over at Greg.
“What? Oh... okay.”

******

Greg must have told her, I didn’t know because I wasn’t watching the conversation. It’d be rude, and more than that, it’d get me pacing and worrying. Instead, we spent all afternoon waiting for an attack that didn’t happen.

I had nothing to do, and so I moved, walking around and around in circles. If it wasn’t for the attack keeping me leashed, I’d go on a run, at least around the block, or maybe around two blocks, so that I could burn off some of the energy.

As it was, I just paced and waited, and then ate dinner and waited, and went to bed with orders to yell and wake me up if anything happened… and waited then, there, through the dark night, where dreams ambushed me again.

I woke yearning and uncertain, to wait even more.

Then finally they came.

“Capes!” someone yelled, and I got up from where I was sitting, by one of the fires. I’d been smiling at it, just to try to practice it. It wasn’t a grin, it was just a smile, and so I shouldn’t have a hard time doing it. But I felt as if I were doing something wrong, as if I’d broken a rule somewhere by smiling, and that I needed to stop it.

I got up, looking at them. They were the same two people, though this time the woman seemed to be moving slightly slower, and she didn’t have grenades. I assumed that her power had given her another weapon, and she flew right on at us, diving just slightly to be able to rain down green and red lasers on her part, and what looked like oil on his part. The oil sloshed on the ground, and I saw him reach into his outfit, perhaps for a match.

Which was when the rocks shot out from the building in a strong wall that slammed into them.

Both capes toppled, falling twenty feet, as dolls moved to try to block their fall. I hadn’t even had time to get my bugs out, they were still buzzing and gathering.

Parian’s stuffed animals caught one of them, and the other hit the ground, hard. I heard something crack, and I rushed forward, covering them with bugs as I did. They screamed and thrashed, and lasers cut into the stuffed bear that was holding the woman.

Down came Pelter, still almost a blur, and then Amp following her, and then we were on them, dragging them down and disarming them, and pulling off the patch, even though skin too came with it.

We didn’t care. They thrashed as much as they could, but they couldn’t actually stop us.

******

“Tell me why you were sent?” I asked the woman, after her broken bones were mended. She’d broken both of her arms in the back, and now that I got a better look at her, even after the healing from Amp, she didn’t look to be in a great condition. We’d keep them and then turn them over to the Protectorate for further questioning, but we needed to know about them and their plans. My bugs, sheerly for the safety of the shelter, had positioned themselves around where Rachel was, but hadn’t quite entered the area, sticking outside nervously and uncertainly, and they showed no attack coming that way.
It looked like these two might be it, at least... for this particular attempt. Maybe there’d be a dozen more where that came from.

“Fuck you,” the woman said.

“She’s taken,” Greg said, a stern one-liner that he seemed immediately embarrassed by, stepping back and blushing.

I shot him a glare and said, “This could go a lot easier if you just told me: is this meant to test our defenses? Wear us down?”

The woman bit her lip and said, “You’re fucking us.”

“Go on?” I asked, trying to relax and sound like I wasn’t about to start hitting her to try to make her say something else.

“The Butcher’s acting weird. It’s your fault, you did something. So we’re gonna fuck you up.”

“Ah, is that what you’re doing?” I asked, trying not to feel too happy. The Butcher acting weird could mean any number of things. I could only hope it meant that I was getting to her, that something bad was happening, something that I could use.

“... it didn’t work,” the woman admitted, with a cough. “Fuck you.”

“You’re the one taking slaves and murdering people,” I said. I frowned, “And Butcher is fucking everything up. Why doesn’t she just leave, then? If she’s causing so many problems and getting none of what she wants.”

“...she can’t. Won’t. Whatever,” the woman said. “I’m not sayin’ anything more to you, you fucking bitch.”

I didn’t care about the insult. I’d heard worse, and I’d heard worse from people whose opinions mattered more, but I imagined what Rachel would do if she was here. Stand up for...

I shook my head. “This is evidence that whatever we’re doing, it’s getting results. The Butcher isn’t going herself to fight us again, because she’s afraid of us.”

The woman snorted. It was an ugly, piggish sort of sound, and I glared at her. “Afraid? Of you? Yeah, right.”

As if it was impossible. But the impossible could happen, and people could surprise you. I was sure that she was afraid, that she was worried, that in wherever dark corner of her mind still had such emotions, she was afraid. I liked to think that, though it was impossible to be sure. But every time she’d fought us, there’d been a cost.

The burnt hand teaches best, and we’d burned her. She’d suffered for going after us, and that was good. Perhaps it’d mean she’d make a better choice in the future... like going back to Boston or New York or anywhere else. I didn’t care, really, about stopping her for good. I didn’t care about the whole wide world, not when right now the real danger was that this camp would suffer.

I could deal with what came afterwards. The city was still recovering, the city was still broken, and this camp was part of it. It felt as if I couldn’t care about anything else, as if my head was stuffed with fears and worries, with all of the things I had to do.

“We’ll see,” I said, coldly. Distantly. I stood up slowly, and stretched. In the distance, Flechette and
Kid Win (the former flying as low as possible) were on their way. “Parian. Flechette is coming, by the way. We can drop them off with the Wards, while they call for backup.”

Parian seemed to consider that for a moment. I could see her shoulders slump slightly, as if she were facing something, and then she took a breath, “Tell her I won’t see her, if she asks.”

Then she turned tail and retreated.

******

Of course I went to see Parian. Not because I didn’t support her in her desire not to see Flechette, but because I wanted to resolve this. At least one of us deserved to be happy.

She was sewing when I came in, working on what looked like a costume.

“Is that for anyone?”

“Actually, no,” Parian admitted, not even looking up from her work. “Just… something. I’ve been thinking about it. A costume for another occasion.” It looked like something old-fashioned, or at least to me it looked a little like a doublet. Though I was pretty sure that few doublets had a slight plunge in their neckline like that. Nor were they as colorful as all of that. “Or for some other costume. Making things to make them. I like doing it.” She was doing it by hand, not using her power at all, though all around her were her stuffed animals.

I stepped towards her, frowning at it for a moment, and then at the hat that was off to the side, with a feather in it. It looked like something that some sort of 18th century cavalier might wear, or something like that. I frowned and said, “So, I assume you don’t want to talk about Flechette?”

“No. I don’t.”

I nodded. “Then I won’t. Are you going to go back to college?”

“Maybe. I can’t spend all of my time around a bunch of teenagers, I need to meet friends my own age. Mature, independent…”

Her voice sounded almost bitter, as if these were marks against them. “In control.”

“Are you saying I’m immature?” I asked, trying to make it sound like I was joking. But in truth, I did wonder how we all looked to her, worrying about such minor things. Worrying, at times, about nothing at all. Getting in little spats, breaking up and then sulking… not that the latter was unique to teenagers.

“A little bit. You have a lot of weight on your shoulders, and you’re not willing to shrug it off. Maybe that’s a mistake,” Parian said.

“Do you think I’m making a mistake?” I asked.

“In what?” Parian responded.

“You know everyone’s talking about it.” My voice was a little acid, and I took a breath and searched for somewhere to sit.

“Perhaps you’re just thinking about it. Please, tell me,” Parian said. Her voice was soft, but there was something cold and stiff in making me say it out loud.

“Breaking up with Rachel.”
“Have you? Then good.”

I blinked. “Good?”

“She was rough, ugly, and crude, and I do not particularly like dogs. I am a cat person, after all.” Parian’s face was impossible to see behind the mask, but she sounded like she meant it.

“She wasn’t ugly,” I said, hotly, feeling fury, and emotion in general, awakening that had been dull and distant these past few days. “She isn’t. And dogs are…” I took a breath, aware of the irony.

She was the first person who’d actually approved of my choice, who’d thought it was good, and here I was… actually, when I listened to myself, yelling. Yelling at her for daring to say bad things about Rachel.

In part, they weren’t the right things: it wasn’t her face, or the dogs. It was the way I was apparently a burden. The way her deeds…

“Fine? So tell me, what was this fight about? What did she do wrong?”

“Okay,” I said, feeling like maybe Parian would actually listen. “I think that she was only pretending to care about anything I liked to have sex with me. I was sacrificing things, and trying to work with her because I loved her, and she just… wanted stuff. And before she met me, she hurt some people. And they’re suing. We’re probably going to lose all of the money we have, and more, and there’s nothing we can do except lessen the impact. And she’s not really, really sorry about it. It’s who she is.”

“Ah, lawsuits.” Parian seemed to almost wince at that. “And if she’s admitted that she only did all of it because you wanted her to, then that’s pretty clear.”

I bit my lip, “She spoke about it as if it were this big burden. And she didn’t deny it when I said it.” I shrugged. “I want to get over her, but it’s not been long enough, and she’s still there. And… I don’t want her to just go away either.”

“Well, I know how that feels,” Parian admitted. “You want to push her away, you want to pull her close. It’s not fair that she comes with what she does, is it?”

“ Comes with?” I asked.

“None of the lawsuits are from after you met her, right? She’s always been a brute and a crude and violent person.” Parian sniffed slightly. “Not my type at all, though I admit that a good set of muscles…”

I flushed, glad that I had a mask to cover my face, because of course, while Flechette and Rachel shared very, very little with each other, both were athletic girls. Just different sorts of athletes. Rachel looked like she could play football, and not the light-touch kind, while Flechette had a body a little like Sophia: made for running, made for long-limbed locomotion.

It was a matter of tastes, and I wondered at that, that we’d never talked about… that. After all, it wasn’t as if I hadn’t heard an earful from Greg before about girls, always delivered in that sort of wistful, annoyed tone of voice that I didn’t trust, sometimes.

It wasn’t as if people didn’t talk about tastes all the time, and I’d had Parian in front of me all this time and I’d said nothing about it. “Well, yeah. It’s a specific taste, but it’s a… I mean.”

“Yes. Everyone’s aware of how much sex you had. Until you stopped having it. Maybe she really
was just using you for the sex.” Parian shrugged. “I don’t know. I bet everyone’s telling you you’re wrong for it. Or they’re thinking it, and you can feel their silent judgement.” Parian took off her mask, and glanced down at the costume sadly. “That sucks. I’ve felt it before, felt pressured to kiss someone or make up with someone just because it’s what you’re supposed to do. I don’t like being shackled, controlled, I want to control… and yet I don’t even know how.” She glared at the costume as if it were a dreaded enemy. No longer sad at it, now angry and ready for a fight. “What am I supposed to do about all that?”

I realized it’d stopped being about me somewhere in there, but I took a breath. “Is it her persistence?”

“Maybe. That makes me think that what she wants isn’t what I want. But… she’s also young for me.”

I bit my lip. “Oh?”

“Am I taking advantage of her because I think she’s be more willing to bend over and do whatever I wanted.”

“Bend over backwards?” I asked.

“…yeah,” Parian said, looking up at me, her face even more blank than her mask. “Just… it’s a selfish, stupid way to go about it. You are afraid she just wanted you for sex? But she started by telling you that she wanted to have sex.”

“I wanted more than that.”

“And she promised more than that?”

“Girlfriends is more than that,” I said. “What we had was more than that. But if it was all just window dressing.” I realized I was circling around, saying the same things I’d always said, doing the same things I’d always done.

I was a dog circling the very end of my leash, straining to move beyond it. Trapped, but a different sort of trap, one that a boot couldn’t just fix.

“Maybe it was. Though if so, then weren’t both of you kinda dressing it up?”

I blinked, and then realized that, well. It was more than that to me, but there had been something physical at the start, and its lack had hurt. Looked over at Parian, and wondered how to explain it to her. She was older than me, so maybe she’d understand: I at once wanted the physical and our relationship had started with that, but I wanted it to be more than that, and couldn’t stand the idea of it being only that.

The clock ticked for a moment as I thought, and she got back to sewing, not even using her power, her fingers nimbly making the costume. It looked… I frowned, looking at it closer. “Maybe, and this? Who is it for?”

“Nobody,” Parian said, firmly. “You should really go. You can listen in and watch me if you want, I can’t stop you. But you’re right: if you had reasons break up with her, then break up with her. Don’t go wishing for some different her. She’s what you’ll get if you want her. And you don’t. So it seems simple enough to me.”

I took a breath. She was right. If it was that simple, it was that simple. She seemed frustrated and open, and I really did want to push her. I opened my mouth, not sure what to ask. Maybe that was a sign that I shouldn’t. I’d just make a fool of myself, I bet. After all, I was a kid compared to her, and
maybe I shouldn’t talk about all of the things I might. But then, who else was there to talk with? But maybe another time. Maybe when there was something to talk about. When the private wasn’t already being hung up like dirty laundry.

Parian approved of what I did… but why did that not completely feel like a good thing?

********

Monday came, and Monday went. I kept on waiting for it to happen, for another attack, but the Butcher seemed to be busy. I wasn’t sure what she was busy doing, but either way, I was ready for the attack.

Anything to get rid of the feeling that I was making a mistake, when the truth was that everything I’d said still stood. At the very least, she’d…

I’d cut myself off there, because if I got myself worked up and angry, it wouldn’t stop. The camp seemed to tiptoe around me, and everyone was smiling in the kind of way I couldn’t really believe, where you knew they were worried.

The camp continued as it had: another dozen people showed up on Monday, in ones and twos, bringing stories of tyranny, of people chained up and sold off. It seemed as if she even had a market, of sorts, and yet where could the money be in all of this? It wasn’t as if she was going to start a plantation, and sex slaves were…

It just didn’t completely make sense, it was so pointless, but that was that. So while she created her own slave society and sacked and slaughtered, apparently cutting through the E88 territory, I sat in camp and considered the difficulty of not having enough toilets, or running out of toilet paper and having to send people out running for some more before the entire campground to a halt.

I was distracted, but not distracted enough.

Tuesday came, dull and bleary, warm of course, but nothing more than that. It felt like it was going to rain, but it was the humidity, rather than any real chance that rain would wash anything away.

******

I saw them coming, of course. I was sitting in my tent, Rachel’s stuff still there, wondering just when she’d actually leave. As long as she was here, still just out of reach, she was going to keep haunting me. But I didn’t want to go and tell her to just leave already, because…

Because I didn’t want that. Or I wanted it, but that wasn’t the same as needing it, and what I needed was for this all to just be okay.

My powers meant that they couldn’t surprise me, Cassie and Stefanie, heading towards me, the latter out of costume and looking troubled, at least as far as my bugs could tell. They buzzed and hummed around the pair, who stopped in front of my tent. “Arachne,” Stefanie said, her voice quiet and uncertain, “We have news.”

“Come in,” I said, setting down the useless book, the cover bright red but the contents as dull as a concrete wall. It felt like the book was holding me back from the interesting parts of the story, as if it were the first volume of a trilogy and they couldn’t get readers too interested or they’d run out of things to say.

Cassie smiled uncertainly, the two biracial girls in very different moods. “Hey, we got news. Good news.”
“What news?”

“Well, the bad news first,” Stefanie said. “She has the news reports, but the Butcher has taken over a lot of the E88’s territory, and there’s widespread reports of violence, especially from… people getting revenge.” Stefanie didn’t sound as pained about that as she perhaps should.

I couldn’t blame her at all. “Ah, and?”

“Apparently Grue has been driven out of his territory, as has Regent. The Undersiders faced off with the Teeth and lost, and were driven back, and so now the remnants of that gang are struggling to hold off the Butcher. If they fall, then next is…”

“Coil and Accord?” I guessed.

“Yes,” Cassie said. “And neither of them are going to be able to stop the Butcher.”

I bit my lip. “Probably not, no.” There were other villains out there in theory: like where was Circus, where were Uber and Leet? But it really was pretty barren. “So, how long will the Butcher take in wiping them all out? Weeks? Days?”

“Accord is usually thought to be pretty tough, people are betting on him holding out. But Coil, nobody even knows what his power is,” Cassie said. “Online, at least.”

I didn’t know either, which was enough to worry me. It was enough to worry Tattletale, or she would have struck out on her own already, and he had Dinah locked up, using her whatever power…

There was a lot I didn’t know because of how secure his base was, but I knew enough to know that I had to act against Coil soon. If he was going to collapse, I needed to save Dinah to keep the Butcher from getting her hands on yet another innocent. Every day I spent caged up in this camp was another day I wasn’t taking the fight to the Butcher.

“When do they think she’ll attack me again?”

“Well, online the idea is that your… group, and they’re starting to debate names in earnest, is too strong for the Butcher to cross, and so she’d save it for last, if ever.”

I frowned, not sure I bought that sort of puffery. It was just bold words, nothing more. “Yeah, that’s real likely.”

“I don’t think so either,” Cassie said. “Especially with the fighting.”

I sighed. “Yes?”

“She’s broken up about you not being there. She’s asked me about you,” Cassie said, accusingly, looking at me with hard, disbelieving eyes.

“And what did you say?” I asked, the words slipping out fast and hard, stomping sorts of words that didn’t walk when they could thunder. “It’s okay, she’s just herself, let me spread my arms wide, and I’ll shelter you?”

Cassie’s smile grew fragile, but it wasn’t Cassie who snapped.

“Don’t say something like that! Cassie has been nothing but polite and helpful since she got here, and that was uncalled for!”
I tried not to snort. Uncalled for? She really was trying to talk like she was the adult in the room. But I took a breath, trying to see things reasonably. “Of course you’d take her side.”

“Her side? I want her to be happy. I’m sure you wanted the same thing,” Cassie said.

“Fine.” I crossed my arms, gritting my teeth and looking at Cassie, who looked straight at me back, not breaking eye contact, her eyes unreadable. “How is she?”

“She’s cried. Not a lot, but… she’s in a horrible mood and she asks about you. About how you’re doing?”

“She cried? When?”

“At night,” Cassie said. “What? Did you think she didn’t have a heart? She’s been helping dogs her whole life, she--”

“Hurt people. People who are going to sue, and going to wipe us all out.”

“Unless she leaves? Unless you drive her away?” Cassie accused.

“Me? Drive her away? I figured she’d leave on her own once she realized I meant it, and that I wasn’t someone she could just… I tried breathing in and out. “She’s going to leave. And I’m better… I don’t want her to, but that’s because I’m a fool.” A fool still in love, but… there were different kinds of love, and there was a point where I wasn’t going to bang my head against the wall. I wasn’t wrong, she was the one who had caused the problems.

“Maybe she will,” Stefanie said. “I don’t know, but we do have news with the five lawsuits. One of the people agreed to drop their lawsuit if Rachel apologized… genuinely, but she was willing to accept it in writing. And another of them, one of the minor cases, is willing to settle for just a few thousand. One or two, at most. Something we can pay.”

I frowned, “Oh?”

“We talked with a lawyer. Or rather…” Stefanie said. “I kinda talked to your Dad who got us a lawyer who knew his stuff. We’re going to have to pay out for all of the cases that go forward, but we might be able to get them to settle, and as long as she’s a hero, and we pay a lawyer to do the work, we can slow-walk it.”

“Slow walk?” I asked, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“We’ll lose… in two years, once it finishes getting through the court system, if we really fight it,” Cassie said. “And if she’s still a hero then, then I doubt the judge will charge more than damages. Same for any of the cases. Time’s on our side.”

For her, for me, for anyone who was a teenager whose life had changed multiple times in the last few months, that was forever. I blinked, feeling as if someone had finally…

No. It was still a problem. I shouldn’t be relieved just because her acts had--

A little voice deep down inside me reminded me of how many people I’d hurt. I’d blinded people in violent spite, and thought nothing more of it. And I had my reasons, and so did she. But her reasons were wrong. None of the people who were hurt deserved it, I thought, trying to explain myself. Or perhaps I should just admit that I was flawed too. But what about the camp, what about that?

I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “Well… that’s great. Until we know she’s left, we should
Then I realized, no matter what, I didn’t want her to suffer. Of course, if she left, I doubted they’d be able to catch her to actually force her to pay with money she didn’t have. Still, looking from worried face to worried face, “Even if she does leave, continue the stalling. We have the money for it, though I bet if she leaves the BitchZone leaves with her.”

“People care about you too,” Cassie said, but a little weakly. It was true that, bizarre as it was considering how I was apparently viewed as a leader, it was everyone else who had the online reputation. Stefanie who had given the interview, Parian who was a known entity, Charlotte and Stefanie (again) who did most of the work with the camp, Rachel who, despite not going online at all, had somehow inspired a movement that had probably saved the camp.

If it hadn’t been for that, how could we have afforded to keep all of this up? Maybe it’d be best if we hadn’t: after all, these people were still here, still in the line of sight for the Teeth, but giving up this area would have meant the Merchants would have expanded, unchecked, and would have been a menace… and probably still would have fallen to the Teeth. So, all in all, I couldn’t say that it was a bad thing that a bunch of people online liked her.

I liked her too. Or I had, and I could still remember things about her. The way she could soften into something, if given enough time. The fact that she cared, really cared, about her dogs. If only she could understand that people mattered too.

She was just so frustrating, but the fact that the situation could be managed meant… it was especially important that I should have talked to her about the specific allegations.

I’d need to do so, even if we remained broke up. It could give me an excuse… reason. Reason to talk to her again. “Thank you,” I said to Cassie’s response. “I’ll need to think about this. You have it all well in hand.”

“Good, though I was hoping,” Stefanie began.

“Yes?”

“That you’d go and talk to Rachel now,” Stefanie said.

“I’ll consider it. I really will,” I said, frowning a little. “I hope you don’t think I’m not listening to you when you give advice.”

“I know you’re listening,” Stefanie said. “Cassie, could you step away for a second?”

“Sure,” Cassie said, rather more chipper than I would have been at being excluded.

Once she was gone, Stefanie said. “Don’t mind that Cassie’s a little partisan. So were you. I’m not on her side, but I am on the side that maybe it’d be better if you talked, even if it was just to cordially break up instead of turning it into…”

“I’m not that sort of person, though,” I admitted. “That a cordial breakup would make sense.”

“You and Rachel aren’t my parents, but you’d seemed to have something that worked, and I wanted it to keep on working.” She looked younger now, looking at me with something like frustration. “I know that’s childish.”

“You’re one of the more mature people I know,” I said. “A lot more mature than I can be, arguing and fighting and yelling. I’ll talk to her. Soon. Maybe this weekend.” I knew I was putting it off, but
such was life. “Give it a few days to cool off.

*******

Time passed slowly when I was waiting. I hated being confined, and this wasn’t just about the locker. I’d been the kind of kid to leap out of bed and try to go exploring when I had a fever, unless one of my parents sat by my bed and played with me, entertained my fickle mind.

Now I waited. I wanted to talk to her, but… was she really crying over me? Surely Cassie was lying, but I didn’t want to check. Because what if she was lying? Or even worse, what if she wasn’t.

I’d feel bad either way, but there were different kinds of regret, and different ways I could approach the problem. So I hesitated. On Wednesday it rained away half the day and I just spent the time in my tent, keeping the bugs out to see if the Butcher was going to do anything else. I knew it’d happen, sooner rather than later.

I’d be ready. This time, I decided, there was going to be no retreating, no hesitation and no running away. I wasn’t going to kill her, if only because that wouldn’t end well, but I wasn’t going to stand for her shit.

If I had to kill all of the other capes on her team, and drive her off in fear of her life, I’d do it. Who was going to blame me? It was the Teeth: though that was a thought that justified far too many horrible things.

But I couldn’t hold back. I needed to defeat the Butcher in order to protect my own. To protect the things, and the people, that mattered most to me.

I had a lot of plans.

Of course I never got to enact them.

******

I woke up on Thursday morning, bleary and confused. Someone was moving around, and I opened my eyes. For some brief moment I expected to see Rachel. I didn’t know why, because it made no sense at all. But that’s what I expected, and when I didn’t see her, it felt as if I’d been hit hard in the chest.

Instead it was Charlotte. She wasn’t in her costume, and her eyes were dark, circles around them marking her out as someone tired.

“Taylor,” she said.

“Wuh?” I asked. I wasn’t a morning person, and so I groaned when I got up, rubbing at my head, aware that I wasn’t sparsely dressed. “Yes?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Can it wait?”

“No, no it can’t.” She bit her lip and said, “I… figured something out. Something bad. I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

“What?”

“I was thinking about what I’ve said, right before you went to talk to Rachel. What people have done
when I said something, and…”

She hesitated, and there was something about to overflow in those eyes, as if she were on the verge of a crying jag. “It’s okay,” I said.

“No. It isn’t.”

“It isn’t?” I asked.

“No. I… I think I have another power.”

I blinked slowly, sleepily, looking at her for a moment. “Like a… second trigger?” I’d heard people talking about it online, way back when. Always speculating about what a cape they liked would look like with one. Usually the ideas were basically expressions of fannish pride more than anything else: imagining ways that the cape you liked could be even more awesome.

“No. I… something I didn’t notice. Something that nobody noticed. I was having an argument with one of them, and then we stopped arguing, and someone tried to get us to make up by testing powers together.” Charlotte’s nose wrinkled, as if the whole idea was odious. “Then when I said something… it doesn’t make sense, does it? Why do I give orders to people before they get the powers? What’s the point of that: unless that’s just it, to give them orders.”

I was slow on the uptake, so I didn’t realize where she was going with this. “Okay?”

“It’s not okay.”

“Okay,” I repeated, holding a hand up, and rubbing my eyes. I was hungry, too, and I really had to go to the bathroom. I was in no mood to really follow through the point. “So?”

“I think I can control people. Or… influence what they do,” she said.

This time I blinked slower, my brain churning through the first implications. “What? Really?”

“…I think so. It’s the only thing that makes sense. I’ve told people to do things and they’ve done so even when they’re opposed. And not even realized it.”

“Oh,” I said, and now my thoughts were moving fast. “You what?!” I sprang forward, grabbing onto her as I bared her back. I wasn’t a fighter, but I was pretty fit, and I had the element of surprise. “You did what?”

“I… deserve this. I ruined things,” Charlotte said. “I didn’t even know.”

“You didn’t? Or you didn’t want me to know because you…” I stopped myself, taking a deep breath, but the rage was there, boiling beneath the surface. I wanted to hurt her. If this was true, and I was sure it was, then it was her fault!

She really had turned me against Rachel.

But had she? She’d used her powers on me, without my permission, in ways that disturbed me, but her advice had been to talk to Rachel to make things right. To confront her, but in a way she had to assume was positive.

The words had been mine. If there hadn’t been a storm brewing, then I would have thanked her for getting me to finally talk to her and clear up the desultory clouds. Except they’d been a storm instead. And Rachel… had noticed it?
Had noticed the way that when Charlotte talked, I listened, and even did what she told me to do. She’d been the one to encourage me to take charge, encouraged me again and again. She clearly didn’t want power, or she would have recognized what she could do far earlier and used it to take over. I wouldn’t have even noticed, if I was this oblivious.

Because I was a fucking moron. Apparently.

“You really didn’t. You don’t want this,” I said. “But you’ve fucked everything up anyways.”

“I…”

“We can start a club,” I said, quietly, gritting my teeth. “We can start a fucking club.”

“Um,” Charlotte said, uncertainly.

“Don’t use your power on… wait.” I held up a hand, thoughts whirring through my head, most of them useless, like: did her power not work on animals, or was it that animals didn’t obey her commands? They obeyed Rachel’s. Or didn’t have brains in general, in the case of my bugs. “Me, or anyone else. Keep this on the downlow, but… keep it in mind. We’ll have a reckoning soon, you know that, right?”

“Yes,” Charlotte said in a small, terrified voice. “Why not now?”

I took a breath. “Because I have a girlfriend to talk to.” I looked down at her, and then thought about a few other things I needed to do. Like get dressed.

“…within the hour,” I added, flushing deep scarlet.

Had she betrayed me? If she didn’t know what she’d done, then no. And yet I felt betrayed. Just like Rachel had, just like I had.

I needed to talk to her.

I needed to make this right.

Chapter End Notes

Taylor’s, well. Bad at relationships, as I’ve pointed out before.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The dead had plenty of tales to tell, but then so did the living. She crouched in front of the screen, frowning, trying to bring it all together. She’d been working on this so, so long. She’d been struggling with it for so long. She had nothing to compare it to, of course.

She’d always been about short-term goals. Lisa Wilbourne had lived first from grade to grade, and then from meal to meal, all the way up until she’d been captured and forced to be more than that. Even now, she sometimes thought too narrowly. Lisa was working on it, but it was a hard thing to buck.

Her little area in the apartments they’d moved into was very small, and very cramped, a rat’s nest of cups, plates, and papers, all of them purposefully disorganized. All the better not to be seen for what they really were.

Nowadays, she barely slept a few hours each day, and sometimes there was even less than that: she’d been busy, and part of what she was doing was on her laptop, right here. It wasn’t secure, but that’s why she didn’t write down or email anything important to anyone.

At the moment she was in a forum, typing a post. “I think they should be called the Pack. It makes sense, doesn’t it? Arachne and Bitch are the center of the whole team, the couple, and those around them are like their family. A Pack, thus. I think it is perfectly logical and reasonable, when you think about it. Pack! Pack! What a perfec”

“Hey! Whatchu doing, nerd?” Regent asked, smirking a little bit. Alec was a very pretty boy, and the fact that she didn’t find him attractive was at least one piece of evidence that really, she never was and never would be interested in other people.

But she did find him amusing, especially the way he acted around her even after she’d all but taken over the gang. In everything but the technicalities, she now ran the Undersiders, something she couldn’t have imagined doing even two months ago. It was enough to run anyone ragged, especially since her plans were ones that Coil wouldn’t approve of.’

At all.

Of course, nowadays she spent all of her time thinking about Coil’s goals… and then thinking of ways to thwart them.

“Nerd stuff,” Lisa said, smiling at Regent as he read her comment.

“Man, you really liked Rachel, did you? With all you’re doing with this stupid stick up for them and intimidate and bribe people thing. What next? Will you show up in court when…” Regent said it all casually, clearly not giving a shit about what she answered, really just wanting to know her answer because it’d relieve his boredom.

And certainly, Regent had cause to be bored lately. After all, they’d been driven out of their territory, and now were on standby, waiting for the circumstances of the big push-back that would deal with the Butcher for good.

If Coil actually had a way to win, at this point. He apparently had given up on the possibility of the
Pack—as Lisa was going to insist on calling them until it stuck—solving his problem for him. Coil’s plan instead seemed to be a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Ambitious, but seemingly assuming that the Butcher would solve herself for him.

For the first time since she’d known him, Lisa started to consider the possibility that Coil was not in control of events.

That wasn’t going to stand, of course, he was going to try to find a way to get back in the saddle, but Lisa had noticed something very, very important about his power. It was the simplest thing in the world, something a child could have figured out, and in fact Aisha did the moment Lisa put the facts to her.

“No, that’d only hurt her case. But I don’t see any reason why we shouldn’t help the Pack. I think they’re alright, and I wish that Coil would just see how much good they could do against the Butcher. No matter how--”

“Whoa, whoa. I’m not your goddamn audience,” Regent said. “I don’t give a shit. Just do whatever plotting you think is necessary and leave me to throw peanuts at people.”

“Well, that’s good. As long as you’re mostly throwing them on the bad guys,” Lisa said with a smile that shared with him just a little of that sarcastic cynicism that was his stock in trade. The way he couldn’t find it in him either to give a shit… or allow others to stand there self-righteous and sure of themselves.

“Oh, you know it, girl,” Regent said, playfully, then he shrugged. “You know, if we could get close enough, I could control the Butcher. Imagine her under our control. It’d be like piloting some sort of… of… come on, you’re a nerd, give me something.”

“Gundam?” Lisa offered with a shrug. It’d been her brother who’d been the closet geek, the one who had always followed the developments in alternate-universe Japan.

“Yeah, one of those or whatever. What do you say? C’mon, does your plan involve me having any fun, at least?”

“Plenty, actually,” Lisa said, quietly. “For one, I think I know at least one cape that’d really help you if we could just grab him. It isn’t the Butcher, but I’ve always wanted a flyer, and the Teeth have one.”

“Ah, is that all it takes to make you happy?” Regent asked. “Step back boys, unless you can fly?”

“Or girls. Anyone, as long as they can go up.” Lisa shook her head. “We also need a brute, yesterday.”

“God, we got creamed out there,” Regent said, then frowned. “Where did that saying even come from?”

Creamed? She could imagine, and no doubt her powers could tell her, but part of being smart was not getting a headache right before the biggest possible event imaginable.

She’d not realized that when she first got her powers, but sometimes you had to control what you knew and when.

“Dunno. What I do know is that you should go and talk to Aisha.”

“About what?”
Lisa gave him a sidelong look.

“Oh, right. All knowing nerdling,” Regent said, casually. “Of course you realized.”

“I’m not going to tell Brian.”

“Good, then I’ll not have to kill you.” He said it so casually, but it wasn’t as if he hadn’t killed before. So perhaps he really meant it. Certainly, Lisa knew that she wasn’t liable to be able to just tell everyone that he was misunderstood.

Except he was, to an extent. She understood Regent rather more than she’d ever understood Rachel, honestly. Even Aisha was less of a mystery than that girl: besides the obvious.

Besides the fact, Lisa thought as she pressed ‘post’ that she was clearly deeply in love with Taylor, if unable quite to express it.

That much was so obvious that it’d take a fool to miss it.

“Well, good. I hadn’t been planning on dying,” Lisa said. “A little too busy for that.”

Alec snorted. “You should get something to eat, and pause the shitposting.”

“You?” Lisa asked, flipping to a secondary account on another site as she began to type something. “Tell me to stop…”

“Hypocrisy keeps the demons away,” Alec said, with a lazy little wave.

******

The first lesson that Coil seemed to have missed was that of networking. His view of the world seemed only to narrow as the pieces fell off the board, as the game changed. He didn’t seem to understand, all of a sudden, just how much these online struggles and shifting understandings mattered.

He didn’t get; or he did and didn’t realize the implications, that if it wasn’t for Lisa, then the Pack would turn on Coil and kill him. She was keeping them at arm’s length, trying to justify both fear of them and yet not elimination, and she was doing it all because after a brief spout of worry, Coil had decided that Arachne was at most a long-term worry, and one that he could use to his own advantage.

The peanut gallery was going to keep on throwing peanuts, but they mattered. They filled seats, and they helped create a landscape that all of his understanding seemed not to fully grasp.

It was bizarre, because all of his plays were about reputation, but he missed that last part of it. The way he’d discredited the E88, the way he was trying to line up people against the Teeth without actually considering the Protectorate… or maybe he simply assumed that he’d sweep Piggot out of the way.

When Lisa was on top, she’d be far more careful.

******

She finally took his advice an hour later, crouching down and opening the fridge. One thing about living with a bunch of other teenagers was that their choice in food was horrible. Brian had his beer that he nursed now that things had turned south, then there was pizza, candy that Aisha had thrown in there even though it didn’t need to be chilled, a few, very lonely looking pieces of fruit, every
condiment known to man despite none of them being used…

Lisa was just inspecting the salsa and considering whether three days expired would really be that bad. After all, they did guesstimate a little bit with these things, and there were chips, at least, in the pantry.

At least, there had been, and she wasn’t going to use her powers to check on that either.

Or she could always have pizza, but she didn’t feel like it.

There was probably some moral lesson in the fact that she could at once plot for the life of her and everyone she had come to care for, and also worry about pizza taste, and whether there was any ranch, or why everyone had ordered pizza that only one of them liked.

Aisha, for instance, had a terrible taste. Or rather, she liked to order absolutely vile pizza and then hog it to herself. Or see the look on people’s faces. Toppings that just shouldn’t be on a pizza, and certainly not in combination. Pineapple and mushroom?

Lisa smiled slightly, knowing that since she could think of Aisha, that meant that either she hadn’t yet gone in for the check-up on the camp that Lisa had finally ordered, or she was back from it and she’d soon had company.

As it was, the door opened and she stood up holding the box of pizza as Brian stumbled in, bleeding.

Brian was a big guy, tough and strong, even if she’d become increasingly sure that for all of his leadership skills, he just didn’t understand the complexities that were involved with the… well what to call it? There was a ‘side game’ in this game of crime bosses, and it involved the vials.

She’d managed to reason out a lot about the kind of people who would just sell these, and none of it was good. But if they hadn’t already interfered, then they weren’t going to do so, at least not anytime soon.

As to why Coil had to go through Accord rather than ordering it directly? Lisa couldn’t quite make sense of that, and even her power had seemed a little vague on the specifics.

“Grue,” Lisa said, hurrying forward. He wasn’t in his costume, but the costume was draped over his shoulder, so he must have gotten out of it before he got in here.

He stumbled towards the couch, which was old and gross enough that it wouldn’t really be made any more intolerable by someone bleeding on it. So she let him, even as she reached under the couch and dug out the first aid kit she kept there.

“How bad is it?” Lisa asked.

“How bad is it?” Lisa asked.

“Over a thousand people are running. The Butcher’s taken over most of our former territory, and the people we’re protecting… she’s been killing some of them. Any of the ones who were working with us that didn’t leave when we told them to get out.” Brian frowned. “I went back.”

Lisa started, “You what?”

“Needed to grab a few things. At least a dozen people dead. At random. She’s making fucking examples. She’s losing her mind.”
Lisa frowned and began to realize that it was quite possibly literal in this sense. But the kind of literal that led to a mountain of dead bodies. “Ah, and so everyone is fleeing rather than live under her rule?”

“Yes. The camps are clogging, just as they were about to… you know.”

Lisa had done a careful analysis of just what would happen over the next year, and the first step was for the camps to finally start shrinking in favor of housing, both public and otherwise. It’d have to happen. Even the camp was temporary, though the more that Lisa observed it, the more she expected it to create its own little sub-community when it spilled out. A neighborhood of sorts, bound by the hardships, the troubles…

But that was optimistic talk at the moment, while the Teeth had free reign.

“I do,” Lisa said, as she pulled out the bandages and began to work. “Is Coil still going to do it on Friday? Did you check with him?”

“Yeah… you sure about it?” Brian was frowning, uncertain and no doubt plotting retreat if she had doubts.

“Yes. Those vials are our replacements. He can’t accept us, we’ve been weakened too much.” Without Rachel, they really weren’t that powerful: she was their movement and their heavy hitting combined, and so her departure for good had been completely contrary to any of Coil’s plans. Not that he’d ever admit that.

On Friday he was organizing a huge trade with Accord. Six more vials, this time given away in person. Enough to build up an army he hoped would deal with the Butcher. And he could make it from people far more loyal than, say, Lisa.

Or Regent or Aisha or Grue. He could send them in the path of the Butcher or just quietly eliminate them, and there were other deals to be made.

Accord had promised to send Coil some beggars, a team that apparently needed help, and had been forced to temporarily stay under Accord’s thumb in exchange for his own… efforts to find a cure.

Within a week or two of the meeting, the Travelers would be here, and the Undersiders would be even more badly outnumbered.

And still he smiled, and no doubt assured them that a few of the vials would join the Undersiders as team members.

“Brian, are you in? We’re going to that meeting, and we’ll see from there.”

“I am,” Brian said. “The way he smiles, you know the bastard’s planning something.”

He winced as Lisa finished bandaging him up, but that was a good thing. Because he’d certainly be necessary. They’d need everyone they could get if the first plan failed.

“Just be careful. You didn’t give anything away, did you?”

“You haven’t told me anything to give away. Just that we shouldn’t trust him and that it keeps up…”

Lisa knew that he had to be asking Dinah about their loyalty. There were so many things going on at once, though, that hopefully it’d slip down the chart. After all, he was committing most of the rest of the money he had on that. He’d spent a fortune on the first set, and this second set? He’d win or he’d
go broke.

Maybe both.

Lisa needed the deal not to go through, because that money... it was the only way she was going to fulfill her end of the bargain.

Now if only Aisha would show up.

******

Second there was the treachery. Nobody trusted him. Nobody believed he'd carry through on his promises, not if they actually took the time to listen to him. People trusted Lisa, and she was using this to build up her response. As long as she held the trust of Grue, as long as he knew exactly what was going on here with Coil's plans, then that was enough.

And Accord? Accord didn't need to be told that Coil was treacherous, but whatever hint of friendship they had... that's the target. Sometimes you didn't have to destroy someone, sometimes you could focus on instead using word of mouth to let them destroy themselves.

Sometimes you let them push themselves further and further out there, and then shone a spotlight on them, and show the world what they are... and where they were. At the end of a long, long limb. And there it was. There was the moment when the branch creaked, where everyone looked and pointed, and he was still oblivious to the idea that he wasn't someone who inspired loyalty.

Lisa would inspire loyalty. Lisa knew that she could be a lesser evil than Coil at his best, that she could make the Undersiders great, and in doing so begin to build something at last. The city needed her, and perhaps it was just Arachne, knowing her and seeing her.

Or perhaps these were urges that she'd been suppressing for so long that when it came out, it seemed like from nowhere. Once she had refused to allow herself to be used, refuse to be a piece, rather than the player, in a game. Once she'd written stupid, rich-girl essays about what she'd do to alleviate poverty.

Step one of Lisa's new plan to make Brockton Bay a better place started with a dead snake.

*******

Aisha was late.

Lisa didn't pace, or complain. She understood that there was something important that she was waiting for, even when she didn't remember Aisha. She just sat and read the book, which was a work of history. History at least was simpler, in that predicting what would happen wasn't quite so easy, and it provided useful information. The journey and the destination were both separate, as well.

How things happened mattered as much as that they happened. It looked like a line, but it was something other than that, something far more interesting, and--

"Boo!"

"Ah!" Lisa said, loudly, even though she wasn't surprised. "Aisha, good to see that you're back."

"Imp, reporting for duty, and we have bad news, boss."

"What?"
“Everyone’s favorite couple’s still broken up.”

Lisa frowned, “I might have to push them back together somehow, if this keeps up.”

“And here I was, wanting to, uh.” Imp glanced away. She was in her costume, and Aisha’s costume was very basic, but enough to blunt the impact of what she was implying.

“Wait, again?” Lisa asked.

Aisha had admitted that once, curiously, she’d sorta… stuck around in the area when Rachel and Taylor were doing what young couples everywhere did.

Which seemed to Lisa to be a case of being far, far too nosy, more than anything.

“Hey, I mean. What if they did pillow talk that was important?” Imp asked. “Wasn’t there that book about the Romero Men?”

“Romeo Men,” Lisa corrected. Soviet spies who’d slept their way to important secrets, since everyone tended to overlook the women who wrote the documents that were classified.

It was not the first case of a woman being overlooked, and it was certainly not the last. Up until now. Still, it was going a little too far. Rachel and Taylor had their own private relationship, and nobody should meddle too closely or watch it, other than Lisa, who was just doing it for their own good.

She was going to meddle in the right way, for the right reasons, which is what really mattered. “Yeah, those,” Aisha said. “So what are you going to do to get them together?”

“I… don’t know yet,” Lisa admitted, frowning. “Surely they should be perfect together?”

“I thought so. It’s kinda cute, in a weird way. Though Rachel’s a lot more badass than Taylor, you know!”

“Different people have different opinions,” Lisa said, thoughtfully. Taylor wasn’t perfect, and sometimes what rubbed off on her from Rachel was the exact wrong set of instincts to be a team leader. But she was learning, that much was obvious. She’d managed to luck and fight her way into a team, and she was going to keep on getting better at it, given time.

She was a smart girl, and she didn’t even have a power to make it better, to help show her the obvious things, like why her brother died. Yet she was also someone who apparently held a grudge.

“Yeah, but the other people are dumb,” Aisha said, with an outstretched tongue to show her opinion of them.

“Tomorrow at noon, you should show up to see if they’ve made up. I have to tell them tomorrow night,” Lisa said. “Either way, you need to pass on the message for me.”

It was Aisha that was the key. Without her, this entire plot fell to pieces, and she was someone that Coil couldn’t really plan for. She’d be nearby and yet… not quite, as the third and final backup plan.

Aisha had never murdered anyone.

But Lisa would ask her to do it, if that’s what the team needed.

“I can do that,” Aisha said. “But what if they’re watching me? Can’t you use that radio I stole?”

“I… might, but I’m not sure if I should trust Artificer. He gets excitable, and I know that Coil…”
There it was. Coil had to know at least a little about what Artificer did, but the question was whether he could find a way to hack it. It was unlikely, but what if he had an agent in the camp?

No. Not what if. He had an agent in the camp, but Taylor was purposefully playing it all close to her chest, in a way that gave Lisa a little hope that she’d learn.

That she’d show some sense and be amenable to the final part of the plan.

“Oh, right. Well, that works,” Aisha said. “I’m tired, do you need anything from me?”

“No, I don’t,” Lisa said, and noted that when Aisha turned to walk off, she was actually going in the direction of Alec’s own small room, rather than her closet. Yes, she had turned a closet into a room. No, Lisa didn’t get why.

Lisa frowned, and knew that she’d have to tell Brian very, very soon: and also that he’d probably noticed but was in denial.

*******

“Are you sure?” Accord asked, quietly. Denial was not something that he engaged in that often, but he’d trusted Coil.

Wrongly, in fact. Coil wasn’t betting all his money on six vials. He was betting all his money on his ability to murder Accord.

Take the vials for himself. Use Regent’s power to co-opt one of the Ambassadors, and eliminate the rest… and then seize all of Accord’s funds and contacts.

“I am.”

“If that is so, then we can talk. You’ll be ready if there is a sign of betrayal?”

Coil could avoid acting, realize that going against Coil was a mistake… but in that case, the deal would go through, and the Undersiders would be forced to go after Coil anyways, to steal the vials and survive.

“We will be,” Lisa said quietly, nodding. “And in exchange, we can keep the vials we have? You keep the money, excepting a… hundred-thou finder’s fee.”

“Yes. This seems equitable.”

Three vials, and a hundred thousand dollars. It wasn’t much to try to take over Coil’s entire organization and run it as he did, but it was enough to try. And the vials that Aisha had taken were the ones most likely to give direct powers of the sort that they needed.

“Good,” Lisa said quietly. “We shouldn’t talk too long. I’ve sent you the papers and information on my analysis of his choice.”

That was what she’d been spending all of her time and all of her headaches on. Because if she could get Accord to eliminate Coil, then…

But would it be Accord who eliminated Coil?

That remained to be seen.

Lisa grinned, broad and confident--confidence masking uncertainty--and finished the call with a few
more details, and hung up.

It was Wednesday night. Soon.

********

And that was it. The final fact. That you could win every battle and lose the war.

Imagine, say, a man is considering a simple question: to go through with an operation or not to go through with an operation. He considers the pros and cons, and in one timeline this man doesn’t. In the other he does, and Arachne is directed like a wrecking ball towards his enemies, who suffer and bleed, while being warned off of directly going after Coil or his assets, the Undersiders.

Say you are Coil: clearly you should keep this timeline, and not the one where you did nothing. It was clearly the better one.

And each time, each time a certain tattletale feeds you more and more lies, more and more a diet of victories that hide defeat within them. You can’t go back, you can’t reload to before you let it happen, and you need victories.

When she helps push Panacea towards proactiveness with a subtle push at the right moment--nothing more than a target for her to lash out at--who can really disagree with the idea? After all, it led to the spectacle of the E88 pressed on all sides, even by a healer… a healer whose weak attachment to New Wave made her ripe for the pickings, should this man truly conquer the city.

Because, as this tattletale knew, you planned on controlling both sides of the game. Planned on talking out of both sides of your mouth. So a hero, an unstable, clearly grieving hero, could be useful.

So you let it play. Again and again you closed off options and avenues: victory could be like that, could catch you by surprise.

Lisa hadn’t planned to become a future Warlord. She hadn’t planned to think about doing something good for the city. She’d just seen a way forward, a way to survive.

A world where she could live, and also Arachne and Rachel as well, at least for a time. It was a fleeting vision, like a single line of a fast-moving chat conversation that you searched through the logs for. But even this fleeting vision was important.

Even trapped, couldn’t he just slither out of his skin? If Accord acted, who was to say it wouldn’t be a body-double. The man had one, and nothing could be done to the double, because Coil would rightly understand that this was an attempt to narrow down his options.

But let us say that the ambush didn’t happen all at once, until he was committed… and at the same time, say.

Someone else was going after him.

Lisa was going to get him coming and going.

So after she hung up with Accord, she prepared to contact Taylor.

Friday. It’d all end on Friday.
Lisa, as always, has a plan. Is it a good plan? It remains to be seen. Final Arc coming up.
My stomach was working itself into knots when I left the camp. I didn’t tell anyone other than Charlotte what I was going to do. I didn’t want to raise hopes, especially when it was still possible that I could just fail. I could start an argument, or she might decide she didn’t want to see me.

So I set out, glad that it was a nice day this morning, but not sure what I should be doing. My bugs were swarming around everywhere, crawling out of the fishbowls, and I wanted to make sure that I was watching for the Butcher when I talked to Rachel. As much as I wanted to fix… no, that wasn’t the right word.

As much as I wanted to talk this out, and figure out how things could work better, I didn’t want to do so at the cost of the Teeth coming at just the right moment. Or the wrong moment, rather.

I walked slowly and carefully, as if I was saving my strength. I imagined running, jogging. Really moving. Maybe that’d be better, but I wanted not to be out of breath, because I knew I had a lot I’d need to do.

A lot I’d need to say, too, but I knew it wasn’t just words that were needed. My stomach knotted itself around and around and around when I finally reached the shelter.

It was still early in the day, but the moment I stepped closer the dogs started barking, loud and clear. I knocked on the door to the shelter, and Cassie opened it up, staring at me in shock.

Behind me, there were a swarm of bugs, moving and straining at the leash, or so it looked, wanting to go pouring into the shelter and to see what was there.

“Where’s Rachel?” I asked.

“Out back,” Cassie said, her voice soft. “Should I…”

“Yes? Should you what?” I asked.

“Stop you.”

“From what?” I asked, frowning a little bit, curious and sizing her up. She seemed determined, if also tired, dressed in jeans and a slightly smelly T-shirt. It smelt, of course, of wet dogs. “Did she give any dogs a bath this morning?”

“Yes, she did,” Cassie admitted.

I felt pleased that I’d managed to draw in context, and I thought back to the routine we went through. “She’s going to be taking them back in soon, right?”

Rachel, for all that I’d thought she didn’t fit in, was a woman of routine. She wasn’t someone who veered off wildly, or did things that were unexpected as long as you understood her.

Of course, I hadn’t understood her, or at least not as well as I thought I had.

“Yes,” Cassie said.

“Well, then that’s my chance,” I said.

“For what?” Cassie asked.
“Action.”

******

By now, there were so many dogs that even I couldn’t keep track of all of their names. They swarmed like a bunch of bugs around Rachel’s legs as she opened the door from the back and let them in.

Big dogs, small dogs, it was just a tidal wave of dogs, and as soon as they saw me, some of them went right for me.

And there Rachel was, in short-sleeves and shorts, her second-hand boots laced tight. When she looked at me her eyes hardened for a moment, and she frowned.

But before she could say something either way I advanced, rubbing doggie ears and dealing with doggie licks the whole way. I took a breath, trying to get used to the smell of dogs. I’d forgotten just how strong it all was when you got a bunch of dogs together. Not that it was that different than with people.

Though dogs were a lot cuter than most people. I knelt down near her, and the dogs leapt right up into my lap, the better to lick my face.

I let it happen, trying to understand her mood. She seemed no different. Was she actually sad? Or had Cassie just been trying to make me feel bad in the hopes that I’d follow up on it and make up with Rachel.

I spent several minutes watching her, in between petting, and her watching me. Oddly, against my every expectation, she was the one who spoke first.

I’d been imagining her voice for a while, asking what I was doing here, angry and frustrated. Instead she sounded confused, “Taylor, what are you doing here?”

“Petting dogs,” I said, quietly, then realized that maybe she’d think I was mocking her. “I wanted to talk to you. If you want to come sit down.”

I was sitting on concrete, but over in a corner there was a treat area. “Or I could grab a few treats and we could feed them together.”

“Sure,” Rachel said, and her voice didn’t reveal anything as she walked over and grabbed and hauled up a huge bag of dog treats. It was heavy enough, and large enough, that I could see her arm muscles bulging slightly at the effort to carry it, and when she set it down, it made a very, very loud thump.

Then, from her shorts, she pulled out a pocket knife and began to work to open it. But her fingers were clumsy, and she was staring at me the whole time.

“I can do it,” I said, reaching over and gripping her hand in mine. It was warm, and I almost wanted to just try to skip past the worry and the uncertainty. She let go of the pocketknife as soon as I was holding it, and I worked to cut through it.

“Taylor,” Rachel said.

“Yes?”

“I’m... sorry.”
“For what?” I asked, a little startled.

“...being frustrated,” Rachel said. She was frowning deeper now, lines on her face, looking as if she was trying to work her way out from a dark thicket of thoughts and fears. “And saying things.”

“Some of them were true,” I said, cutting her off. “I… don’t want to just shrug and hug you and then go back to what we were doing before. If only because, if we do that, then where will we be?”

Rachel stared at me, not quite getting it.

“So, one of my concerns is that you’ll… leave. That you don’t care about this camp or anyone in it, and that I’m all that’s keeping you, and maybe not even me.” I frowned and looked away. “And it feels like… I’ve done plenty of shit to get closer to you, and I’ve loved doing it.” I reached a hand out to take her hand, as I cut open the top and scooped some treats out, their texture rough and jerky-like as I threw them towards the dogs, who scattered slightly and then began wolfing them down.

“What did all that mean?”

“Change is fucking stupid,” Rachel said, quietly.

I waited, aware that interrupting her would lead to nothing good.

“I don’t like it,” Rachel admitted.

She was a creature of habits, that much I understood.


“Yes?”

“I like that. And I’m not,” Rachel said, though she said it matter-of-fact, as if it didn’t matter except to the extent that…

Well, that it mattered to me.

“You like it?”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Duh.” She looked at me, her eyes softening for a moment. “But I’m not good at talking, and a bunch of fucking yap-yap-yap people who’re smarter than me are turning you against--”

“Charlotte wasn’t,” I said. “Turning me against you.” I took a breath. “But… did you think she was doing something?”

“It wasn’t natural,” Rachel said, bluntly, edging closer to me.

“She just figured it out. Her power lets her give commands that are more likely to be obeyed… if you’re using her power. I think the more you use it, the--”

Rachel stood up suddenly, springing up as if she were about to go storming out of the room.

“But she didn’t say anything to turn me against you,” I said. “She fucked up and didn’t even know it, but she always fucked up in the direction of trying to help.” I reached out and grabbed Rachel’s arm. “Fuck, you know me going to talk to you?”
“What?” Rachel asked, whipping her head around, murder in her eyes.

“She asked me to talk to you, and when she did she was using her powers. But she wanted me to make up with you instead of keeping up the cold front. She wasn’t the enemy that drove us apart… it was me.” I winced and added, “Mostly me.”

Rachel turned to look at me. “Why?”

And then I realized, through all of this. She’d been assuming that it was entirely Amp’s fault, that Amp was doing something and that if it wasn’t for her, I’d be totally happy and things would be just fine. It was easier to blame Amp than it was to blame me, because…

My knees felt a little weak as I followed that twisting line of logic and reasoning all the way to the end. Of course. Because she loved me, and she wanted to think anything at all, or in fact everything at all that doesn’t involve me being at fault. She’d rather blame the world than blame me, and that wasn’t necessarily a good way to look at things.

Because I was flawed, and I was a screw-up, and yet I couldn’t help but look at her in realization and appreciation.

“I was afraid. That you were just doing it because you were attracted to me.”

“I was,” Rachel said.

I blushed, aware of how obvious that statement was. “But just… because of that and nothing else. That you were just doing all of this shit because you liked my body.”

“No. I was doin’ it cause I like you,” Rachel said, and there was something incredulous in her voice now, as if she couldn’t believe that I had really been doubting that.

I frowned. “Me me, or just… fuck.” I shook my head, looking back at her, angry and frustrated at myself for not having the right words. I saw that same frustration staring back at me, which was odd. Or maybe what was odd was that there never were enough words, or the right ones, just to fix things.

I thought about meeting Rachel.

The moment, in retrospect, seemed so small compared to what else had come after it. Yet it had been right there, at the start. She had taken the lead, and I had been willing to follow her, willing to work with her. We’d both bent, and we’d not broken, unlike the E88 that night.

When did the idea of compromising with someone else begin to seem so difficult and impossible? Was it because that’s the way Rachel was, too? Stubbornness was not something either of us lacked.

“So, me. What is me?” I asked, frowning. “And what is you?”

Rachel looked at me again, and this time there was something blank and unyielding in that stare. I looked away and grabbed some more dog treats to scatter about, leading to yet another loud scuffle among the dogs. “What?” she asked.

“I mean…” I knew that I couldn’t really say it the right way. What was the her I’d fallen in love with, and what was the me that she thought she liked? I wasn’t sure if they were the same person as the actual people who were sitting here right now. I didn’t know what to do with that fact. She was so close I could smell her, feel her, she seemed as real as anything I’d ever seen. But what was I seeing but… what I wanted to see? A her that I’d constructed in my head, and I didn’t even know when it was it started.
Maybe it was when I started defending her.

I’d talked about how she wasn’t a murderer, and I’d advocated for her as hard as I could, I’d struggled and strived for just this situation. But then when it’d turned out that not having murdered people didn’t mean she’d somehow never hurt anyone or done anything wrong, I’d…

Fuck me.

I groaned.

“What is it?” Rachel asked, uncertainly. The dogs crowded closer to me, as if they could feel my distress, though I was pretty sure that none of their solutions would help.

“I stood up for you online. And to the Protectorate. I talked about how you weren’t a murderer, and it was true. But then… you have hurt people before, and you said it. You’re sorry, but not that sorry, and that’s just it.”

Rachel grunted. “Came out wrong.”

“Oh?”

“I’m… I did shit to survive.” Rachel frowned, and I knew that she too was struggling to find the right words to describe it.

But… I got what she meant. I nodded, looking closer at her blunt face, those dark eyes. “And now you don’t have to do those things. Or… only to people like the Teeth.” And even then, if we had Amp, then we could paper over that. She was violent, and I knew that that aggression could leak out.

But I’d been just fine when it’d been Sophia and Emma. I hadn’t turned on her for making me like that, for making me someone who was willing to lash out at my bullies. Even though I’d paid for it, I’d seen it as something I had to do.

Because maybe it was. I didn’t know where I’d be if it wasn’t for that suspension. I’d be suffering at school, miserable and falling apart, and… would Rachel have gone to the fight? Would I have gone alone and died?

I didn’t know.

In retrospect, we make our lives into stories, in which of course this happened, because that happened. Stories where we are the heroes, or the tragic villains, or at least where we’re relatable people we can understand. But then looking back, how easily could things have gone wrong any number of times. Any number of ways. I’d hurt people, just like she had. And just as much, I’d risked hurting people.

I didn’t know all of the cases, but what I’d heard had the same theme, the same vibe. She attacked with superpowered dogs, and it was impossible to just do that and not risk seriously harming someone.

That was the cost of doing what she’d done. She had to do something, and that was that.

Could she have made better choices? I didn’t know, because I wasn’t Rachel. But those were the choices she’d made, and these were the choices I made.

And… did I regret what I’d chosen, really?
“Yeah,” Rachel said.

“The camp…”

“What about it?” Rachel asked.

“You like reading?” I asked.

Rachel’s eyes narrowed, as if she spotted a trap. “Yeah.”

“Do you like playing games with Greg?”

She nodded, “Sure. It’s fun.”

“And what about Cassie, you like her?”

Rachel looked even more suspicious. “…Yes.”

She kept on waiting for the trap. “How do you feel about Stefanie?”

“She’s alright. She helped with the dogs,” Rachel said.

“And what about Parian?”

Rachel shrugged.

“You know, she has her own romance she’s dealing with,” I said, though I was pretty sure she didn’t care that much. “With someone else that she struggles to…” I bit my lip. “And has Charlotte ever done anything bad to you? I know you don’t like her, but has she?”

“Nah,” Rachel said, though I could still see the simmering anger. “But it ain’t right, for her to just fuck with us like that.”

“And we can put in protections in place. What I’m asking, just to be clear: are you okay with the team or not? If you aren’t, then that’s something we’d need to… figure out. I decided all of this, and I thought you agreed, except to Greg, but he… you know. It’s Greg.”

I knew that wasn’t much of an argument, and now that I was looking I realized… Charlotte had encouraged me to do something. To step up and act, to make a choice. And I’d chosen to go ahead with giving Greg powers, even though Rachel disapproved of the whole thing.

She didn’t want more team-members, and maybe I should consider what she wanted. I took a breath, prepared to say that as soon as we dealt with the Teeth, we could break up the team.

“No,” Rachel said.

“No?” I frowned, waiting to see what she meant, as I reached up and scattered more treats around. The dogs had by now gotten bored of all of the humans talking and mouthing off, in what was no doubt a complete surprise. They had more sense than some people, really.

“I like the team. I guess.” She shook her head. “But I’m there for you.”

“And the camp,” I said. “Some of them are going to get the puppies…” I paused, thinking it through. “Can I see them?”

Rachel hesitated for a moment, brow knit in uncertainty. “Sure?”
I’d not even gone to see the puppies, even though she was going to let me have one as soon as they were old enough to be adopted off. Though of course, considering how easily she took to dogs, and how easily I’d taken to her, maybe I already owned a lot of dogs.

“The camp, though. We need to protect these people. Because there are people who would hurt them, just like they’d hurt dogs.”

Rachel frowned, taking that in. “Yeah, I guess.” She shrugged a little, but this time I suppressed the frustration that that’s all I was getting. It was more complicated than that, more complicated than just assuming that if she didn’t feel it as strongly as I did, she didn’t give a shit.

She did, she just didn’t have as many shits to give as I did. “So, I’m sorry, Rachel. And I want to stay with you. And… I love you isn’t always enough, but I do.” I bit my lip.

“Ah,” Rachel said, quietly, looking at me, so close she could and was touching me, so close that I couldn’t help but want to get closer. I wanted her.

But of course it fucking involved bodies. Yes, she started with lust, but… I had to believe her when she said there was more than that. She wanted me for my body, and would I want it any other way? I’d hate for her to want me for my mind and not be attracted to me at all.

I could call on a thousand memories of bodies meeting and--

Arousal coiled up inside me, replacing the nervousness, as memories made themselves known, and not politely. They knocked on the door, loud and heavy, of my heart, and demanded to be known.

They mattered, and they weren’t going to be silent, and they weren’t going to just lay still and go away if I ignored it all. “We do have to talk. We have to figure out how this doesn’t happen again. How we can know that we’re all cool, that we are there for each other. And…” I bit my lip. “We do need to talk about what you’ve done? I looked through some of the stories, just… I need to know what you remember.”

“Why?” Rachel asked, sounding a little more hostile than she probably intended, because she added, “Taylor?”

“Because we’re going to use it to defend you. So we need to know the details. I don’t want to quiz you for too long on this, but I do have questions.”

“Fine.”

******

The puppies were so young, and so naive. They barked playfully when we came into their room, moving straight from their mom towards the guests. I knelt down, petting their soft fur, running my fingers this way and that and talking about subjects that really did need puppies to be lightened up.

She had a good memory, better than I expected. Obviously, she didn’t know names, but she was willing to dig back through her memories and recall the incidents. Almost all of them, except one.

And the stories she told weren’t all that different, but then there were little details that made me wonder at it.

“An’ I said to him, something like, ‘Don’t move’,,” Rachel said, kneeling down to rub at one of the dog’s bellies. That little ball of fluff looked so happy, and I listened to her words. “So then I was clearing out things into the pack. I hadn’t eaten in a day, I was hungry as fuck. So I turned away and
reached to go grab something to eat, and… fuck.” She cleared her throat. “Never met Vlad?”

“No? Was he one of your dogs?”

“Yeah. Not for long. He was a wild dog.” Rachel shook her head. “He turned towards me and barked, cause he wanted some of that food. He hadn’t eaten in a while. Then this guy just shoots at me. And so…”

And so that’s not what he described at all. How could he have felt threatened by that? Rachel half-facing away, rummaging around for a beef jerky, while the dog wasn’t even looking at him. And yet he’d claimed he’d been afraid for his life when he fired, and claimed that her dog had barked at him.

I believed her… and it was possible to even believe him, since of course memory was fickle.

But.

“What? I wasn’t in Lansing then.”

I frowned, thinking back to the case. A man had been jogging when he’d been attacked by a large dog. He’d been bitten badly, and claimed to have seen Bitch in the distance calling the dog in and then leaving him.

I didn’t know what details made him so sure that it was Bitch, but at the time I’d believed it. Maybe one of her dogs had gotten out. Maybe it was the middle of a fight, since of course the details were very vague.

“Huh. Can you prove that?” I asked.

“Yeah. Robbed a gas station twenty miles north that… was it a Saturday?”

“Yes,” I said, frowning.

Well, there was one down, if she could prove that. “Did you hurt anyone at that gas station?”

“No, but they had cameras and shit,” Rachel said with a shrug.

I nodded, glad that we were making progress in figuring this out, even if it was also just as clear that this was going to be taking a while. “So, Rachel.”

“Yes?” she asked.

“We need to talk about this shit, more. I mean, I know it’s just words, words words,” I said, waving a hand furiously. “But… if we’d found a way to just work this all out, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Okay,” Rachel said.

I blinked, my mouth open. I’d been ready for a lot more in the way of arguments. She was stubborn, and I knew that she didn’t like change. But instead she seemed almost plaintive, and there was this slight hardening in her eyes as she nodded again.

Then she said, “I kept on thinking you’d wake up or some shit. Realize that, I dunno, you should be dating some pretty… A student or some shit.” She waved a hand, far less emphatically than me, and shook her head. “Cause fuck.”

“Well, that’s one part of it,” I said, trembling slightly. Maybe I should have avoided doing anything
at all. But she was close now, still close, always close, her eyes hard, but the sort of firmness of purpose that just made me want to see her melt in my arms even more. “There’s also, like. Where do you see us in a year? In two years?”

Rachel frowned. “Together?”

I tried not to laugh or smile, but that was about what… it was a very Rachel thing to say. It was such a Rachel thing to say that I had to step closer, almost brushing past one of those little puppies. They were small and fragile things, but they were also a promise. A promise that there’d be a her around to give them out in weeks and weeks.

“Yeah, I want that too. I just… know that you go from one place to another. You move.” I shrugged a little and said. “You move, and the world moves.”

She leaned in, and I thought of all the things I could say, about where I’d be when I was eighteen. I could talk about college, or ambitions, or seeing where things went. But her lips were pressing close to me, and I held out a hand.

“What?” she asked, stopping when I gestured.

“Maybe not here,” I said.

“Oh. Was just going to kiss you,” Rachel said, bluntly.

It felt like my face was burning off. I’d just… assumed a little bit. Maybe a little hopefully. “Then…”

I leaned in, and she grabbed me, her arm wrapping around my back, and she kissed me rough and hard, and I stopped breathing.

I stopped breathing, and then when she pulled away, it was as if somehow she’d given me the kiss of life by taking my breath away.

“We should take care’a the dogs,” Rachel said, hopefully.

It was an offer. It was a hand held out, a hand that I took.

*******

Sometimes it’s what you don’t see. Sometimes it’s what’s not there, or it’s the simple stuff of life. It’s rolling a dog over, his tail wagging so fast that he was almost scooting away, and checking his paws because he’d looked like he was limping, as Rachel watched on and didn’t need to smile.

If you had to wait to see her smile, you’d be waiting forever, and you’d also be blind, you’d be missing that way her lips quirked, and her whole body seemed to unspool before you, those eyes wide and thoughtful.

You just had to know. Or you didn’t have to know, and you just saw two women taking care of dogs.

Two girls, really.

That’s not what I saw, that’s not what I felt.

When her fingersbrushedagainst my shoulder, I almost shivered. Every touch reminded me of the
things we could be doing, and I felt as if… she had to know what she did to me.

I knew I was staring, when I wasn’t working. Looking at her, at the way she moved. Her movements were always so direct, forceful in their own way, even when she was just walking towards me.

I didn’t know if I’d call her without guile, but she acted when she wanted to. So I knew that this was true.

I knew that she loved me, and other things. We’d figure them out.

When we finally headed back for the camp, sometime after noon, we were holding hands.

*********

Back at camp, we went straight back to our tent… and read.

Sometimes normalcy was more important, and I knew exactly what we’d be doing tonight. I had a good idea of what the next few days was going to look like as well, as we prepared for going after the Butcher.

Maybe it wasn’t the smartest move, but perhaps we could get Accord on our side, and try to force the Undersiders to help out, while they could still fight. If we all got together and attacked the Butcher, then surely we’d be able to push her back. The goal would be to try to cripple everything except her, and then hope that together, with Protectorate help, we could staunch the bleeding.

And once the Butcher was out of the way, I was going to murder Coil, Tattletale’s permission or no. I had it all sketched out.

******

“And…” Rachel frowned, looking at the book. “anyways… the path we take isn’t one that will be noticeable to those who cannot see what we see,’ he told me, with the kind of smile that made you want to doubt yourself long before you’d doubt him.” She was reading it slowly, of course, but she was reading it. Like the words were carved, in slate, upon the monument of life. “‘What they will see is nothing more than two lonely dogs walking down a deserted street, but, and here’s the… jok--”

“They’re parahumans?” Rachel asked. “That can turn into dogs?”

“It’s before that, actually. Or… mostly before that,” I said, amused at the assumption.

“This is kinda weird,” Rachel said.

“Yeah, it’s really weird,” Imp said.

“Oh, ye… what?” I startled, and Rachel grabbed at Imp, crouched in the corner, watching us with that half-hidden grin and those wide, playful eyes.

“Hey, hey! Don’t start anything!” Imp said. “I just wanted to check if you two were getting along. I, uh, have some news.”

“What?” Rachel asked, her voice a low growl as she leaned in.

“H-heym. I’m just sayin’. Tattletale wants to ask you if you can attack and kill Coil at… start the attack at ten, exactly ten. We’ll throw in a free vial for it.”
“Really?” I asked, frowning and glancing over at Rachel. “Kill Coil and save Dinah?”

“Yeah. Take her to the Protectorate. We don’t wanna abuse her either. But Coil’s gotta go, he’s going to lose us everything. Or something.” Imp shrugged and said. “That’s just what I was told. But… you want to kill him, don’t you?”

I glanced over at Rachel. This was not just her decision too. It was our decision.

Rachel frowned, then nodded. “Sure, let’s do it.”
We needed to be subtle, or at least not give away the game. That much Imp was very clear on, and I agreed. If we made it too widely known, would it get out to Coil?

I had to believe it would, and it wasn’t as if I was advocating not doing anything. Rachel understood the need, and that meant that we could tell only so many people.

The first one, of the two people who really needed to know, was Stefanie.

She answered the door with a surprised look on her face, her eyes wide, her mouth opening a little bit as she took in Rachel.

“Hey, Stefanie,” I said. “Can we talk for just a minute?”

Beyond her were her parents, mother and father, and a table of food. Sandwiches, chips, slices of apple, all of it laid out on three sets of plates.

Stefanie glanced back at her parents, looking her age and no more as she considered and nodded. She closed the door behind her. “What is it?”

“Tomorrow, we have a raid we’re going to do. And I’d like to ask you if you’d go along?”

“Tomorrow?” Stefanie asked.

“Yes. You can’t tell anyone else, because it’s that important.” My bugs were watching for anyone else in this apartment building. “We’re going to end Coil’s reign of terror, and then after that we’re going to go after the Butcher. We have to end this.”

“We? Did you and Rachel…?”

“Yeah,” Rachel grunted, giving a stiff nod. “We talked.”

“Oh, that’s really good… I’ve been here, and I wasn’t sure if the rumors were true.”

It’d only been a few hours since we’d come back, and I assumed that Stefanie had been busy with managing the camp and spending time with her family. She’d sacrificed things too, to be part of this team.

And she hadn’t complained, hadn’t ever given any sign that she didn’t like the way we were pushing her.

“They are,” I said. “But what we’re going to do… you can back out. We’re going to kill Coil. He has an innocent girl kidnapped, addicted to drugs. He has to die, and… he can die in the fighting.”

It was a lie, of course. Stefanie of all people probably understood that, understood the way that this was all just an excuse, a way to get around the fact that even if he was on his knees begging, I didn’t have any interest in letting him survive. But it wouldn’t be hard to kill him… once he was almost there.
But the fewer people I admitted this to, the better. I wasn’t going to tell Charlotte.

She’d object, strongly. She’d be angry, she’d be frustrated. She’d not want to do it, because of course this camp and the people in it, we were the good guys. She wanted me to be the leader because I was a hero, and heroes led things: she imagined a world that didn’t quite exist. She had encouraged me, and at times her power had been involved, but even without it I might have trended in the same direction, just from peer pressure and the requirements of the moment.

So I’d lie. To her, but never to Rachel. Not anymore.

“‘Oh,” Pelter said. Her voice was hard, her voice was quiet. “I… tell me about the girl?’

“Dinah Alcott. The niece of the mayor. She was kidnapped, she’s addicted to drugs, and he’s using her powers for his own gain, bribing her with drugs to keep her pliant.” I frowned, aware that my fists were clenching so hard it that every tightening of my grip almost hurt, all the way up my arm. “I’ve waited too long. I’ve waited because I’ve trusted someone, and it’s paid off. So tomorrow, we need to get going. I’ll tell you the exact time tomorrow.”

“And… keep this on the down-low?” Charlotte asked. “What about the Butcher?’

I snorted. “Charlotte will be here, and so will Parian and Artificer. We can also get the Protectorate on the line, or… something.” I frowned and shook my head. “We can make it work, if the Butcher attacks. If Flechette is here, breaking her own heart, then maybe we could try that idea…”

“What idea?” Charlotte asked.

“Give her a knife. Make her fast. See what she can do with that, as long as she’s not killing anyone, especially not the Butcher,” I said.

“Huh,” Rachel said, frowning.

“Rachel, we’ll need to talk to Charlotte, and we can… figure things out there.”

“Sure,” Rachel said, with a sort of half-shrug. She glanced over at Stefanie and said, as if she barely knew how to say the words, “You’ll do good.”

She was trying.

Stefanie just barely avoided smiling a little, and instead nodded, glancing away.

“Yeah, we can do this. Get everything you can. We’ll keep in contact with Charlotte by radio. If that’s alright.”

“I… yes,” Stefanie said, quietly. She shook her head, and then added, “This is very sudden, but I’m glad you two are back together.”

“I am too,” I said, glancing over at Rachel.

I reached out and took her hand, squeezing it tight. We still had all afternoon, including waiting to see if the Teeth came. This was something with careful timing. Timing that would mean we had plenty of time to kick our heels… or to do other things, for that matter. I had my own ideas about how to spend the time between here and dinner, and I wondered how obvious it was.

Certainly, nobody had commented much on it once it’d been normalized. You almost expected it, but… nothing.
At least, nothing like what I’d almost feared. My bugs could listen in on everything, I would have
known if there was a lot of discontent with me, and I was pretty sure that people were too used to it,
and too used to the fact that they could bitch and complain all they wanted, to hold their tongue just
because bugs were there.

Stefanie nodded again, and I saw the real effort she was going through to keep her lips from turning
upwards. It was very amusing, and I almost wanted to laugh. By now I didn’t even have to think
about it except when I was really happy. I just… expressed it differently, or had trained myself to
hide it.

“You should try to relax today. And make sure to bring everything. Including bigger, or heavier
things.”

Hardness mattered, but size was important too. A baseball wasn’t going to do as much as a chunk of
diamond, but it was certainly bigger and harder to dodge, and probably still hurt them.

“Got it,” Pelter said.

********

Privacy is something important. There are moments that words can’t reach, or at least my words can’t
reach. Call me an incomplete, or even an incompetent, poet, but a part of me both did and didn’t
want to put it down in words.

The part that didn’t wanted to say something like: And then we fucked.

The part that did wanted to talk about the awkwardness as well, wanted to talk about her elbow
pushing against mine as we faced each other, entirely exposed and yet entirely comfortable, or about
the mole on her hip, as much as that part wanted to talk about pleasure and togetherness, about love
and whatever the hell we were doing, that might be called making love, if you were in the right
mood.

That might be called erotic, if I packaged it right. If I used the right adjectives, if I made it something
more and something less than it was.

If I caged it in, and collared it and called it spot, this feeling and this sensation.

But… fuck that. If I ever wrote anything, I’d be for Rachel and myself, not for anyone else. It was
private, it was personal.

That’s the instinct that won.

So we had sex, and we made love, and of course, maybe just as importantly, we fucked.

Night came, and then morning.

*******

Charlotte came to our tent at six, bedraggled and clearly still out of it. I could tell because her hair
wasn’t as well brushed, and her eyes had dark circles beneath them. I wondered at whether I should
have showed more care for her.

It had to be hard, learning…

I was barely dressed at all, having decided to sleep in, just a little bit. My own hair was no better, but
that was different.

That mattered less. “Charlotte.”

“I’m not surprised you didn’t try to talk to me,” Charlotte said. She glanced over at Rachel, with a wide-eyed look of fear, her lips pursed. “Rachel, I’m sorry… I mean, for--”

Rachel glared at her, and then rubbed her own head a little bit, blinking back sleep as she moved closer. “C’mere.”

“How?” Charlotte said.

Rachel grabbed her arm, a little tight. “You wanted her to be, what?”

“Arachne?”

“Taylor,” Rachel said, firmly.

“Yes, I… I wanted her to be in charge. She’s… she could be such a good leader, but I didn’t know what I was doing. I thought I was just convincing her, I thought that… and other people also were… and…”

Her eyes had teared up a little.

Rachel frowned, “Don’t make other people what they’re not.” She said it as if it was obvious, just tell her not to do it. She sounded firm, though, the way she did when she was getting a command through to her dogs.

I could have laughed, I could have cried, of course she was treating Charlotte the way she would a dog that’d done something bad. She wasn’t violent, not with dogs, unlike with people. She knew it didn’t work, beating a dog. When she hurt people, it wasn’t from the same impulses, she didn’t view people as basically smarter, less fuzzy, and less interesting dogs. She wasn’t stupid.

“I… my powers--”

“Just order people to touch their nose, like you’ve been doing,” I said. “And then don’t give them orders about what to do beyond that. Unless you’re willing to actually be in charge, instead of just letting others be in charge for you.” I leaned in, and then added, “Or else you’ll order some guy to go fuck himself, and then you’ll be beyond all of us.”

Charlotte winced, getting the reference that sailed right over Rachel’s head. I scooted closer to her, and then patted her on the shoulder.

...maybe I too was treating her a little bit like a dog, one that needed coaxing and praise. I blushed at that. “It’s fine that you… didn’t feel up to it. It’d be just like your power to work that way, to do something like that. But why are you here?”

I glanced over at Rachel. Honestly, I was glad that Rachel wasn’t too angry now, though I could feel the simmering nature of all of this. Not that she was about to lash out, but that her acceptance was very provisional. It was very temporary, and yet it was the best we could hope for right now.

And it was fine. Should I really be that angry that Rachel didn’t react well to someone who had messed with people’s minds?

No. Not at all.
“Pelter said I should come here,” Charlotte said.

I needed to treat her like Amp. “Ah, good. Rachel, Pelter and I have something to do. We’re going to have to call you using one of Artificer’s radios to get some superpowers. We’ll be leaving a little later this morning.”

“Oh, right,” Amp said. “Even her?”

“If you don’t order me to do nothing,” Rachel said.

I had a thought, then, but it wasn’t one I could really do anything with. For the first time in quite a while, there were no dogs at the camp, or at least, none of Rachel’s dogs. It was a weakness, of course, since she should have at least two on her at all times. But we hadn’t wanted company. Two was enough.

“Well… I can--”

“Hey, I had was thinking,” I said. “Not for now, but… what if the reason that the dogs couldn’t be powered up was because they didn’t obey?”

“Huh?” Rachel asked.

Charlotte frowned, her eyes briefly narrowing, before they widened again, as she shifted forward a little. “Huh…”

“Not that we’d do anything like that. They’re Rachel’s dogs, but--”

I imagined what one of Rachel’s dogs could do with healing and toughness. Obviously, the super-speed would be no good because they wouldn’t have the intellect to really figure out what was going on, and without orders, they would probably get into trouble. But healing, or increased toughness, could make them powerful enough that, combined with Rachel’s power…

I could imagine a lot, but when I started picturing what all of our powers combined could really do, it started to get insane.

It started to get game-changing.

“Oh,” Rachel said, and she didn’t look happy.

“But that’s not important right now,” I added. “Right now we have to get going, and you have to help us. We’ll want a package that lets us heal and protects us from damage. A little bit of extra strength helps, but… except for Pelter. She needs all the extra strength she can manage.”

I didn’t know how much Coil would have to throw at me, but being bulletproof was basically the floor of what I needed. Less than that and we’d be fucked.

“I can do that,” Amp said, nodding. She tried to pull herself together, rubbing her eyes and straightening her shoulders. “When are you leaving?”

“Nine. We need the time to get there and set up, but… we have to time this perfectly. We’re operating under… rules and advice.” I knew that Rachel didn’t really trust Lisa, but I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. Coil was no doubt a schemer, and so if she had some sort of specific timing going on, it had to be because she thought he’d wiggle out of it anyways.

“Got it. I can… do that.”
I nodded, thinking ahead to what we needed to do. We needed to eat, and be ready, but we also needed to make sure not to act too soon, not to act like we really were in a panic.

********

I sent the spiders out ahead, and the other bugs, slipping out of the jars, moving almost to the edge of my vision, which was smaller than it’d been before I’d gotten back together with Rachel. I didn’t regret that at all, and it was far, far longer than it’d been when I’d first started out. At this rate, the real problem was that you started to be able to only use bugs as a thin network of tripwires, if you were trying to see everything. Unless, of course, you had boxes of bugs everywhere, ready to use the moment you called on them.

I could almost picture what it’d look like, though I bet I’d have to design it. And it’d have to be several different environments. Black widows needed to be kept separate from flies… and there wouldn’t be a lot of terrariums for flies, because who would want to raise them? Not normal people.

But I wasn’t normal. I wanted more of the bug jars, more of the fishbowls, and more actual environments. Bees, at least, should be easy in theory. Humans kept them as-is…

Ideas sprung forth as I hummed and walked around the camp, taking it in. There were already a few newcomers, fleeing from the Butcher, but I didn’t want to talk to them. Not unless they had news of an impending attack. I was nervous, but also in a good mood, imagining a beekeeping service. I could probably manage all of it about as efficiently as possible, and I wouldn’t need to wear a big suit to keep from being stung.

Spiders crept along the ground, moving very slowly in the absolute sense. But the black widows were going to come in handy, I thought, trying to position them near the base, without making it obvious. Every dark corner of that only still just pulling itself together area… there the bugs were going to wait. I didn’t want to move in a big cloud of bugs for the same reason that I was able to watch Rachel carefully choosing her dogs.

Bentley, Angelica, Lucy… she was not choosing all small dogs, by any means, but she was definitely choosing dogs that were calm, and relatively even-keeled, and not the largest examples. The pit bull and the bulldog, or the mid-sized mutt, over the really, really big dogs. She was choosing five or six, and I saw her run them through their paces.

Bentley, Angelica, Lucy, Sunny, Cindi… five dogs was enough for this, hopefully, and by leaving at nine, we’d have time to power them up.

We wouldn’t come in riding on dogs, at least not until we reached the right area.

So I paced, and hummed, and contemplated murder in all its forms, in all its results. I was going to kill someone today, and I didn’t even feel that bad about it. I couldn’t even bring myself to really question it, it was just how things should be. Someone like Coil, I didn’t trust people to actually put him away. After all, wasn’t it his first time being arrested? Who’s to say he wouldn’t be let off lightly?

I knew I was making excuses, I just didn’t care that much. He deserved it, and if I could kill the Butcher without just making the problem worse--I couldn’t imagine what the Butcher with control over insects so that she could monitor everyone would be like, and I’d go mad and die, no doubt--then I’d do it. They all deserved it, and if not me, then who else? The Protectorate which had been struggling to do even the part of its job I’d given them?

After all, we’d been on the front line of both the Merchant attacks and the Teeth attacks, and we’d
survived every single time. In my head, the memories of the fear and humiliation of some of the fights was less important than the certainty that we were only getting stronger, and that we had to do something.

So we were going to act.

******

“Hey, Greg, how’s it going?” I asked, stepping into the tent.

He was slumped in his chair, half-sprawled, as he looked up at what seemed to be a half-complete suit of armor. It was plate armor, but rust-brown, and coated in something slick looking, that was dripping down a little bit, as if it hadn’t yet dried on.

“...fine, I guess. I’m trying to get this done. It’s just a first generation suit, barely even worth it, but I need to figure out what works and what doesn’t?”

“First generation?” I asked.

“The goop’s low-level, and the…” Greg rubbed his eyes, and I could already see his enthusiasm start to come back, “Rocket-boots are slow. Twenty, thirty miles per hour, and the guns… they can’t really hurt the Butcher that much. I’m working on something better with that, something that I can use. And Amp’s power thing, there’s no synergy!” Greg threw up his hands, quivering this way and that. “You’d think being able to go super-fast would be good, but some of the inputs are… themselves. I’d have to have a weapon that fired at a quantum-lightspeed rate and didn’t take time to fully discharge, and if I’m firing that fast, why do I even need superspeed?”

“I don’t know,” I said, even as he continued to talk over me. I picked up a few words, but quantum was definitely one of them.

And goop was another one. It seemed that everything was goop, quantum, or quantum goop on his suit of armor. I didn’t know how that worked, but I was just going to assume that it did and move on from here.

After almost a minute of babble, I held up a hand, “Okay, okay. You should focus on being able to stand up to a hit, more than being able to do damage. Because if and when we go against the Teeth, there’s going to be more than just the Butcher,” I said. “Okay, Greg?”

“Yeah,” Greg said quietly, but it sounded like he was about to pout.

So I stepped closer. “I said, is that okay, Greg? We can’t have you running into the middle of a fight, just because you want the glory of it.”

“Fine,” Greg said. “I’ll… try to get done what I can. Can you tell everyone not to disturb me? I’m going to be working all day…”

Knowing him, he’d also find time to play games, but I didn’t want to mention that. He deserved time to himself, and as long as he kept on getting work done, that’s what really mattered.

I supposed. “Sure. Can I borrow a radio? Me and Pelter are going to go over to the shelter for a while. We want to practice something, and we want to keep in contact with Amp.”

“Why? Can’t your bugs know if this place is under attack?” Greg asked.

“Think about it. If I were the Butcher, I’d attack the shelter. Kill Rachel first, because on her own
she’s squishy and vulnerable. We should have a radio there at all times, actually, instead of just bugs. And then once she’s taken out, swoop in on down to the camp. But if we have Amp’s powers available…”

“Ohhh,” Greg said, staring at me as if I were magic, when really it was something so obvious that only the cold front and then the fighting kept me from just doing it.

“Yeah,” I said. “So, you have a radio?”

“Okay, got it…”

********

At nine o’clock, we took off without a warning. Rachel just said, “Going out” to the staff of the shelter, and took five of her dogs on leashes. We weren’t in our costumes, which were in our backpacks, but despite that, maybe they’d guess we were patrolling.

If they did guess that, though, then they were wrong.

We took off through the ruined city in a sort of look. I knew that we’d stand out no matter what we did, but hopefully anyone who saw us wouldn’t guess our purpose. None of us were that distinctive, really. Even Rachel, whose public identity was known, wasn’t exactly a household face. Or name, for that matter. So we jogged along, though there was probably nobody dumb enough to believe that three girls holding leashes and jogging with dogs were anything but… something.

I was a little bit out of shape, too used to riding on the back of a dog, but I was still able to keep up with the other two. Actually, it was Pelter who was falling a little behind, and we had to stop once while she leaned against a burnt-out building and caught her breath.

There was soot on her arms when she jogged off again, and we reached an alley two blocks away from Coil’s base about on time. We’d had to jog around some bad spots, but we were still there well before ten.

I leaned up against the wall and glanced over at Rachel, who was barely sweating, though even that little bit of sweat, in the heat of a summer morning, was enough to darken her loose white shirt.

She’d definitely need those zippers at the armpits, I thought, as I pulled out my own costume and began to get in it.

My bugs reported no activity from the base. Well, no, that was wrong. A few people were going in and out, but it was emptier than usual. I wondered if this was a trap. If it was, then we had the bugs to clear the way.

Still, the few that I took inside had to move slowly and carefully as I tried to scope out the entire base.

Coil’s mercs were well trained and very dangerous, but they weren’t parahumans, and I didn’t seem to see anyone new.

The good news was that Dinah was in her room.

Her room wasn’t much, really, but it was… oddly considerate. Or at least, I’d thought that the first time I’d seen it, but each subsequent time, I’d been more and more turned off by it.

It was cute, but in this alien, off sort of way. It was what an adult would imagine a girl’s room to be.
Pink sheets, posters of boy bands that Dinah might well not care about, a CD player, a bunch of rugs and carpets flung this way and that, it all felt fake, and that was before you got to the magazines lying in a dusty pile in the corner, as if he’d taken all of the contents of a doctor’s waiting room and dumped them in to see if she took the bait.

Her bed, four posters and plenty of sheets and pillows, looked well-used, and there were only a few books that even looked like they’d been touched, flung here and there on the floor.

Her closet was full of clothes she didn’t wear near the back, clothes that seemed to be nothing more than dress-up. Had he planned on finding a way to make her more pliant and then take her to another location? Maybe. Most of the clothes she wore, including the ones that she had on that day, were far more normal, and a little old and ugly. Sweatpants, sweaters, plain T-shirts, all of them washed and cleaned whenever she needed it.

This was a closed-in place, and not a home for anyone at all. It was the kind of place that showed that something was lacking, something so fundamental that I hadn’t been able to describe it at first, except in nebulous phrases like ‘love.’

Just seeing it, even through the bugs, made my heart go out for Dinah Alcott.

She was sitting on the bed, glancing at the empty cradle of a phone. Of course he didn’t keep a phone there… in fact, he hadn’t had that there before, and one of my bugs carefully explored the room, trying to figure out what was going on.

I glanced over as Rachel changed into her costume, even as I looked, feeling pride in it. It was my costume… it was her costume. Ours, that was the word for it.

Something we owned together, something I’d created, but something that looked perfect on her.

I knew I was biased, but even just looking at her in it was… oddly distracting, if only because of how cool it was.

I did good work, that’s what I told myself.

So there Dinah was, and so there we were. We needed to get to two targets at once. Or at least, we needed to get to them fast enough, and close enough together, that Coil couldn’t just threaten her to try to survive. Or something bad couldn’t happen to Dinah.

My bugs were keeping out of the way, but it seemed like Coil was in his office. They seemed to be acting like he was, and if he wasn’t there, then we’d just take Dinah. It was that simple: we had to get rid of him, and we were going to do it, no matter what.

I leaned against a wall, and glanced up at shoddy brickwork as nine-forty came. “Alright,” I said. “In about ten minutes, you should start amping up your dogs, Rachel. I’ll call Charlotte soon.”

“Got it,” Rachel said.

I made sure that Pelter was following along and then got back to waiting. I was nervous, my whole body tense as a dog about to pounce, and I was aware that if this was a mistake, I’d know it very, very soon.

There was only one way in, at least right now. But we were going to get dogs to make a new one. Hell, considering that it was half-buried like that, we could probably just have the dogs dig down until they hit something and then found a way straight through. But I knew where the secondary entrance was, the one that the mercs used. It was a long way around, compared to the more
straightforward entrance that I’d seen capes use.

That entrance was now doubt far more trapped than the one that the mercenaries used. It only made sense, because traps were a double-edged sword. Obviously it was important to set them if you were defending a secret villain lair, but unlike in a video game, his allies weren’t immune to the traps. They needed a way through, and I thought I knew where most of the places where there’d be problems were.

So all it took was going around. And we were going to do that. Hell, we’d swarm them ahead of time and take the keycards needed from their unconscious bodies, rather more directly than Greg might have advocated.

But he wasn’t here, was he?

All of this thinking and worrying helped take up ten minutes, and so I called Charlotte. “Hey, Amp. We need those powers now. Or in just a minute or two.”

“All right, Arachne,” Amp said. “Just tell me when.”

Rachel was sizing up the dogs. We were going to ride on them. Two of them, at least. The others would be coming with us. The car entrance was wide and yet surprisingly subtle, opening as it did in a half-ruined parking garage that had been quickly refurbished, and was currently being used by a lot of the people working on dealing with, say, the wreckage and the radioactive part of the city.

And then from a secret entrance down there, in the lower levels that had been most damaged, there was the connection. It was that simple, really. Once they were there, the cars that went that way could just drive up, and people would rightfully assume that there were people parked in the lower levels.

...as there were. They were just people who worked for Coil. Those that didn’t want to drive their cars in and out of a loading area and tunnel of sorts could just… park and walk a mile or so in safety, and then come back to drive out.

Even the mercs could easily clean themselves up enough to pass as just any old construction worker. Or even better, honestly.

It was a clever solution, and the entrance was hidden enough, and the area busy enough up top that it’d take some real sleuthing to find that entrance. Or bugs and enough range that you could make out the farthest reaches of a truly impressive base.

Timing was everything.

“Arachne, touch your nose. Bitch, clap your hands. Pelter. Touch your ears.”

We obeyed, Rachel most reluctantly, and then Charlotte said, “Please only call if you have need of any changes in your powers.”

She didn’t want to keep in contact, in case she used her powers against us, in a moment of panic or fear when she didn’t actually know whether any order she gave us would be the right one.

“Got it,” I said, quietly. The moments were ticking closer and closer.

If Coil knew about this attack, if it was a trap, surely I’d see some sign of it? Surely he’d at least move from his office, which was well-secured, but…
What was he playing at? And yet, something seemed wrong. I wasn’t quite sure what, though. It was this feeling in the back of my head, as if something that my data, including the bugs that were slipping under the doors, was telling me was… wrong.

I glanced at the dogs, and then tried to locate the entrance relative to them and calculate travel time. Several minutes, now. And I needed to start attacking with the bugs at least a minute or two before I arrived.

I mounted up on one of the dogs, one of the bigger ones, as Rachel finished up her work.

9:59.

“Get on behind me,” I told Pelter, hoping my voice didn’t quaver at all. How did you prepare for a murder? How did you psych yourself up?

I’d just have to do as best I could. I got on, Bentley panting beneath me, and leaned down to give him an order, “Bentley, follow.”

And then I leaned in closer, and hugged tight. We had put the saddles on the two dogs, having wadded them up in our backpacks, and they provided a little bit of protection, but we were still riding on top of bouncing, angry dog-monsters, and so we all had to hold on tight as we moved.

I timed it carefully as we ran through the street, avoiding anywhere important at first, moving past building after building.

People shouted to see us, surprised as we went past.

Construction workers carrying wood to help fix up an old building that was going to be used as part of the resettlement.

Cops sitting in cop-cars, frowning and watching for signs of anything wrong.

Just plain bystanders, leaping out of the way as the cavalcade of dogs ran through.

It took just a minute for us to go quite a ways towards our destination, and that’s when I struck.

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What did they see? To them, there was a giant swarm of bugs coming out of the alleys, out of the buildings, and then descending towards the normal entrance, thick enough and loud enough that anyone could be beneath it.

The cloud of insects was only growing thicker and larger as it buried the entrance in bugs, pressing through, opening it movement by movement. Most bugs weren’t very strong, but all I needed to do was make an opening big enough for them to slip through, and then pour down the hallway, in a rush.

And within the building, there were already bugs waiting. People at desks were bit by black widows as larger spiders leapt down on others, more to scare them than kill them.

The bugs going with me were the diseased bugs, the hornets and the wasps, and so what was mostly going for everyone else were the ones left over.

Mosquitos that stung and died, flies that went straight for eyes without mercy or hesitation. All across the base, I was doing as much damage as I could. Bugs were watching the door into Dinah’s room,
and I was so focused I almost missed the moment where it got darker, as the dogs raced into the parking garage.

The smell was vile, and I realized… that was it. Something smelled off. Through my bugs, and through my nose.

The base of the smell with my nose was simple: gasoline, and lots of it, but also something burnt, and… other smells I couldn’t quite place. Probably industrial smells, smells that given time I’d no doubt get used to.

But what was wrong with the bugs? Nothing specifically, just the feeling that something was wrong.

In his office, Coil stood to his full, towering height and paced over towards the wall. Hornets nipped at him, but he didn’t even seem to feel them as he opened a panel that I hadn’t even known was there.

Out of it he pulled a strange looking device, that seemed to be made of wires and tubes, unpainted and hardly liable to stand out among any other tinker-tech. He pressed a button, and up near the entrance, gas started spraying, and my bugs started dying. “You shouldn’t have done this,” Coil said. His voice was calm, unhurried, even as my bugs tried to sting him. He pressed a button, and...

The machine whirred a little, and I found that my bugs couldn’t move. I could still feel what they were feeling, but they were… hovering in place.

“Arachne,” Coil said, blandly, as if he were bored. Then he walked over to his desk and pressed a button on it. “Go to the entrance. Kill whoever is left alive. Arachne is still alive.”

A huge chunk of his mercenaries were down, but a few of them had hurried towards these pods I’d noticed but not noticed, and stepped in.

What were they doing? I felt bugs dying as… some sort of decontamination?

Down below, we raced past rows of cars, as Coil talked.

“We have a problem,” Coil said, pressing a button on the desk. “Arachne. I have it handled, though. She’ll be dead soon.”

Then he stopped pressing the button, and pressed a button on the device. My bugs were still hovering, giving me information but nothing else, as waves of gas sprayed through some parts of the compound, seemingly at random, killing the largest swarms of insects there.

It was a different gas, though, a bright yellow that didn’t seem to do any immediate harm to the people who were down.

Pelter hopped off of the dog and pressed the button that I indicated, hidden beneath one of the cars.

The wall opened.

Coil pressed a button of his own, and my own bugs swarmed together into a dense ball as he walked towards his office door and opened it, stepping out briskly.

I knew exactly where the bastard was going.

Dinah.

It was a little way away, but only a minute or two walk at the most. And with my bugs under his
command, there wasn’t anything I could do to just stop him from taking her hostage. I doubted that he’d overreact, not when he was sure that I was done for. But when I turned out to be alive? And what about the gas? If it was at that entrance, was it here?

We were racing through the entrance tunnel, cold and blank, boring even, on our way to the vehicle bay.

What was I supposed to do?

I had ideas, but I needed time to pull them off. Time I might not have. “Pelter! If I say jump off, will you be ready to do it?”

“Uh,” Pelter said, a hint of incredulity in her voice. Of course she was surprised. It was a stupid thing to ask.

“I need to give you speed, soon. And you need to go protect Dinah.”

Except what about the gas? Maybe she could dodge it. It’d depend on how much speed she got. I didn’t know, and we hadn’t had the time and energy to experiment, with just what we had. Gas moved pretty fast, though. My bugs had died in a span of moments.

“I… can try. What about strength?”

“I’ll tell Amp. We want speed, toughness, regeneration… strength, not so much.”

He stalked through the base, almost to Dinah’s door, stepping closer, even as a half-dozen of the mercs stepped out of the pods, dressed in suits that my bugs couldn’t do anything about. Most of the rest were fled or down, but not all.

Counting them all up, I probably had… twenty or so enemies left, plus Coil, in the entire base. Well trained, powerful enemies, but I think we could beat them.

I hoped so.

“Amp,” I said, switching on the radio. “Can you give Pelter a lot of super-speed, some toughness, and regeneration?”

“I can,” Amp said, not asking questions about why we needed it, luckily. “Pelter, touch your nose.”

The dogs were moving fast enough that she took two tries to touch it, and then she half-blurred off the dog, landing on the ground and racing ahead.

The door we were approaching was torn open by a hail of pebbles, and beyond, there were dozens of cars, in a greasy, but well-maintained car-lot, complete with an area to elevate cars to look at it. Hiding behind a red sports car in the back was one of the mercs, a thickset man who’d come from an area that Coil had cleared with the gas. Still, I came in a cloud of hornets, and I sent them straight at the man, even as he rose up and began to fire in our direction.

Bullets hit our dogs as they raced right at him, but they were too big to even wince, not when it was just a handgun.

The man kept on stepping back, firing with surprising accuracy.

The bugs were covering him, and he should be screaming, but instead he seemed to be still trying to do his job.
Meanwhile--

Coil fucked up. That was the only explanation for what was going on. The machine he had could clearly control all of my bugs within his range. His range for that device wasn’t my range, and the bugs seemed clumsy, but this was a hard-counter to my powers. He’d be able to sting me with my own bugs.

But…

I could still see through them. I could still sense what they sensed, which meant I knew exactly where he was and exactly what he was doing at all time. He had even known it, but he didn’t seem to realize or care what this meant, or that it meant that we had the advantage.

He was now at the door, but I could vaguely see Pelter’s movements, and she was at most a few seconds away from Coil.

The merc went down, just at the same time that one of his bullets slammed into my chest.

If I hadn’t been wearing my costume, and if I hadn’t had Amp’s power, that might be it. As it was, the spidersilk armor mostly stopped the bullet, and my skin meant that it didn’t even leave a bruise, what momentum was left.

We stopped for a moment, as I slid off my dog and walked over towards the merc, writhing on the ground. I stared at him--

Coil opened the door slowly. “Dinah,” he said. “It’s time to go.”

--and then I reached down and grabbed his ID card, just in case. Of course, we could make walls into doors if need be, but better safe than sorry.

Dinah crowded towards the back of the room, and as he stepped in, he got control of the few bugs I had in there with her. All of the bugs were now swarming around him on both sides, clearly trying to make a barrier in case we came up on him.

Pelter’s rocks slammed into the bugs, and Coil turned as the bugs went straight for her. She was a blur, but not such a blur that the bugs couldn’t at least splat themselves against her, as she threw more and more rocks, saving the diamonds for when she was…

I assumed she wasn’t trying to kill him, because she probably could have.

Instead, he slammed the door shut as most of the bugs he controlled died.

A press of the button and the door locked itself.

Of course, that wasn’t going to hold her for long.

Coming through the doors into the base proper, we were caught in an expected crossfire. Five of the suited henchmen were spraying bullets in our direction, having set up in preparation.

Have you ever heard a real barrage of gunshots?

It was something that was capable of drowning out everything, and our dogs launched themselves forward as the bullets seemed to tear them almost apart. A paw slashed across a suit, opening a gap for the bugs to pour in, more and more.

The suits were grey-brown, and surprisingly hardy, each slash and bite opening up only a very small
area… but that was all it took to pour the bugs in. I was low on them, after all that destruction, clearly
planned to deal with us, but… not out.

We didn’t show them any more mercy than that which it took to allow them to live. I only wanted to
commit one murder today.

I felt oddly detached in relation to this fury and this frustration, this driving need to end a life. It
should have been beating like a drum at the edge of my thoughts: I’d never done anything quite like
it, so it should feel special, or different. But just like blinding people with bugs, it felt like
something… that I caused to happen, rather than something that I was going to do. There was no
time as we blew past the suited men, four of them down, and the other two little threat as the bees
continued to sting at them.

It was a decent trick, but I knew he had to have something else. Something that he wasn’t showing
yet. He had the suits, he had the mercs, he had the box that could control my own bugs, somehow.

This wasn’t enough. He had to have at least some intimation that I might have the forces to
overwhelm that.

Pelter was throwing more and more stones. They slammed against the door, battering it down while
Dinah squirmed. Inside, Coil pulled out a knife and held it to Dinah’s throat. “Fuck,” Coil muttered.

Fuck?

Something was wrong, I thought, but I couldn’t figure out what I was missing.

He held up the device and pushed a button or two. But the machine just buzzed, and whatever
happened, it wasn’t anything that made Coil happy. He stood there in control of a bunch of bugs,
wearing a skin-tight suit as the door was slowly knocked down by rock after rock.

It wouldn’t be long now, though it seemed like… huh. The super-speed had to be wearing off,
somehow, as she was slowing down. She was no longer a blur, she was merely… very fast, the kind
of fast that startled people at a person’s reflexes, but nothing more.

I… that didn’t make sense.

He was pressing another button, and now I--

I lost contact with the bugs. And I could hear something… something that sounded remarkably like a
scream.

Something that sounded like whatever Tinker he’d been using had decided to copy yet another
power. I wondered whose powers the box also copied? Pelter’s rocks, though, were… did they not
qualify? Because she was still able to throw them if she kept on backing up, almost to the point
where she couldn’t hit the door. Once she threw them…

The rocks still traveled on their own, and the door still finally collapsed and tumbled down.

But by then, Coil was at a corner where she couldn’t get a good shot off at him, I realized, without
getting closer.

And if she got closer, I thought, tearing through the hallways, her powers would stop working. In
fact, if he were more confident, and if she didn’t have the speed now that she was out of range, he
could probably rush her, and then she’d just be a fourteen year old girl.
He’d be an adult with a knife. I didn’t need to ask what would happen then.

We were almost there, and he… was actually in a surprisingly solid position, despite everything. I didn’t know how we were going to…

I did know.

“Stop!” I yelled, and my mount obeyed. Rachel stopped her dog too, and the other dogs paused, panting heavily, as they looked towards me, confused. “We need to back up.”

“Okay,” she said, just trusting me in a way I didn’t necessarily deserve. I didn’t know whether what she was doing to her dogs would be enough. In a desperate situation we could send her dogs after him as if they were just regular attack dogs, but there was another way we could even the fight.

Slightly even the fight, truthfully.

Guns. I knew nothing about firing one, and I wasn’t going to assume anything, but what they really mattered for was a threat. If we could go in there with guns raised, and with the apparently latent powers of Amp on us, then he’d either have to deal with us personally, using nothing more than a knife—and I knew that as tight as his clothes were, there was no way he had a gun, or at least, if he did I didn’t know where he was hiding it, unlike the knife—or he’d have to turn off the power-damping for whatever other absurd features his damn machine had.

Who had made it for him? I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to think about the implications. His men were gone, downed and hurt, and we needed to hurry while the situation was merely very bad, rather than catastrophic.

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Rachel took a rifle, I took a pistol. They were terrifying looking things, to someone like me. I’d never hunted, I’d never seen the need to defend myself or carry concealed or… well. I was a teenage girl living in a city. What I knew came from shows.

I knew to check the safety, I knew to never keep my finger on the trigger and to aim by holding it and looking down the sight rather than assuming that I was some sort of action-movie star. I knew that I should never point it at anyone unless, well.

And that if I fired, I needed to probably be prepared to kill anyone within dozens of feet of where I was aiming.

If it came down to shooting, it wouldn’t be me pulling off some trick shot like a sniper to kill the hostage taker. If I was shooting, I’d probably be murdering a young girl and Coil, and the thought of that made me sick. He didn’t have access to his own powers, probably, and that meant… what?

He had some sort of Thinker power, or something so subtle that I hadn’t even noticed it, and that was a sickening thought too. We hurried on, and I wished that Rachel could depower her dogs right now, because I wasn’t sure what would happen to them. Would they get trapped in the meat shell that was their body?

Would they somehow be immune to it, treated like the objects that Pelter threw? Already imbued and… but then, why was Amp’s power affected?

And what was with his…

Smell?
That was it. He smelled wrong. Was he sick, or was there something else? Either way, the whole world was slowly shrinking down. I had so few bugs left that weren’t dead or busy watching around us as we moved, women and dogs, to confront Coil once and for all.

We rounded one more corner, and there Pelter was. She’d started taking to peppering the wall with pebbles, thrown slowly enough that they wouldn’t go straight through and potentially hit Dinah, but thrown with enough force that sooner or later the wall wall was going to come down.

“Coil!” I yelled, as Pelter turned and looked at me. “Come out, and we’ll let you live.”

My voice was tense, and I was starting to sweat. The truth was, I was lying, and I… decent people didn’t lie about sparing someone’s life. But if he came out, it’d be because he had some sort of scheme to take advantage of us. At the same time, it was a lot easier to imagine just swarming him with bugs, or ordering one of our dogs to kill him (there was even a command, wasn’t there?), then it was to imagine to stand in front of him, watching as he was helpless, and then choose to shoot him.

I’d do it, though. I had to, it felt like. The pressure, the tension, the fact that Coil was at the center of all of this. The vials, the Merchants, so many bad things could be placed at his feet.

“No,” Coil said. “I don’t think you will, and I don’t think I need to come out. You cannot stop me, and I cannot stop you. We are stalemated… and the Undersiders will be back, as will my other forces, soon enough.”

“And the Protectorate can be brought in too,” I said, absently. He sounded arrogant, but I could hear a slight note of uncertainty, and that seemed wrong too. Would someone like Coil really show doubt like that. “Your own box takes away your power too, whatever it is.”

“That it does,” Coil said.

He smelled… odd. What was I missing? There was one last trick I was missing, and I couldn’t figure it out. Here Coil was, and I’d been able to see his box, before. I knew that he also had Dinah nearby.

She was struggling, from the sounds of it.

“I’m going to come in, and we’re going to talk.”

“Oh, good,” Coil said. “Do so.”

I glanced over at Pelter. “Stay out here,” I said, quietly, and then I took Greg’s radio, holding it tight as I handed it over to her. “If anything goes wrong, call Charlotte, tell her where this is, and tell her to get all of the Protectorate swarming on this place.”

“I can do that, Arachne,” Pelter said, dubiously. Then, slightly firmer, her eyes firing up, “I will do it.”

“Rachel, you ready?”

“Yeah.”

We advanced, the dogs with us, and just like I suspected, after a certain point, they weren’t able to move. They stopped, their fleshy meat-suits becoming inert and dead, and Rachel paused for a moment, to dig at the meat, and she freed one of the dogs before turning, her arms all red with the blood and gore, and frowned.

“We’ll get the others later.” Then I turned to where Coil was being awfully quiet. “You better not
have killed Dinah, Coil! She’s your bargaining chip.”

The sound of the device was still working, and I was alone. I’d never felt like this before, since I’d gotten powers, never entirely without bugs, at least not for long.

And certainly not with a lot of time to think about it.

It felt so quiet, despite the scream of the device, despite the whining of the dogs. Despite the fact that Bentley was panting, scared and confused. It felt so alone, despite the fact that I was surrounded by people, really. Despite the company.

Of course, I’d felt alone in the locker, and I wasn’t, I really wasn’t: I wasn’t alone enough there, helpless and afraid, too afraid to realize what I had to do and what I’d do.

Nobody whose job it was to save me came: it was a janitor who let me out, not that long after, but long enough to change my world.

It felt, sometimes, like nobody came. Like nobody cared.

I’d stopped, just right near the entrance of the door, and I realized I was trembling slightly. I didn’t even know why, but I felt trapped and scared, I felt cold, and I shouldn’t: my power shouldn’t mean that much.

The world shouldn’t feel wrong, as if I were some different person, some person who wasn’t as strong, and wasn’t as sure. I clung to the gun tight.

It felt like nobody had ever actually come.

Rachel reached out a hand, even covered in the blood of the meatsuit, and took my hand, squeezing it.

I glanced over at her, heart racing, eyes wide, “What?”

“You okay?” Rachel asked.

Rachel was here. I’d be okay. “I… am.”

I turned, and she whistled as Bentley stepped in ahead of us. “Bentley, sit.”

We both stepped in behind him, and aimed our guns straight at Coil.

He was crouched down, holding Dinah close, the knife at her neck. And then just behind him, resting against the wall, was the device, still screeching loudly.

I couldn’t see his face, but I could feel the tension, I could guess that even if he wouldn’t admit it that he was afraid. He should be afraid, he was holding an innocent girl hostage.

Dinah’s dark brown hair was hanging limply, and she was staring straight at me. And the gun I was pointing away from both of them. It was pointing at the floor, and I wasn’t going to try anything fancy.

“It’s over, Coil.”

“You wish it was,” Coil said, quietly, almost drowned out by the sound of his machine.

“I wonder who made it for you? Can I get you to talk about that?” I yelled, mostly so I could be
heard over the damn thing.

“Leet,” Coil said.

I blinked. The supervillain? Well… then at any moment, shouldn’t it blow up in some comical way? And… why would he tell me that? He was a smooth operator, he was--

Or was he?

I didn’t feel like myself, stripped of my bugs, but I trusted them. I trusted their senses, and what they and my instincts both said was: this was wrong.

Coil smelled different. Drugged? Maybe. Or…

Wrong. Not like Coil, from what little that I’d somehow… I blinked, and was glad that my mask hid the no-doubt-baffled look on my face.

It was a guess, it really was. I had an idea, and the idea was just an instinct, just a… Coil was clever, right? Scheming, plotting, drawing everything together? But then, when the time came and he had to expose himself to others, why wouldn’t he just use a…

I looked up at Coil and said, “Are you the real Coil? Or are you some sort of body-double?”


Which made certain things make more sense. If Lisa… wanted us to come at ten, it was because she was with the real Coil. Maybe she wanted to distract the real one with the attack? I didn’t know why it was necessary, but I knew there had to be a reason we were with the fake Coil.

The reaction all but proved it. “Yes. A body-double. And that means your chance of not dying has gone way up. Now give Dinah up, and you get to live. Give up that machine--”

What if it worked on the Butcher’s power? What if it was a way to make her just a normal mortal? We could capture her then, we could chain her up, that thing whirring and groaning, and that could be that. Prison, death, whatever we wanted.

The anger, the cold fury, it was all draining away: Coil wasn’t here, and I wouldn’t be the one to kill him, if he died.

“I’ll give you the bitch,” ‘Coil’ said, “But I’m keeping this. And you’re backing up as soon as I push her over.”

“Fine,” I said. “Bentley.” He looked up. I pointed at the door. “Go. Rachel, you can put down the rifle.”

“O… kay.”

I waited until she had, and then kept my gun trained in his general direction, but without my finger on the trigger. “Drop the knife, first off. Just on the ground. Don’t need to throw it away.”

“How did you know?”

“I could smell it,” I said, drily.

He set the knife down and pushed Dinah forward. She stumbled, and he reached down towards the
device. “You stupid bitch, I’m going to--!”

Dinah stumbled forward as I stepped past her, and against all common sense fired at his outstretched arm.

As if, despite everything, I was a SWAT sniper.

It missed arm. It even missed his hand.

But it hit the device, which let out a whine, as I tried to get used to how loud a gun was. I had been aiming right at his arm, and I’d missed by a lot.

Then the device exploded into a thousand fragments.

My powers came back at the same time as the device exploded, which was the only reason I was alive. A huge shard of steel was buried in my stomach, the pain so great I couldn’t breathe.

Dinah was behind me.

The fake Coil was curled into a ball, bleeding from a dozen places, trying to cover up his arm, which was halfway blown off, as blood poured out, soaking the ground. “Oh,” I said, taking a breath.

I could feel my bugs again. Rachel was behind me, less hurt, and still with Amp’s power to protect her. I felt my skin already painfully trying to close on the wound already, so I pulled it out, gasping and almost passing out as I healed from the piece of steel that probably would have gone in even deeper if my skin wasn’t so hard. It was a miracle he was still alive: even if he was currently dying.

“Pelter!” I yelled. “Get in here!”

“Taylor,” Pelter said, rushing in. “There’s news--”

“No time,” I said. “Turn on the radio.”

Pelter quickly flipped a switch and Charlotte began, “Arachne, you--”

“No right now!” I yelled, as I grabbed the radio and moved over towards the man, who was shuddering. “Coil, not Coil or whatever, do what she says if you want to live. Give him regeneration, and nothing else.”

He just kept on shuddering. I didn’t know if he even heard her.

“Please nod your head… Coil.”

He shuddered, and for a long moment I was sure that he wasn’t going to respond at all. He’d just lay there silently and die. But finally, he nodded.

He collapsed as I watched it, the body knitting, the bones crunching slightly as they forced themselves into place. I was soaked in blood, but I didn’t care that much. “Alright…” I said. “Here’s hoping that Tattletale finished him off.” I glanced back over at Rachel, who was moving to go check on the rest of her dogs.

“Arachne, I need to talk to you.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“There’s… visitors to the camp.”
“The Butcher? If so, hold them off as long as you can, get the Protectorate in, and--”

“No. It’s the Undersiders. And some of Accord’s people. The survivors. They came from… they’re all dead.”

“Who?”

“Uber, Leet, Coil, Accord… just about everyone. The Butcher wiped them all…”

I stared at the radio.

Oh.

Chapter End Notes

Thus always to Coils.
I looked up at Pelter, and then over at Dinah. “We have to go,” I said. Dinah was standing there, staring at the unconscious figure of the fake Coil. She seemed shocked, trembling a little bit. “Dinah, I… I do want to take you back to your parents. But we don’t know where they are--”

I should have asked. I should have thought ahead, beyond the moment I killed Coil and rescued her. I’d been distracted from this, but it’d been a goal, something I’d wanted to do for a while, and now that I’d done it…

I found that over the next hill were still more hills. It didn’t end. But Rachel was there with me, and I would figure out what to do next.

“Okay,” Dinah said, quietly. Her voice was a whisper. Then she added, a little thoughtfully. “I’d thought you’d come for a long time. I’d looked for it, or something. I’d seen…” she trailed off, the trembling getting a little stronger. “Death, or freedom.”

“Death, or freedom?” I asked.

“He could have killed me,” Dinah said.

“Yes, he could have, but he didn’t--”

“Sometimes he did. Or would have,” Dinah said, with an absent frown. “It’s complicated.”

“Your power lets you see the future?” I asked.

“… possible futures,” she said, quietly, looking at me. Of course, all she could see was my costume, and she was definitely more exposed than I was. I was soaked in blood as well, so I pulled off the mask so she could see my face.

“Well, then. I’ll take you to the camp, and then as soon as we can safely get you back to your parents…”

“I understand,” Dinah said, nodding. “What about him?”

“What do you want to happen to him?”

“I wanted Coil to die,” Dinah said, quietly. It was a choked voice, as if the words themselves were an indictment of her.

“So did I. And now he’s dead,” I said. I didn’t even feel bad. I knew that Dad would have. Every life was precious, and these lives mattered, and of course, justice was trying someone and putting them in jail.

But I didn’t feel that way at all, not right now. Maybe I was just in the wrong mood for mercy.

“Yes,” Dinah said.

“Hey, kiddo,” Pelter said, awkwardly, only a few years older than Dinah. “Do you need to get anything before you go? We can put it all in a bag on one of the dog’s backs.”
“Clothes,” Dinah said, quietly, glancing around. Certainly I didn’t think that she would be that interested in keeping all of the stuff she’d been given. She walked over towards the closet, still shaking, and opened it up, beginning to pull out clothes.

She liked things that covered her, I thought, with sympathy and understanding. She liked things that I liked, which meant she grabbed long pants, and baggy shirts, anything to cover herself up. She didn’t care about style, just things she could wear, and it only took a minute or so for her to get packed up.

Apparently she’d run through this before, in her head. She’d thought about what she’d want and what she wouldn’t want.

Rachel came in with her dogs… it was weird. The suits had died, but then when the power lapsed, the suits were still there, so the dogs just… reinhabited them?

So there wasn’t a ton of meat outside, except from the one dog that we’d had to excavate from all of that. They barked as they saw us.

“You ready?” Rachel asked.

Dinah was in the middle of finishing up the packing, and so I said, “One sec, Rachel. And… Coil’s dead.”

Rachel glanced over at where the fake Coil was lying. “He is?”

“That wasn’t the real him, I said. But the real him… Tattletale says he’s dead.”

“How?”

I sighed, “We don’t know yet. We need to get to the camp, and we need to do it now, before we run out of time. There’s bad things going on, and we don’t want to get caught up in this.”

“Yeah,” Rachel snorted, glancing at the assembly. “Then let’s go.” She walked over to me, and I looked down at the blood and other gross stuff on her. Even I didn’t want to kiss her or do anything much with her like that.

...and I’d done plenty of things.

But she just walked past me, to Bentley, who had slipped into the room and was sniffing at Dinah and began to power him up. He was growing before her eyes, but Dinah didn’t even react, just watched thoughtfully, as if it were a show, or rather as if it were something that she could just watch from a distance.

“Pelter, can you hold onto a dog on your own?” I asked.

“I think I can,” she said, quietly, clearly trying to be the adult. “Dinah, is there anything else you need?”

“No,” Dinah said quietly, as she glanced up at Bentley.

******

Pelter struggled to hold on, as Dinah gripped at my waist. We weren’t even running, really, just a fast jog by the standards of Bitch’s dogs. But it was enough to make the ride pretty bumpy as we left into the late morning light.

Nothing seemed different as we moved, at least at first. Then, in the distance, I heard it. The wail of
sirens, loud and pleading, as if imploring the world to make sense again. I listened to it as we moved, going faster and faster as soon as we were sure that Pelter could hold on.

Of course, we could have had Charlotte give Pelter powers and then she’d return the way she came, but I didn’t want to have a long conversation with her here, not when I needed to talk to Lisa and see what the hell was going on.

I was tense, waiting at every moment for the sirens to get louder, for what was before a distant problem to suddenly spring on me. I didn’t have enough bugs, for one, so while I could see pretty far around me, except within about two blocks away, my sight was limited. I’d come in with every bug I had, and that meant was having to gather bugs as we moved. But we were moving fast enough that it was actually rather difficult.

I didn’t want to tell Rachel to slow down, though. There was too much danger, there were too many things that could, and probably would, go wrong. So I just did what I could. The spiders were mostly lost, and I had to make sure to keep the flies that had diseases close to me, to make sure we didn’t miss them.

I wasn’t going to be much good for the next while, unless I could find some bugs, and that’d mean I’d have to go far afield. I’d need to… I didn’t even know. I didn’t know what we could possibly do.

I’d just have to have a thin set of tripwires, instead of the thicker, see-all field that I’d gathered up over time.

Even with the reduced field, there were still a few bugs in camp, and I set the flies buzzing as soon as I got closer, so they’d know I was coming.

They were all in a tent that had been set up. Regent was laying down, and out of costume, his arm seemingly broken, and his knee bent in a way that knees didn’t. Grue was in costume, but all but collapsed in his chair, while Lisa’s face was bruised, and I could see Aisha lying on a second cot.

Besides that, there were only a few others. Three Ambassadors. Citrine, Codex, and Arturas.

That was it. Were all the rest of them dead? I didn’t know.

******

When we came in, crowds surrounded us. Over a hundred people crowded in, pushing and shoving and babbling as we tried to dismount. Charlotte was there, in the corner, near the tent, but she didn’t want to speak up.

“Move, please!” I yelled.

The people stepped back, finally taking in that we were soaked in blood and probably in no mood for it. I could feel their fear, palpable and potent, but there was nothing I could do.

“Things’ll be alright,” Pelter said. “Please go back to your homes and tents. We need to see to the child--”

Which only made people look over at Dinah as I tried to help her off.

I wasn’t that strong, not like Rachel, but I was still able to lift her up and set her down as we went for the tent.

I thought about what had changed: smells. I could now apparently identify people by scent, and if I
could tell that, what else could I notice? I didn’t know, and if the situation was so dire, I’d have a huge pile of things to study with how to use my powers and everyone else’s.

Instead, we all piled, still bloodied and exhausted, into the big brown tent of the sort you used as a pavilion of sorts, in order to talk to Lisa.

There they all were. None of them were in a good way. The very best off of them still looked like they’d had a long, hard day, and the Ambassadors were all in the corner, glaring at everyone.

“Lisa, what the hell happened?” I asked.

There she was, moving as if she was afraid of breaking something, pacing back and forth. “Taylor, did you get Coil?”

“He was a fake,” I said. “I let him live. You can clear out the base if you want, if he hasn’t run away, but I wasn’t going to kill some body-double.”

“Shit,” Lisa said, glancing over at Grue. “But… we did kill him.”

“Really, what happened,” I demanded again.

“Coil tried to betray Accord,” Citrine said, her voice soft, and formal. Like she was giving a report at a board meeting, rather than in a tent full of Parahumans.

“I knew it was coming,” Lisa said, taking charge effortlessly, though I had a feeling that there were more than a few people a little annoyed at that. “So I told Coil about it. It was going to be a trade: money for vials. Coil… he had the power to split himself into two realities. And make different choices in each, and then eliminate the one he didn’t like. When he heard that you were attacking the base… I bet he collapsed the reality where he was at the base and his double was at the meeting.”

I frowned, behind my mask, and I bet that Rachel was confused by that too. It was utterly bizarre. “Alright, and he died…”

“Yes. And that’s when the Teeth came. Accord tried to fight back even as he fled. She killed him. She killed the others, too. Every Ambassador who isn’t here. We tried to have Aisha hurt her, but…”

Grue finally stirred. “Her power can somehow sense that she’s a danger even when it doesn’t know she exists.” Grue looked over at Aisha, and I had a feeling that he was angry. Angrier than he sounded, which was a task.

“Yeah, it was… troubling,” Lisa said. “So we had to run. The Protectorate showed up after that, and… the fight’s still ongoing, as far as I know. She got a hold of several of the vials that we couldn’t save, and that’s a problem. But a bigger problem is that with Accord gone, us cleared out… and we can’t make it back to our apartment, and Coil dead—”

The more she spoke, the more I stared at her. She and the Butcher had removed all of the villains that could stand in the path of the Teeth. That just left the heroes… and them, here.

“Oh,” I said, faintly. I glanced back at Pelter, and then over at Dinah, crowded in. I almost wanted to ask how likely it was that we’d be able to deal with the Butcher, but she’d just escaped from someone who used her power against her. “So, why are you here?”

“Asylum,” Lisa said. “And… I think that we can beat the Butcher. I have some ideas, and they know that Accord made at least a few plans to deal with the Butcher.”
“Oh?” I asked.

“We have to work together now,” Grue said, firmly.

“Maybe we do,” I admitted, frowning. “How?”

“We have a few things we need to do first,” Lisa said. “First, we need to be healed up. That’s non-negotiable.”

“I can do that,” I said. “But why should we help you, rather than turning you away and doing it on our own?”

“You wouldn’t—” Lisa began, and then she blinked. “You would, wouldn’t you?”

“If I don’t have a good reason not to. Because you’re villains. I like you, Tattletale, I really do. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to help you take out the Butcher just to replace her.”

“I have an idea about how we can kill her. And kill her for good. I need to check just one thing before I know if it’ll work. And we need to have as many ways to do it as possible. Because this is a rough idea, and one that is subject to change,” Lisa said.

“Oh?” I asked. “I’d be willing to help you for that, but… you need to not do anything criminal here. As long as you’re staying here, you should basically be a vigilante. No recruiting people, stay as far away from—”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it,” Regent said, his voice grabby as he tried and failed to sit up. “Don’t get within a hundred feet of minors, wear a bracelet at all times, and you’ll whip us while we’re doing it because we’re naughty, naughty boys.”

I winced, but… it was true that I wasn’t going to give them free run of the camp. “What you do on your own time isn’t my concern,” I said, glancing over at Dinah, in the hopes that she wasn’t being affected by this… coarse language.

Regent let out a laugh, high-pitched and sorta modulating, as if he were a jackal. “You got me.”

“No, I don’t,” I said. “I need to take a bath, and clean off. And you… Charlotte can help all of you. Stay here for the moment, and we can set up some more tents if you need them. I…” I glanced around. “After I bathe, I’ll see what else we can do. Do you want us to just sit around waiting for now, Tattletale?”

“No. You should keep in contact with the Protectorate. Find a way to justify us. I don’t think this crisis is going to last too long. Either it ends, or the Butcher wins. There’s no way she can operate at this intensity without burning out. But… I have to say. She had extra powers. She’s using the patches.”

“Oh. Oh shit,” I said. The power patches could give capes extra powers? That meant that she was going to be even more powerful and dangerous. And I already only had a few half-baked ideas about how to defeat her. And none about how to kill her.

I knew just what kind of a disaster killing her would be. If I was lucky, I’d survive for long enough to turn myself in to the Birdcage.

The only hero to ever be caught up in it apparently hadn’t been. Maybe the voices in his head stopped him. Either way, it was very clear that past a certain point, I’d have to rely on dangerous and tricky combinations.
...which meant I needed to practice a few things.

“Yeah, I’d say that,” Regent said. “Oh shit is right.”

Over in the corner, Citrine stepped forward. “We’re willing to go along with all of this for now, but once this crisis is passed, we need to return to Boston to salvage the rest of his empire. It is too important to leave to chance.”

“Of course,” Lisa said, and Citrine looked surprised at her words, staring at her as if she’d stumbled into a mine.

“We can get everything ready, but… if the Butcher comes—”

“Everyone who can needs to move into an apartment,” I said. “Even if two families have to share the same apartment. The only people who should be out here are those who can fight, one way or another. And we need strong capes more than we need waves and waves of fighters.” I glanced over at Charlotte. “Strong capes… and perhaps strong dogs. But only if Rachel agrees.”

“What’d you want?” Rachel asked, frowning a little.

“Just to teach them a single command. Or, Charlotte teach them. Not real commands. Just… sit or something. Something they can obey without obeying any other commands,” I said. “If not, it’s fine. We’ll find other ways to deal with the Butcher.”

“Fine,” Rachel said. “But just one command.”

“Good, and we need to bring the dogs into the camp. The shelter’s nice, but it’s too isolated. Everyone needs to go in as close as possible. Once we clear out some of the tents, Rachel, then we can just create an area for the dogs.”

“It sounds like you have these things under control,” Lisa said. “I’ll handle Aisha’s mission… after the healing. Remember about that?”

“I do,” I said, looking at her smile and trying to remind herself that she probably meant it. It looked so fake… and it was also just a smile, and those were a little annoying to deal with, when I was used to how Rachel reacted.

Honestly, it was almost easier when… nevermind.

“So, Charlotte, let’s get this going.”

******

The world shrunk, and shrunk again, even as my range began to expand, greater and greater. Of course I was trapped. It had already been impressive, but as I moved this way and that, and the tents were all tossed aside, the families shoved into the apartments, the entire camp changing in character, it was… startling.

My range wasn’t a mile long, that would be absurd. But it was longer than it’d ever been before, and it was long enough that I could vaguely feel so much between me and the camp that I had to prioritize with the bugs I had left. There were a lot of bugs in the Butcher’s territory.

The Teeth were not a clean people, though my range wasn’t long enough to reach whatever den that fucking Butcher was hiding out in.

She’d learned, apparently, and was going to sleep deep in her territory, so that she wouldn’t be in
range of my bugs unless I actually went after her.

I gathered bugs from there and moved them, spreading them out as I helped people pack and move things.

Then I went with Rachel to clear out her dogs. There were a lot of dogs, and they were very glad to see us. There was also a lot to haul. I really did need to practice more with lifting things, because my muscles were burning hauling the huge bags of food, and setting it all in the saddles.

I watched her, and helped as much as I was able, aware that if it came down to a fight it was going to be rough. I had to hope that the Butcher took a little longer to get to us. There was no way she wouldn’t attack us. The camp, the Protectorate, New Wave too I supposed. Those were the only clusters of parahumans still left, other than the Teeth.

But she didn’t come, at least not immediately. We returned to the camp, an army of dogs at our back, and began the difficult work of turning the camp into a dog-park.

Charlotte kept close, watching and listening and no doubt waiting for a chance to learn. She was nervous around Rachel, as skittish as a dog that’d been hurt a few too many times, but I knew that she’d figure it out.

Rachel was in a good mood, or at least I could feel it in the way she was standing that she wasn’t nearly as tense as before. Was it because we were finally going to get to acting? We’d attacked a bad guy, we’d come together at last…

Whatever it was, despite the fact that the city well may be burning around else, I felt sort of... optimistic. Not entirely so, but I at least believed that things would work, and I left Rachel to deal with Charlotte, and maybe teach her not to look so worried around the dogs.

I had to talk to Parian.

*******

I found her pacing in her room. “You decided all of this without me,” Parian said, firmly. “How dare you?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Is your family okay? The people in this apartment building? They’re going to have to share even more space if we’re going to do this.”

“Are we going to do this?” Parian asked. “I just… this isn’t the way I thought it’d go. You didn’t tell me about leaving, you didn’t tell me about--”

“Coil had agents everywhere. There was too much chance of something leaking out. Now he’s dead. I’m not holding back anything from you. I know that Stefanie’s already come by and she's told you what’s going on, Parian.”

Parian sighed, and stopped her pacing, glancing over to her sewing desk, which was strewn with what looked like multiple different outfits. Some of them were hero-okay, but some of them were honestly a little skimpy, though they all looked like costumes.

“More costumes that you’re not going to use?” I asked.

“Sure,” Parian said. Her voice was gruff, and it reminded me of Rachel when she was in a bad mood. Just something about that intonation told me she didn’t want to talk about it… probably ever.
“If the Butcher comes, you should stay back. Your dolls can help us with the numbers, but--”

“But?”

“Can’t be affected by Amp,” I said. It was one area where the synergy was less than ideal. If Rachel’s dogs could be powered up by both her and Amp, that’d mean a lot to how we worked together.

“Ah, right.”

“But you can still definitely help, and I should have gone and gotten you,” I admitted, shaking my head. “There’s just so much that’s going on. I hope that we can finally end this, and things’ll calm down.”

“Why would they?” Parian asked.

“Because the Teeth are the last major gang in town… other than the Undersiders, I suppose.” I frowned at that. “And I don’t think they’re nearly as big a threat as the Butcher is.”

“Maybe not, but hearing that you’re working with them…”

I sighed. “I met them a long time ago. They came with Rachel, really. At first, at least. And I think that we can trust them to work together for now. Later we can figure things out.”

I thought about when my biggest worry was a bunch of lawsuits, and the distant threat of the Butcher coming back.

Now she’d all but won, and I didn’t know if I could trust the Protectorate to actually take her down. She was very powerful anyways, after all, and whoever they sent up against her had to be able to defeat her without killing her.

That was the real trick: if it was just murder that it took, I was sure that… someone would have figured it out. After all, at least one hero had before.

But she just kept on getting stronger and stronger with each new iteration, and at the rate she was gaining powers…

I imagined her with Amp’s powers. I imagined her with my powers. Or Flechette’s. Hell, even Pelter’s power would probably synergize well, and if she were a tinker as well, she’d just get even harder to actually deal with.

There was no good outcome to be found here, and I didn’t know what to tell her. I wanted to sit down and really talk to her, and figure out how to make her satisfied with the fact that I hadn’t included her.

I worried about her. I thought about Lily and realized that in a rough way at least some of these costumes could fit her, and I wondered what that meant. I wanted things to be okay between the both of them… whether okay meant they stopped pining and moved on, or okay meant that they did something about it.

I wanted Parian to be safe: I wanted a lot of things. I was watching as Rachel taught Charlotte, I was watching as Stefanie tried to talk to Dinah, who was quiet and reserved, eating in silence until Greg came barrelling in.

‘Hey, kid. Uh, Dinah? Do you like video games?’"
With a faint smile, she took it.

Then he hurried off, back to his tent and the suit he was desperately working to finish in time.

“What are you thinking about?” Parian asked. “Rachel?”

“Not at the moment. Just... stuff,” I said. “What can I do to make this better?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Parian said, dismissively. “There’s bigger problems right now, and--”

At the edge of my view, I spotted something, blocks and blocks away, and my bugs moved to get a closer look.

Kid Win was flying, low enough that he could still bail off if need be, and down below him were two other capes.

Flechette, and Phase. They were moving carefully, though they seemed to relax when they saw the swarm of bugs that I let appear.

“Flechette’s coming,” I said.

“She is?”

“And two other Wards,” I said. “Something’s up.”

“Really?” Parian asked, and it took a brief second to realize that she was being dry.

“...Yes. Anyways, do you want to meet with her?”

“I want to, yes,” Parian said.

“Alright, then--”

“I want a lot of things I shouldn’t,” she added, in a small voice. The ache of my heart was almost literal as I looked over at her mask, and the costumes.

I looked at her desires and her fears, and saw them... and I felt like they weren’t that different. “What if you just... acted?”

“Acted?” Parian asked, frowning.

“Had sex with her. Well, asked her to. She’d agree, and then you can take it from there,” I said.

“That’s... I guess that’s it.” Parian didn’t explain what she meant.

That’s it?

“Are you going to...”

“No. I can’t,” Parian said. “How would my family react?”

“You shouldn’t give a shit,” I said.
“I do,” she admitted.

I let out a long, low breath. “There’s going to be fights and danger aplenty. Now’s a chance. Maybe a last chance. I’d… maybe I’d be too much of a coward to go for it.”

“Maybe I am too,” Parian said.

I looked at her, shifting my weight a little as I tried to think through what I wanted to do. “Fair enough, then. I’m going to go and talk to them. Should I tell her not to come up?”

“If you could, please,” Parian said. “But nicely?”

“I can try that,” I said.

*******

Kid Win was circling near the camp when I stepped out onto the street, and only then did he land.

Bryce looked… tired, more than anything else, and I tried to ignore him to focus on Flechette, whose costume was just as torn up. She had on a jacket over it, as if that would be enough to cover the fact that… she’d been injured and then healed, and while skin could be reknit, clothing hadn’t been.

Which meant there’d been a fight.


“What’s she done now?” I asked.

“We don’t know. She attacked Accord, we know that, but we have no idea where the Undersiders are, or if she killed or captured all of them too.” Flechette’s voice was panicked, and she was twitching and shifting from foot to foot the whole time.

“No, they’re here.”

“They’re what?” Kid Win asked, stepping closer. “Why?”

“Artifice really could use some help, I think he’s trying to get kitted up in time,” I said. “If you’re here, you might as well help, right?”

“Actually, we were here to ask for your help,” Flechette said.

“We’re going to go after the Butcher. But in our own way. And what about the Protectorate, haven’t they--”

“Almost everyone was sent to the hospital in a fight about an hour ago. We’re the only ones up and walking, other than Miss Militia. And… I think it had to be an accident,” Flechette said. “Because she went out of her way to just take us down, hurt us. Break a few limbs. Break our backs. Just… not kill us. But she killed Triumph.”

I blinked. “What?!” I didn’t know Triumph that well, but… why? Did she just overestimate him? Was there something else going on. “Is the Protectorate going to--”

“We’ve requested more reinforcements, we really have,” Flechette said. “They’ll probably come through in a few days, but… even then, it’s not going to be more than a few people from Boston, New York, a few other places.”
I looked at her, and then glanced over at Kid Win. He was the only one who merely looked tired, rather than beat up. Maybe he’d avoided attacks. Maybe he hadn’t been there.

“A few days?” I asked. “Why not now? Shouldn’t you be swarming like… I dunno, cops,” I said, trying not to sound furious. “Legend could show up in five minutes.”

“He’s… been avoiding fighting the Butcher. The last time they fought, Piggot told me personally before she—”

“Sent you here? Why.”

“Help. New Wave’s the only group still out there holding back the Teeth,” Flechette said. “The Butcher has retreated for now, but…”

“But? Actually. Come into the camp. You can at least stay to eat, and maybe help out, as long as you promise not to fight any of the villains of they don’t fight you back,” I said, trying to sound stern, my mind already racing.

*******

Flechette sipped water as she looked at me, trying to ignore that Lisa and Aisha were hovering in a corner of the tent with Codex, planning something out, apparently.

Of course, I could listen in, and my bugs were, but I was trying to multi-task here.

Aisha had a mission, and that mission was going to take her to the heart of Teeth territory, and it had to do with Dose. That much I understood, though they kept on trailing off, as if they were both thinking through things.

Meanwhile, Flechette was explaining to me what had happened.

“She… Piggot says that Legend felt as if she was daring him to kill her. He’s beaten Butchers before, but they always escape, and each new Butcher, he has to hold back less and less. The fifth one, he actually captured for a time, but the man escaped… the seventh…”

“I get it,” I said, glancing over at Bryce. “Do you have anything to add?”

“No, I--” he began, then closed his mouth.

I looked at him, just in case he wanted to say something, like maybe even begin to apologize, at last? Or explain what he’d been doing. I wondered if Sierra knew he was here. Sierra was out of the camp, at least for the moment, but… she did turn up, now and again.

“Then maybe you could go and see if anyone here needs help. They’re still moving.” He was flickering in and out a lot less often, now. Which was a good thing, right, that he was getting control of his power?

“If Legend ever killed the Butcher, it’d be a disaster,” Flechette said. “Best case he’s able to turn himself up, and he’s in the Birdcage and… the world loses a legend.” She bit her lip. “Where were you? I tried to message you earlier, right when I heard it all happened, because I thought…”

“Thought what?” I asked.

“That you’d be able to attack the Teeth while the Butcher was busy,” Flechette admitted, biting her lip a little and looking away.
“I was busy rescuing Dinah Alcott from Coil.”

“Dinah?” Flechette asked, sounding as if she were going to throw up. She sounded sick, she sounded uncertain, and I just stared at her and waited for it to make sense. Something was not only bugging her, it was terrifying her, but not in some immediate sense.

She didn’t want to run, or hide: she just wanted it not to be sure.

“What is it?”

“I guess… secrecy doesn’t matter anymore,” Flechette said, and I realized she was on the verge of crying. Bryce was cold-eyed, shaken but in a way that left him just staring ahead, out of it. I almost felt bad for him. “Triumph was Rory Christner.”

It took me a moment to remember who that was. I’d been so disconnected from the city as a whole. It’d been our own world, out on a limb, as we still were. “The Mayor’s…”

“Son,” Flechette said. “And he’s dead. And Dinah is--”

Now I knew why she wanted to hide. Now I knew why she looked sick. I felt sick too. “Oh. Cousin. I saved her, but… do you know if her parents are alive?”

“They… I think, yes?” Flechette said, clearly straining to know for sure. “But I think everyone thought that Dinah was dead. Or… they didn’t know where she could have been.”

“I…” I trailed off. “Are you sure they’re alive? Did you meet them?”

“No, we’re… we’ll see. If they’re not, then she’d go with the mayor, but--”

But he was probably mourning and… I hoped I hadn’t just saved her only for her to have no good options to turn to.

But what was I supposed to do? Leave her there? I bit my lip. “I’ll tell her. You should stay here. It’s not safe to go out. And… do you have a radio? Tell them if they do want to send backup, what they could send is bugs. I’m running short.”

I knew I was being curt, but the truth was I had to force myself to say even that much, because the words I had inside me were too sharp and twisted. They were jagged words, words that wouldn’t help anyone, even if holding them in meant that they cut me up.

“I can do that, I… tell Dinah I’m sorry.”

I’d lost someone before. Sorries didn’t help. They didn’t even blunt the impact, sometimes.

******

Stefanie was with Dinah when I found her. Dinah was sitting on the edge of a sleeping back, looking as if all she wanted to do was close her eyes. And Stefanie wasn’t a fool. In fact, she was honestly one of the most mature people I knew.

I wondered at that sometimes. She’d been star-struck, and she was fourteen, ultimately, but she took on all of this burden, she shouldered it all and carried on. I wondered what she wanted. School was probably off still, so there was nothing to get in her way even if she wanted it to, but what sorta student was she?

Did she have crushes? Did she like a particular type of music? I’d learned a little about her, I thought
I knew her alright, but… there were details you couldn’t see here. People didn’t react the way they would in times of peace, and we’d been surviving the aftermath of an Endbringer attack.

Even the slow moments had had that desperation…

Now she just watched Dinah, ready to help if she could.

“Dinah,” I said.

Dinah looked up. She seemed as if nothing could possibly phase her. But we’d see if that was true.

“Dinah,” I repeated, and her eyes focused a little more. She looked as if she were finally seeing me again. Her eyes were deep and soulful, the kind of eyes that drew you in, made you want to know what it was that was behind them.

Of course, that was probably just me reading too much into it, me knowing who she was and what she could do, and assuming things.

Maybe it was her eyes and her face, or her eyes and her age. But finally I was able to speak. “In a fight with the Butcher, your… cousin died.”

“Triumph?” she asked, as if she had a dozen cousins. I didn’t know if it was shock, or if they weren’t close.

“Yes,” I said.

“Oh,” Dinah said, hunching up a little bit, as if she were bracing herself for something worse. Her eyes were hollow now, and the pain I’d felt before was redoubled, the ache in my heart.

“I… we can take you back to your parents, or to someone who can take care of you, now,” I said.

I could have Amp give her super-speed, and one other person. We could be gone and back, hopefully before anything happened. Or at least, I could get her to the authorities, and surely they’d have something they could do.


“Is it your power saying that?” I leaned in, looking over at Stefanie. “Stefanie, has she eaten?”

“No, not yet. She didn’t want to eat,” Stefanie said, not commenting on the fact that I already knew this, that of course I’d thought about that.

“It isn’t. Just… I don’t want to go yet. You’ll keep me safe,” Dinah said.

“Me? I… if you want,” I said. I looked at her, short and seemingly helpless, but there was something solid about her words. Perhaps it was hollowed out, but I didn’t want to think that way. Not when she was looking at me.

She was someone I could save, someone I had to help.

“I can’t… use my powers for you. But you have a chance.” Dinah said it so simply, as if this would be reassuring.

“Do you want to talk about it? And Charlotte has a… group. If you wanted to…”

“No. I… “ Dinah blinked, and suddenly she was the young girl I’d imagined, eyes wet. “Didn’t
know him that well. But Uncle Christiner was nice, and now he’s going to be upset. And I… why did the Butcher kill him?”

“It was an accident, I think,” I said. “She just used too much force, or maybe… one of her powers?” I didn’t know. It felt so distant, but I knew that this Butcher was the one I was going to be fighting soon. Very soon even. I’d have to face her again, and I remembered how dangerous she’d been.

I imagined the Protectorate up against that, and suddenly it didn’t feel distant at all. It felt like it was going to close me in at all sides.

“Oh,” Dinah said, quietly.

“If there’s anything you need, please tell us,” I said. “And please eat, Dinah.” I said it softly, afraid of startling her, or of her doing something wrong. “Flechette will be coming to talk to you, if you want it.”

“Flechette?”

“She… knows more about your cousin,” I said, firmly. I hoped she did, at least. She didn’t know about Dinah’s parents, but surely she’d at least seen the details, or… maybe hopefully she hadn’t, and she made it softer then I knew it’d be.

I’d seen what people looked like, dead or dying, and it was nothing close to pretty enough to let a… twelve? year old girl listen to. “Okay,” she said.

“By the way, how old are you?” I asked. “If you don’t mind me asking?”

“…Twelve, I think. My birthday is in August,” Dinah said, quietly. And then she’ll be thirteen, I thought. Stefanie wasn’t that much older, really. Neither was I, either. We were all just kids here, or at least that’s what it felt like at that moment.

Kids making adult decisions because who else was going to decide things? Who else was going to bail us out?

Yet there were plenty of adult civilians that we could have relied on. Instead, the fact that we were capes, all of us, meant that we were somehow supposed to be ready for all of this. Fuck, I couldn’t consistently figure out love and dating until it slapped me in the face, and then I messed it all up within a short time and had to fix it all.

And I was the ‘leader’ of a team of heroes? It made no sense, but I didn’t… regret any of this, at least, I didn’t regret where I was now.

I couldn’t say sorry and mean it, and saying sorry and meaning it wouldn’t even change anything.

He was dead. Mom was dead. After a certain point there was nothing to be done except to try to move on. Of course, I hadn’t done that. Or at least, I’d barely started doing that before everything had gotten knocked around.

I’d wasted years after that. Or… I guess I shouldn’t say wasted, but it was wasted.

“I need to get going,” I said. “I need to check in with Rachel and Charlotte.”

********

The sun was still high in the sky, but it’d be up there until late, of course. The Undersiders were all
here, as the food was brought out from the kitchens. Lisa in a corner talking with Grue, Regent bugging the Ambassadors, who were all clumped together, not talking, just watching and waiting with tense uncertainty.

Artifice and Kid Win weren’t here, at least: still in the tent, working on the project together, and Parian and Flechette were on other sides of the central grassy area that we’d turned into the meeting ground.

I didn’t know what we were waiting for, but I’d eaten with Rachel, and now we were cuddled together, laying on the grass. The dogs were wondering around, but a few basic barriers meant they were unlikely to wander off. And if they did?

I had a fly on each of their collars, and if they tried to scratch it, I moved them out of the way in time. Charlotte was in one of the buildings, talking to her girls. To the people she was working with, worrying and fretting, and then probably at some point washing up.

I didn’t think she smelled that bad, really, but she talked about how sweaty she was and how she smelled of dogs.

She didn’t smell at all like that to me, though. Rachel did, but her? Just being around them for a few hours? Not so much. But I guess it was her choice to think she smelled when she didn’t.

I wanted to say something. Perhaps if someone else was there, I’d have a big speech in me, to rally everyone. But I didn’t. We were waiting and eating, and I was too busy paying attention to Rachel, really. She was eating a little sloppily, clearly in a rush for some reason that… I didn’t know. I felt it too, we were supposed to hurry just in case of… something.

But I was there with a napkin to wipe her mouth, and I tried not to focus too much on the presence of everyone else. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t ignored people before, after all.


“Like what?” Rachel asked, frowning, as if she couldn’t remember what she’d done today to warrant it.

“Everything. Including teaching Charlotte.”

“As long as she doesn’t do her weird talky shit on you anymore,” Rachel said, firmly, as if she needed to remind me.

“She won’t,” I said. “She knows what she’s done now.” I frowned, and began to work on my own food. I admit I ate it almost as fast as Rachel did, but I was a little more careful. I knew she could eat nicer than that, but only when she had a reason to.

“Good.” Rachel frowned. “Should we read tonight?”

I considered it. We had something we’d have to do pretty soon, I was sure, and there was the threat of the Butcher. Could we even afford to go to sleep? Now would be the perfect time to take up a coffee habit.

There was a lot to think about? Maybe we could sleep in shifts. “I don’t know, I… oh.”

“Oh?” Rachel asked, confused.
At the edge of my range, slowly making her way towards the shelter, which was of course evacuated, was Cassie.

I would know her smell anywhere, the slight floral shampoo, the scrubbed clean smell, and a thousand other scents that I just knew, in some unconscious way. And my bugs were able to get close enough to see for sure.

She was dressed in a hoodie, which she pulled back when she saw my bugs, which I concentrated while trying to make them point like an arrow. ‘Come to camp’ I tried to say through them, though it sounded… slightly off. I needed more practice. She seemed to hear, though, speeding up slightly.

“What?” Rachel asked.

“It’s Cassie, she’s coming.”

“Oh.” Rachel frowned. “And?”

“She shouldn’t be here. She…” I trailed off, not sure how to say it. She was a kid, younger than me, and she even had a family.

… a very lax one, to allow her to do all that she’s done, but one that existed in a theoretical sense, at least. I hadn’t asked about it. I hadn’t asked a lot of questions, and I knew that there were some I didn’t really wanna ask.

I’d said things that I had reason to regret now, including about Cassie and Rachel. You couldn’t help who you had a crush on anyways, and it wasn’t like she was a threat. I just…

Most of all, I wanted her gone so that I wouldn’t have to worry about her.

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It was luck as much as anything else that meant that nothing went wrong. Cassie had a long way to go until she reached the camp, but she kept her hood down and moved fast. She moved fast, but she also… avoided people. I saw at least a few Teeth, here and there, at the edge of my range, and at least a few were actually within a half-block of Cassie at one point, without even knowing it. They flowed to and from battlefields, I had to assume, and if I wanted to escalate, I could have taken them all out with bugs. But I was too busy gathering bugs to risk some of them dying. I’d need them when the real threats came out in force.

Finally, there she was, in visual range. The dogs started barking as she got closer.

The sun was just starting to set, and she was hurrying, a pack on her back filled with what seemed like notebooks. Rachel and I were standing watch, waiting for her, while the rest of everyone else… waited.

There was a lot of waiting, and I didn’t even know for what.

Then there was Cassie, walking along. Walking alone. Though of course she wasn’t behind her were by this point hundreds of people online that I’d never met, users of an internet that I hadn’t been on since Behemoth. They saw something in Rachel… and me too, I supposed, that I couldn’t see.

I wonder what they thought of all of this? I knew that they were still on my side, most of them. But was it even my side? Or Rachel’s either, the second choice? Or were they on their own side, and they thought we were on theirs?
Cassie looked up and smiled at us, stepping closer, but before she even spoke I said, “You shouldn’t have come--”

“I came as soon as I heard,” Cassie said, eagerly. She wasn’t smiling, actually, and of course she wasn’t. She knew how Rachel was with people baring her teeth. “I… thought I’d be needed.”

“You’re in danger here,” I said, firmly. I looked at her, at those blue eyes and the brown skin, at this girl who had allowed this camp to continue. “I don’t want to have to look out for you too.”

“I can take care of myself,” Cassie said, and then she froze for a moment, looking from me to Rachel, and seeing to sense that we were no longer at each other’s throats. Sensing that maybe we were finally getting along enough that… “Arachne, did you make up with--”

“Yes, I did,” I said.

To her credit, she looked relieved and happy about that, her lips turning up even as she didn’t show any teeth, her shoulders relaxing. “Good, good.”

“I’m sorry if I--”

“It’s already forgiven,” Cassie said, almost too fast. I didn’t know what to say to that, of course. Because it shouldn’t be.

I didn’t forget that easily, I thought, with a frown. “Okay, but you do need to go back… I, we can figure out how to get you through.”

“I can help here,” Cassie said.

Rachel frowned and said, “Let her stay.”

I turned to look at her, nerves jangling a little as I imagined all of the things that could go wrong. She’d be yet another civilian trapped here, waiting to see if we could actually fight off the Butcher again, and this time with the odds even worse… or at least, I knew that she would have new tricks, just like we would.

The question was whether it’d be enough, especially if she went straight for the kill while--

I opened my mouth, and Rachel reached across to run her hand across my back, as if she were about to give me a massage. I was wearing a shirt, but it felt like her fingers were melting into me. I let out a long, low breath, trying to relax. I knew that was the point. “Fine. Cassie, can you help Stefanie out with the civilians? They’re going to have to be kept calm, and you’re not going to be able to go home until we’re done with all this.”

“That’s fine.”

“What about your parents, what do they think?”

“They don’t care,” Cassie admitted, her voice a little low. “As long as I’m not dead, that’s enough for them.”

“Oh,” I said, frowning. “Uh… how will I find them if anything…”

“It’ll be fine,” Cassie assured me, as if her own death was something impossible, something that couldn’t be imagined. It was true that she wouldn’t be in any more danger than any of the other civilians, but that wasn’t really reassuring.
“I hope so,” I said. “There’s a lot of work to do. And the dogs as well.”

There were people from the shelter to help deal with them, but… it was clear that if we wanted them to stay here long-term we’d need…

I’m not sure. Maybe some sort of fencing? I knew that there were temporary wire fences that could be set up, instead of this makeshift barrier of crates, tents, and other such impediments that mostly just discouraged them from straying too far.

“Of course!” Cassie said, eagerly. “I can definitely help out with everything. And I brought some paper and pens in case anyone wants to leave messages.”

“Oh,” I said, and then I admitted, “I might have a message for my Dad, then.”

********

It was dark when I remembered that Aisha existed, just moments before she and Lisa approached our tent.

We’d all decided that we’d sleep in shifts. I’d sleep from ten to twelve, then stay awake until four, then back to sleep until eight… or something like that. I was already tired enough as it was.

Rachel and I had been fooling around a little, in that lazy sort of way where neither of us had thought that it’d get out of hand.

Which was of course why I was covered in sweat, panting and a little exhausted at the end of it. Because we clearly hadn’t strayed from fooling around into having sex, like we always seemed to do.

Either way, I was in a… good mood, I think. It was hard to assess, because there were so many elements going both ways. But I was happy, and thus their approach worried me. I glanced around, grabbing a shirt and putting it on. I didn’t have time to find anything else to wear, so I just pulled the blankets up and said, “Come in.”

Lisa stepped on, averting her gaze, while Aisha sniggered.

“So, we’ve found Dose,”

“You have?” I asked.

“Yes. We need to rescue him, so that we can take away the power granting. Without that, she’ll run out sooner or later… which means she’ll have even more reason to attack us.” Lisa nodded. “She’ll attack us for the vials and she’ll attack us for Dose… or she will avoid it and she’ll run out of patches and things will turn against her.”

“Really?” I asked, frowning.

“Yeah,” Lisa said. “So we need to rescue Dose, preferably without starting a war with the Butcher yet. She’s not been seen in the area, and that’s a good sign.”

“Yeah, she’s fucked off to do stuff near the docks, I think?” Aisha said, frowning. “That’s what the goons said.”

“So, that’s the plan? Grab Dose? Smash and grab?” I asked, glancing over at Rachel. She was very good at smashing, and I’m sure if we just unleashed the dogs…
“More grab than smash,” Lisa said. “We need a small team, because we have to keep some people here in case she attacks. I don’t think it’s likely, though we could find out for sure by asking Dinah…”

“No,” I said, firmly. “Okay, a small team, we grab Dose, we come back here, and we get ready for a fight? Is that the logic?”

“Yes. You need to go, I need to go, Aisha needs to go… Charlotte needs to stay here but keep in contact,” Lisa said, thoughtfully. “Regent can stay here… Grue wants to go along anyways.”

I frowned, looking over at Rachel.

“Give me a bit of time, and we can see if anyone else should…”

“Pelter, and… how about Codex, just in case?” Lisa asked.

“Get out of my tent, first. I need to get dressed.

********

The skeleton-camp of sorts was ablaze with light and activity as we moved. The dogs were barking, and Rachel was uncertain, not wanting to have me go ahead. But it was true that even if Rachel’s dogs were very good at what they did, she’d be needed here if the Butcher attacked.

She’d be sorely needed. So we were going to go without her, and hope that this didn’t end in all of us dying horribly.

I was going to go out there, and if we weren’t back by midnight it’d probably be because we were dead.

Surely she’d respond, and fast. Surely she’d be there.

I was about to gather with the rest of the team, when the tent flapped open on Greg’s tent.

He stepped out in armor. It was hard to see at night, even with the lights, but it was grey and blue, a very angular sort of armor, and also a bit blocky around the legs. In what was almost a little… no, not almost, the armor’s stomach area had fake ripples like the start of a six pack, but other than that it was purely functional, complete with a huge, rounded helmet with a black visor that I knew he could see through. He clanked slightly when he moved, but despite the weight he didn’t seem that much more awkward than he normally did.

His mouth was exposed, and the armored gloves he had looked a bit big, as if they’d be clumsy. And then there was the backpack, brown but armored at places, and probably tougher than it looked… though also, certainly, pulling down the vibe of the outfit.

There were guns holstered, too, the two he’d made so far, and a third that seemed to be hanging from a string on the backpack, and looked… wait. No really? Was that some sort of melee weapon? It could be, actually.

“I’m ready to go,” Greg said.

“Greg, you’re not going.”

“I am. I’m not weak anymore. This suit can stand up to anything except the Butcher, and you can just make my skin tough if she gets through it,” Greg said, crossing his arms. Kid Win was asleep in
the tent, no doubt having worked with him non-stop.

“Not yet, you can’t. Keep on working, we’ll need your help soon.”

“You always treat me like I’m some sort of kid, or a moron,” Greg said, and I could imagine the look in his eyes. I could already see his lips pursing, the way he looked like…

“I don’t! I’m glad that you’ve finished this suit, and I hope to see it in battle soon, but I can’t just let you in on a mission like this at the last moment,” I said. “Even if you are my best friend?”

“Really?” he asked, sounding a little incredulous. “You have so many other choices, don’t you?” His voice trembled a little bit at the end, and I realized he was afraid. Afraid of being replaced.

“I know I’ve not been the best friend myself, lately. I do want to play video games with you, I’m just… doing a lot right now.”

“I get that, I really do, but man, it’s like… you care for your nakama.”

“My what?”

“Friends,” he said, blushing a little and looking away. “Come on, I showed you that one--”

And off he was, to the races. I nodded a little, and said, once I’d heard it explained what Nakama was, “Alright, Greg. As soon as this is all over, I’ll watch your shows, and we’ll… heck, we can go to movies together, if this city gets itself back together.”

“That a promise?”

“Yes,” I said, and meant it.

I knew he’d treat it as such.

*******

When I slammed the door open, superhumanly fast, my first and guiding thought was simple: where was the Butcher?

We’d fought our way through a bunch of goons, but neither the Butcher nor more than Reaver alone, wearing an eyepatch, had been there to confront us.

Surely she should be guarding him better?

Instead, it hadn’t…

It’d been tense, but here we were. Lisa at one side of me, and… nobody else.

I had knocked down the door, but now I reached for Artificer’s radio and clicked it on, a sign that the speed was no longer needed. I had to talk to people, after all.

Inside, Dose was chained to a bed. Actual chains, which seemed thick and old-fashioned, as if someone had raided a medieval dungeon.

He was all but naked, in a pair of boxers, staring at me owlishly. He blinked once. Then again.

“Dose?” I asked.
“What?” he said.

“You’re coming with us.”

Chapter End Notes

The pieces are all in place for the final confrontation. Sorry it took so long to post this, I got distracted with a few things.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

We expected the Butcher at any moment, we didn’t sleep for the fear of it, working in shifts again. I got just an hour of sleep, barely enough to count, and I knew that Lisa got even less, interrogating Dose and setting up plans and schemes to the very last. I could hear the interrogation, and could think--in a sleepy, out of it sort of way--of ways I could use what I’d learned, but the truth was that I was tired enough that a part of me just wanted to get it over with. I didn’t know how, I just wanted to… figure something out.

And eventually I did. At around seven I had an idea, though I was pretty sure it was just the idea that Lisa was going to tell me, because to me it seemed… one possible way.

But we’d have to wait, we’d have to be prepared for the fight to come to us, because there was no way she wasn’t coming.

Every minute she didn’t, though, there was more stress. I paced, I tried listening to music and couldn’t even sit still long enough for that. Something was wrong, and this something wasn’t going to be fixed by ignoring it.

The question kept on echoing in my head: where was Butcher?

When I finally learned, I wish I hadn’t.

I was sitting around the fire at seven in the morning, my bugs spreading out--I’d found more, or more had wandered into my range, though that had decreased--when Flechette approached me, holding the radio she’d brought.

It was blocky, but it was her contact with the Protectorate, and it was currently on. I hadn’t been monitoring her because she’d been pacing in the apartment building that Parian occupied, and there was too much chance of hearing something I shouldn’t hear. So I’d just decided to keep the bugs away from her, though perhaps I shouldn’t have.

“Arachne,” Flechette said. “There’s word from the Director and Miss Militia, they wanted to speak to you.”

“Yes?” I asked, looking at the communication device for a moment.

“We’re going to have to recall Flechette, Kid Win, and Phase,” Piggot said, gravely. “And we’d like to request that you send us Amp and evacuate your position in the camp. We can help you move, but we need to retrench and…”


“The Butcher,” Miss Militia said, her words sharp and formal, “Realized that with Panacea there, we’d been able to heal all our injuries. So they attacked the homes of New Wave. Only the homes.”

“They destroyed them. Our analysts think that this was a move to force them away,” Piggot interrupted.

Emily Piggot, the director, had a plain sounding voice. The kind of voice that asked you to pass the
ketchup bottle and you didn’t even bother to look at them.

“And?” I asked.

“They wounded multiple members of New Wave. Panacea heavily damaged two of their capes, and captured one of them, but her leg has been broken and she’s been knocked out,” Miss Militia said. “We now lack healing, and that’s why we need Amp.”

“She can heal at a distance. She can’t heal people who can’t hear her, but you know you don’t have to demand her, and we won’t be moving from our spot. We have this situation under control,” I said. “Or… we have plans. We’re not moving any of our people out of our location today. If you want to join us, we could use the help.”

“Join you?” Piggot said. “By Tuesday at the latest, and probably more likely Monday, we will have an entire squad of reinforcements. Until that time, there is nothing any of us can do to stop the Butcher without killing her.”

“Oh, and this squad is going to specialize in that?” I asked.

“As much as possible,” Piggot said, her voice a little cold. “So we do not need arrogant, overconfident—”

“Yeah, we’re not moving, and Flechette…”

“Flechette,” Miss Militia ordered. “Please bring Kid Win and Phase here, they need to know that they are to leave the camp.”

She bit her lip, and handed the radio to me. “I’ll… be right back.”

“Amp can help you, as much as possible over a radio connection,” I said. “But we have our own plans.”

“Plans that involve wanted criminals,” Piggot said.

“Ah, Flechette told you about that,” I said with a sigh, glancing around. A dog started barking, and Rachel moved to see what had made her so upset.

“She did,” Piggot said. “It’s foolish to work with villains to stop villains. Even if you don’t leave, we’re pulling…”

“I can’t stop you, can I?” I asked. “You’re going to kill people. We have a way to murder the Butcher. Come here, join the Camp, and then we can go our separate ways once the Butcher’s done with. Where is she now?”

“She’s not been spotted,” Miss Militia said. “We think she’s laying low and planning her next move. What’s your plan?”

“We go at her with everything. I have a few tricks, and I think Tattletale has a few more. Either she comes today, or…”

I thought about Rachel, pacing, frowning.

(“When’s she fucking showing up?”

“…if she doesn’t come today, we’ll go after her,” I’d promised, at six in the morning, and meant it.
Though, I couldn’t imagine her avoiding it, now?

What was she, afraid?)

“Or?” Miss Militia asked.

“Or we go after her and kill her. We have ways to make it stick for good this time. And we also have the strength needed to capture her, and certainly to destroy the Teeth.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Piggot said. “We won’t…”

“Oh, they’re back.”

Kid Win looked tired, but he almost bounced up to the radio and said, “No!”

“No?” Miss Militia said.

“I’m helping Artificer. We have an idea that can take her down, just trust us,” Kid Win said.

“Are you refusing the order to return?” Piggot asked, calmly.

“Uh, yeah,” Kid Win said. “I am.”

“That’s insubordination and will be noted,” Piggot said, coldly. “But we don’t have the resources to force you to do anything. You need to understand that—”

“I’m going back to helping Artificer,” Kid Win said, and turned on his heels.

“I...” Bryce frowned and then said. “I’ll be back within the hour.”

I didn’t expect more from him. Even one of them staying was more than I could hope for, and it was also clear that I couldn’t possibly hope for the Protectorate to grow a spine. They were content to wait a few more days in the hopes that the damage done wouldn’t be too bad.

And if a camp was raided, well. The Butcher couldn’t kill everyone. The anger I felt was cold, but precise.

“Let me think about it,” Flechette said. “Can we… I’ll call you in an hour with my answer.”

“Flechette, you—” Miss Militia began.

“She said she’d call you back in an hour,” I said, aware that I was raising my voice. “So just accept that. Some people... fuck.” I shook my head. “I know you mean well, but you’re wrong, like you’ve been wrong so many times before.”

“We haven’t,” Miss Militia said. “Just because we disagree, doesn’t mean we’re not fighting. We’ve been fighting for days now.”

“So have we,” I said. “Maybe we should stop this conversation before we argue any more. Whoever comes back with you comes back with you. We won’t stop them. We’ll even give them some help to make sure that the Butcher or the Teeth can’t ambush them. But those who don’t... you’re not going to come in here to try to stop us, are you?”

“No, we can’t afford to,” Piggot said, sounding as if she regretted it.

“Well, good,” I said.
I clicked the radio off, and looked over at Bryce. Flechette was pacing away, clearly troubled.

“I’m not a coward,” Bryce said.

I bit my lip, and said, “Oh?”

“I don’t want to fight. Have you ever… fuck, you have, all the time. But you’re never afraid. I thought I’d have power. I thought that’s what powers meant.”

I snorted, and bared my teeth at him. Bizarrely, he relaxed for a moment, before seeming to realize that I wasn’t smiling. “Of course they don’t. They don’t even mean responsibility. I don’t have to be here. I am because I want to be here.” That was the way to look at it.

What I did here, it wasn’t obligation in the way you were required to show up to your job on time. They were… I’d chosen all of this, and I didn’t regret my choices, not now. “And you’re here, or you’re there, because you chose it. You chose to get powers.”

“Not these powers…” Bryce said.

“Why not? When you go, you can take Sierra with you. If she’ll go. She’s busy helping some of the people who moved into the apartments. Evacuation drills. I’m sure your sister will be happy to—”

“You took her away,” Bryce said, accusingly. “It’s all she fucking talks about, how stupid and worthless I am, how great you are for saving me.”

That didn’t sound like her, but I didn’t say anything, just leaned in and waited for more words.

“I… I feel weird when I’m using my power. Like I’m a robot, or something. My emotions are there, but I don’t know what to do with them. I can’t be afraid, there’s not even room for that. It’s just me and…”

He trailed off.

I felt the tiniest bit of pity. For a piece of shit like him, being alone with his own thoughts, being alone with himself and just himself, would be torture. I knew my thoughts were hard and sharp, the kinds of thoughts that didn’t do anyone any good.

Didn’t people deserve a second chance?

...Maybe? But that didn’t mean I had to be the one to forgive him for all he did: he’d grasped, desperately, for power and notoriety, and now it wasn’t what he wanted.

“You can stay here, you can help others. Or you can leave. I’m not going to spend all my time trying to convince you to stay.” Bryce stared at me, as if waiting for me to say something else.

“I… Sierra.”

“Yes?” I asked.

“Sierra would want me to stay.”

“Family’s nice, but make your own decision… and then don’t be surprised when people judge you for doing as you do. That’s just how it works,” I said, turning away.

“Wait. How did…”
I turned back. “Yes?”

“How did Hellhound become a hero?”

“Bitch. It’s not that hard. You’re a hero now, or at least, that’s what people would call you. A Ward. That’s that. People will see you as a great dude no matter what. You think the people online will know, you think the average citizen will?” I shook my head.

People saw what they wanted to see. Rachel had changed since I’d met her, but as much of her being a villain, and then being a hero, was where she stood and what people saw her doing. I hadn’t redeemed her, not in the way people wanted to think.

I wouldn’t redeem him either: for one, he wasn’t even worth the efforts I’d spent on Rachel.

“Fuck it, whatever. I’ll help out here.” He said it reluctantly, and I nodded.

“Good. Perhaps you could help protect people,” I said. “We’ll see.”

I shrugged. I didn’t like him, but I’d accept help from absolutely anyone out there, if it meant another warm body against the Butcher.

*******

Flechette didn’t decide in an hour. She didn’t decide in two. Noon was approaching, and still she paced and sat, talked to a few people in the apartments about nothing at all, seemed to be wrestling with enough problems that I didn’t know how I was going to rely on her if she even did come.

We had a sword for her. We had knives. There were ways she could use her power on people, and these ways would be important for the fight, if she could just manage not to kill the Butcher. And if the Butcher didn’t have the time to just teleport away. If the Butcher didn’t have time, if Flechette was too fast. But Amp’s power sped up a person, not objects.

But I couldn’t say this, no more than I could guilt Bryce into staying.

But eventually, when you saw that she was sitting in the lobby of Parian’s apartment block, you had to interfere.

I didn’t think this would go all that well, really. But I wanted to try, and I was curious about what was wrong. Did I think I could help? Maybe not.

Flechette looked up at me when I stepped in, walking over towards the bench that had been left there. I sat next to her, feeling suddenly slightly nervous. I wasn’t sure why, because of course there was no pressure. This was just a gamble, and if it lost, that was that.

“Flechette,” I said. “Do you mind if I sit here?”

“You know what… call me Lily,” she said.

I blinked. “Well, then. It’s not as if you don’t know? Or couldn’t if you looked?” I pulled off my mask. “Just call me Taylor, then.”

“Taylor, how did you… you’re back together with Rachel, right? How did it happen? How do you have such a…”

“Such a?”
“I’m supposed to be… I should just go back. I’m supposed to be a role-model for people. For young
people.”

“Role-models are what you make of them. Look at all the people who look up to Rachel? It happens
or it doesn’t,” I said, firmly. “But what do you mean?”

“Look at Legend. He fought for equality, he fought to keep the streets safe. He doesn’t rebel. I’ve
heard him speak about the man he’s married to, never enough details to identify him, but… it’s a
partnership. They’re equals: one of them isn’t older than the other, and they don’t just have random
casual hookups just because they’re horny sl-- I shouldn’t be talking about this,” Lily said. “It doesn’t
matter. I’m trying to decide something far more important.”

“I don’t think you are,” I said. “I mean, just care about what the fuck you care about.”

“You say that, but your relationship with Rachel, even with the fighting, is equal, and fair, and it’s a
normal relationship, a model that young LGB--”

“It started with sex. Rachel is violent, I’m vindictive, we’re never going to be the Brady Bunch, and
she’s gay and I’m bi. If you want normal, then look at, I dunno. My parents. And that’s good and
fine but that’s not us so… I don’t even know what you are, that makes you so afraid?”

“A freak,” she said.

“How?”

“I want to stay here and help you just because I want to fuck Parian. How selfish is that?”

“And I first got together with Rachel over lust. It happens. Do you want to help people?” I asked,
stunned at my position.

It was frankly absurd that I was giving advice on anything at all. I was the farthest thing from the
right person to be giving this sort of advice. I wasn’t Legend, I wasn’t Miss Militia. I was oversexed,
unbalanced, sometimes-violent and… I don’t even know.

“Well, yeah.”

“Then you have good motives. Yes, you want her, but… fine? You do? What about that makes you
a freak?”

“I’d be happy just to throw myself down at her feet and tell her to do whatever she wanted,” Lily
said bluntly. Her eyes, her lips, they all said she was waiting for disgust. “She’s years older than me,
and wanting just sex isn’t right. Wanting… I’ve always ruined relationships, and if I went to her I’d
ruin this too.”

“Ruin how?”

“I’m weak. I’m tired from a long day of being a Ward, and I want them to just handle things. I don’t
want to have to put in the equal effort that makes good relationships. Both partners should be
equal… that’s why it’s called a partnership. I’m lazy, I’m stupid, I get stupid thoughts in my head, I
let myself get led around by my stupid lust instead of something truer like my--”

“Heart?” I asked. “Listen. Just do what you want. If you want to go up to her and ask to have sex, do
it. And I still don’t get what you’re so afraid of.”

Lily frowned, and then she admitted, “Being found out. I’m a fraud. I present… I guess you haven’t
seen it. This sort of chipper, joking-but… like. It’s all a lie.”

“What? Online presence?” I asked. “And Bitch is idolized by many in part for things she doesn’t
even get are special. I wouldn’t care about it.”

“People rely on me,” Lily said. “I’ve had people tell me that things I’ve said have helped them
through tough times. Coming out to parents, dealing with relationships. I’ve mentioned some, but I
never mention how they all fail. And how it’s all my fault.”

I looked at her, unsure what to say. “Fail?”

“Three relationships… not counting this crush I had on a girl back in first grade, of course,” Lily
said. I realized that she was… nearly teary-eyed. Her smile was a little too watery. “Three
relationships, and none of them lasting longer than a year. I’m not counting three or four dates and
then it doesn’t work. Once is circumstance, twice can be coincidence, but if it’s three times that it’s
failed… then it’s me.”

I frowned, “And?”

“I really, really like Sab--… I mean, Parian. And I don’t want to fuck up her life and ruin a chance
with her,” Lily said.

“So you’re going to just not start it at all? Or start anything?” I asked, a little outraged, despite the
fact that… it wasn’t any less brave that I was most of the time. If Rachel hadn’t rubbed my face in it,
like a person pushing a dog’s nose into a wet spot while scolding it, I would have crushed on her
for… well, forever, without even knowing it.

“I… maybe I should. But what would she say?” Lily asked. “I mean, look at her. She’s… really,
really pretty. She’s a lady, and I’m…”

“What?” I asked, frowning.

“I don’t know. If I reveal myself, she’ll judge me. She’d be right to. She deserves better, really.”

“You think she isn’t attracted to you?”

“I don’t know why,” Lily said.

I laughed, and she startled. “Really? You’re tall, and thin, with the kind of runner’s build that… well,
I see the appeal? And your eyes, they’re very expressive. Not a lot of people could pull off skin-tight
and purple, could they?”

Her face flushed, as I looked her over, and yes. She was attractive. She was no Rachel, in terms of
making me look twice and then thrice, even after months of being around her, but… they’d make a
cute couple.

And if not a cute couple, they could still find… something, if they just did it. It was frustrating, and I
felt like a fraud as I looked her over.

“I…”

“So, try it. And even if not. I want you to stay here. There are knives we can give you. And clubs.
Combine that with speed and you might be able to really hurt the Butcher. I think you can be useful,
I think you would make this a lot more likely to succeed, and that’s that.”
“I… thank you for listening, even though I’m--”

“Don’t say a freak. Just… don’t,” I said, frustrated. “Okay?”

“I’ll try,” Lily said, softly.

********

She didn’t go straight to Parian. But she did go straight to the radio.

I added a little something to her message: “Tomorrow morning, if she hasn’t attacked somewhere yet, we’re going after her. If you want to help, join in or protect the camp.” I didn’t wait for a response.

Then I had to talk with Lisa and figure out our game plan. I didn’t like it, there were too many things that could go wrong, and more than that, there were too many factors that were contingent. Contingent on things we shouldn’t rely on, but that Lisa said she would, based entirely on what her powers were telling her.

Plus, there was Dad.

*******

I saw him ahead of time, of course, but there was no polite way to ward off your own Dad with bugs, and I didn’t want to talk to him again with Rachel, because I really didn’t want to get her in the habit of telling him to fuck off.

...which sounded mean, but that’s basically what I was going to try to tell Dad when I met him. He needed to be somewhere else, somewhere safe. He at least was coming from the direction that was least plagued by the Teeth, but he was an easy target for them, and I didn’t know what he was doing here.

So, I just paced around, and let Rachel deal with the dogs, and hoped she didn’t notice too much how nervous I was.

Of course she did.

“Taylor, you alright?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Dad’s coming. I can see him.”

“Why?” Rachel asked, sounding baffled.

“I don’t know. I need him to not be here, though. He’s just going to get in danger.”

“Then tell him to leave,” Rachel said.

“That’s my plan.”

“Ok.” She looked as if she thought that’d settle it. Like I’d say, ‘go away’ and then he would and things would be good and it wouldn’t be awkward at all. It wasn’t how it worked at all, but then again she didn’t really have a family.

She never had: she’d had caretakers and that was it.

“Good, so now--”
“I’m going with you,” Rachel said.

After a moment, I acknowledged and conceded defeat.

******

We met Dad a block away from the camp. He stopped short when he saw us walking up, and then walked a little faster.

“Taylor,” he said, his voice quiet and a little hopeful. “You’re alright.”

“Dad, what are you doing here?”

“I wanted to check in on you. It’s chaos out there. The work on the docks has all stopped because of the Teeth.”

“If you’re here, you’re in danger,” I said, glancing over at Rachel. “And I don’t know if I have the time and energy to protect you.”

“Are you back together with Rachel?” Dad asked.

“Yes. Thanks for asking,” I said. I reached out to grab her hand, because it was comforting. “But… you can’t be here. You need to leave.”

Dad looked embarrassed as he rubbed his head and said, “Taylor, I can help out. Even if it’s just organizing an evacuation.”

“Really? You want to help out? Do you have a van? Do you want to risk dying?” I said. I said it as a challenge, sure that he wouldn’t say yes.

“I could get one. I just want to help you out,” Dad said, sounding awfully a lot like Greg when he said it.

“Dad.”

He looked at me from beneath his glasses. “The docks are closed down, I don’t have anything else to do, and my daughter is apparently up to something. Online they’re talking about… all sorts of things, including a mutiny.”

“A mutiny?” I asked.

“Just… rumors of tension between you and the Protectorate.”


I turned to look at her, betrayed. “Really?”

“Everyone’s gotta work together, right?” she asked. She was turning my own attitude in on me. I’d worked at convincing Bryce and Lily to stay and help. But… Dad was different. He didn’t have powers, and--

And I had an idea for what he could do, but it’d be dangerous and in theory anyone could do it. Anyone who wasn’t going to be fighting.

But… asking Sierra wasn’t any better, was it?
Dad managed not to smile as he stepped forward.

“Fine,” I said. “If we go tomorrow, we could use the help. Now, Dad, did you eat dinner? Maybe we should…”

********

Everyone got ready in their own ways. Everyone waited in their own ways. I was no different. I tried to do what I could and focused on spending time with Rachel, but part of the nature of my power meant I couldn’t help but see other people, and how they reacted.

I saw them.

Greg who paced and kept on building more, including a new gun which had only one real use. Kid Win was with him, enthusiastic if unfocused, but together both of them seemed to at least be able to keep themselves on track. It was nice to have someone to bounce off of, I assume. Greg was still Greg, powers or not, and that meant that he was sometimes hard to work with.

But apparently Kid Win needed the help and companionship, because he didn’t seem to react negatively.

Cassie? She moved among the survivors with the sort of grace I both admired and envied. I wasn’t a charming person, while she seemed to be able to make friends with everyone she met. I watched her, but her secret seemed to just be… to talk to everyone and never get frustrated or too angry?

I wasn’t charming, and nor was I organized like Stefanie, who walked with Cassie everywhere, filling out paperwork and nodding to herself. Honestly, if it wasn’t for my powers, this isn’t the sort of company I’d be in, really.

I wasn’t dumb, but neither had I been all that motivated even at the best of times, let alone capable of making loads of friends. Emma had been it, and look at how bad that had ended up?

It was all luck that led to this, luck of the draw and luck that I’d met people willing to tolerate me and work with me.

There were times when this all would have been cause for bitter envy, or at least brooding, but now I just felt… lucky?

Lucky to have Rachel, lucky to have Greg, lucky to have Cassie and Stefanie to help me out.

Charlotte was talking with ‘her girls’ with the people she’d talked with, the people she’d done all she could to try to help. She cared deeper than I did, or at least she was more able to talk people through problems. Even without her powers, she was very persuasive, even if it was clear that she was a follower, someone who liked to do good, but didn’t like to make decisions.

I could imagine her as a therapist, just like I could imagine Stefanie as any sort of organizer, Cassie as an activist, Parian, of course, as a designer…

It was Rachel and I who were the ones who needed our powers. I didn’t want to imagine where Rachel would be now if she didn’t trigger. I could imagine where I’d be now if I didn’t trigger, and the thoughts were ones I didn’t want to dwell on.

But that just made us luckier, that just made us… more ready. I wasn’t sure if this would all work, but I had hope.
Citrine leaned against the wall, looking at the camp and at the dogs that were penned up with distaste. Of course she did. I knew her makeup was flawless even still, and she seemed as obsessive as Accord.

“Will you be able to help out?” I asked.

“Yes, of course,” she said. Then she added. “But I think the idea is a foolish one. Accord had a better idea.”

“What?”

“Wait a day or two. Gain specific capes that can allow the chance of success to be one-hundred percent,” Citrine said, her frown deepening. “Your people are rough. A gaggle, a pack when it should be a team.”

“Well, that’s us,” I said, with a shrug. “We have a plan, though. Do you trust Lisa to know what she’s doing?”

“She’s the one that lured Accord to his death.”

“Really? Do you think she intended to betray him too?” I asked, less incredulous and more curious.

Lisa was keeping really quiet and pacing. Grue looked worried, Regent bored, all of them with a remarkable ability to keep away from everyone. Keep an eye on their vials, and the powers that they were no doubt planning on using once it all fell to pieces. They had a plan, they had a vision of the future: and while I needed to stop them, I needed their help more. Regent’s power might work on the Butcher, and Lisa’s analysis, and… something. I couldn’t remember what, but there was another cape on the team, or something, that did… things?

“No. I think she’s just a fool.”

“Maybe I agree with you,” I said.

“You’re a fool too,” Citrine said, with a sniff.

“Now I know I agree with you,” I said, baring my teeth at her, but really amused deep down. “But as long as you’ll help out… what can you do?”

“In theory, I could shut down the Butcher’s powers, but in practice it’s unlikely. My effect can slow down time in the radius, though, if you ever needed more time to move.”


“Yes, of course. All of us are going back.”

I knew that Lisa had in fact talked to Codex and the other cape, and gotten answers which weren’t yes… but weren’t no. But now wasn’t the time to reveal that, was it? “And what will be there when you’re done?”

“Enough. Accord taught us well. We have power, and we have plans,” Citrine said. “That has to be enough.”

She said it all so crisply, and yet I heard a slight note of uncertainty, caged up and locked away, but still there, kicking at the door.
I’m sure it will be.

Dinner came, and Dinah came down, quiet and polite, closed in. A lot like me, but I was sure that was just on the surface. She seemed out of it, and I wondered if she was withdrawing. I wondered a lot of things as I watched her move, and sit. She sat and read, and despite being free, her routine looked almost the same as what she did before.

I wondered at that: but I couldn’t spend time worrying too much.

I ate with Rachel, and watched her. I felt like I knew her better than I’d known anyone else in my life, maybe even my parents. I knew that this was… at least a little bit wrong. That it was at least a little bit of assumption going on here.

But I was fine with that.

There are times you pull the bugs away. There are things you not only shouldn’t see, but that you should leave private.

Lily walked up to Parian’s room. My bugs retreated, all of them. They left the entire building, and buzzed around outside, as if they had been kicked out.

I smiled, without teeth, genuinely and truly, and kept on reading to Rachel.

Why hadn’t the Butcher came? Was she really afraid of me?

On Sunday morning, after a quick breakfast just after dawn, we set out, all of us--with one final message telling the Protectorate to either help or guard the camp--and went to confront the Butcher.

Chapter End Notes

And so it will soon end.
Flea 7.5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

We were trying to stay together as we moved. Flechette could go faster than a lot of us could, so she was keeping up top, while the rest of us mostly went on foot, except for Charlotte, who was with Dad and others in the van, following behind closely enough that I could see and hear them, but not so close that they’d be an easy target.

The roads were rubble, but that’s what the van’s wheels were made for. They’d been changed out for the kinds of wheels that did off-road stuff, which looked very odd with a van like that… but I didn’t care about how it looked.

Flechette above, everyone who we could fit on dogs, with only Parian walking, and that because she wanted to keep among her stuffed animals.

They were a host unto themselves, a surprisingly adorable collection of stuffed animals. Lions, tigers, and bears oh my, and even stranger animals. There was a stuffed animal that… I think it was meant to be a squid, but it honestly looked as if someone had tried to make a tentacle monster cute. I tried not to say anything, or look (physically at least) in the direction of the girl whose eyes she kept on trying to meet as she marched with her animals.

Flechette, at least this time, at least this once, was wearing a costume that made her look more like a mustakeer than anything, a costume I knew that Parian had made for her, like all of the other costumes she’d worked over, labored over, with no expectation that it’d ever be worn.

There was a feather in her cap, I thought, looking up at Flechette as we… well, the dogs were marching, more than anything. Daring the Butcher to show up, daring her to come and attack us. We wanted to all keep together. Flechette’s costume was less skintight, but at least as revealing, if not more so, mostly by careful cuts made here and there, and gaps. The chest area, for instance, had an old-timey ruffled collar, of sorts, but plunged slightly low. The tights looked painted on… little details like that which would have made me wonder if I didn’t know otherwise.

Most of the people on the dogs had no right to be there. At least if how they were clinging to them as if they were going to throw them off was to be trusted. Codex, especially, looked like a huge lump on a log, and she made rather pathetic sounds every time we sped up slightly.

And still no Butcher. My range was vast enough that I should have noticed something, and what did that mean? Was she holding back? Did she plan to hit the Camp from behind? We had a radio left back at camp that would tell us if that was the case.

Slightly divorced from us, Kid Win and Artificer both flied low. Sometime in the middle of the night, Greg had finally figured out rocket-boots, and while he wasn’t moving very fast, barely faster than if he were running, he could do it for far longer than he could ever manage to run… if we were being honest here.

So there were two groupings, but I was watching so I knew they wouldn’t divide and conquer. I could see the capes, in their bases.

Reaver, and Animos, both together. One eye was enough for him to still fight.

Hemmorhagia, Spree, and Vex together with two new capes, both of them dressed so trashy I almost
discounted them. I hadn’t seen them fight, but I’d assume they were dangerous and make sure to knock them out as fast as possible.

I didn’t want to fight fair, but I also knew that if I ended this too fast, the Butcher would run away.

A part of me was okay with that, of course. I could imagine her escaping to Boston, her men all captured, her gang broken, but alive enough to rebuild them, because of course there were wings of the Teeth who weren’t here. It’d be a loss, and a humiliating one, but it was one they could survive. And ultimately I was a selfish human being: if the Teeth didn’t mess around with Brockton Bay, I wasn’t going to go hunt after them.

It was just that simple.

Just as simple was the fact that I wouldn’t really be satisfied with that. The Butcher had hurt countless people, and just as importantly, she’d nearly killed me and everyone I cared about. Repeatedly. If she’d won, she’d no doubt enslave or hurt countless civilians. It was selfish, it was selfless at the same time. I wanted to help others, but I also wanted revenge.

That’s how it was.

My spiders were marching ahead, I’d been working to set them up as I gathered every bug I could. The farther I moved, the more there were, and the Teeth hadn’t seemed to practice the kind of hygiene that kept bugs from multiplying out of control.

It was stupid of them, but bug-proofing your little pocket empire was hard, especially since they should have been long-gone.

If this kept on going, we’d have to engage them and the Butcher would just stay away, I realized, looking over at Rachel as she scanned the crowd.

We all had Artificer’s radios on us, and all of us had enough Amp power that the Butcher wouldn’t be able to immediately kill us. But no more than that, not even the super-strength, because I had a feeling that Amp would have to save most of her frequency for those who needed it, rather than spreading it out uselessly.

Okay, the secondary plan if Butcher didn’t show up immediately was to attack them all at once, and send a message. Demoralize the Butcher, and see what happened.

The sun was hot on my back, as I turned and said, “Get ready.” Bryce tensed, Pelter nodded, everyone seemed to prepare in their own way, and I just tried to focus and not pay them too much mind. I had plans.

I was dealing with any of the Teeth close enough to see our attack coming, but that did mean that I’d need a chance to really announce myself.

So I gathered my bugs, around and about, as we closed in on the real hotspots of Teeth activity.

Their sense of architecture was bizarre, and they made every building they inhabited into some bizarre, post-apocalyptic fantasy. They hung skulls, fake and real, from the bannisters, they jammed rusty nails into the sides of the buildings at opportune places to keep people from climbing up them. There were all sorts of little elements like that that seemed to show a suspicion and hatred for their fellow man that was…

You know, completely expected.
It was the kind of careful attention to ruining the landscape that wouldn’t stop most capes, but probably did pretty well for dealing with the average gang-banger, which was probably why they set it all up. Boards placed at careful locations with nails sticking out the wrong way, tiles beaten to heck in some parts of the place so that they’d creak and be easier to stumble over…

But we weren’t going to play their games. Good luck trying to make a bunch of stuffed animals stumble.

First, I had to deal with Animos. He was peering down at the ground, pacing a little bit. Where was the Butcher? There was a radio nearby, and maybe that connected to her. But where would she be, but here? Was she attacking the Protectorate HQ, armed missiles and all?

Reaver was near his sword, but I wasn’t afraid.

Spiders gathered, my bugs prepared to swarm, and then, at the same time as they leapt for Animos, I began to speak.

It was a challenge I was putting out, clumsily talking through my bugs. But I knew enough to do this, at least:

“Your Butcher is a coward, hiding away, running from me!”

A man screamed and started breaking out, clearly allergic to something I was biting him with. Reaver was retreating, Animos had transformed and was about to scream, while Spree was pumping out more and more clones to try to keep me from finishing him off.

Vex was retreating towards the streets.

“If she’s so tough, then she should face us!”

People threw on patches, hurrying to get out into the streets, just as Parian began to direct her troops forward. We were upon the first hideout, the one where Spree, Vex, and the two new capes were all headed for the front.

Some of the powers they gained allowed them to survive easily against my bugs… but some of them didn’t.

Kid Win and Artificer were closing in on the second of four hideouts we’d identified. And considering that we’d already raided one of the others, they’d understandably not put a lot of important people there.

Animos had finally started screaming, which meant I couldn’t see the insides of the old apartment blocks, but Kid Win and Artificer just kept on firing at the general direction of the building.

The point, as much as anything, was to keep them freaked out.

A few gang members flew up into the air, leaping off windows to do it.

Artificer suddenly blurred as he shot all of them with his laser gun, which crackled as it was almost burnt out from the speed of firing.

He’d used Amp’s power to get off the fast shots, and almost half of the pseudo-capes tumbled to the ground, while the other half were driven back, firing in return with what they could, a few of them just plugging away with rifles.
Parian’s dolls were meeting an army of Sprees, but I could see that Vex and the other two capes, one female, one male, were going around the back, using the power patches to give themselves relative immunity to my bugs.

I picked up the radio, glancing over at Pelter. “Pelter, get back there, Vex is trying to break out. Flechette, same. Grue, Regent, Phase, provide support!”

Pelter nodded and sprung off her dog, racing forward and slipping past the dolls as they continued their stalemate with Spree, though the other cape was seeming to be pushed back a little by a little.

I glanced over at Rachel, who was looking intensely at the building and no doubt intended to set the dogs on it, if need be.

I was tense, waiting for the final shoe to drop, as capes began to run down the street. Fake capes, of course, with patches. The third and fourth hideout were now in full reinforcement mode, but if they went after Kid Win and Artificer, the two of them could retreat, having drawn them away, and Phase was keeping them busy, slipping through attacks.

I felt like I was a general, directing a victorious army. At least, it was victorious so far. I kept close to Rachel, and close to Lisa. Two people I’d definitely need if this fight started to get rough.

Pelter made it in time to start lobbing stones and glass at the three enemies, Flechette just a moment behind her, loading and firing at Vex fast enough to force the woman to stop making more of those jagged forcefields, and focus on getting undercover.

But in the time that took, Pelter had deflected one attack by the boy of the two with a shield, and returned the favor with a stone that sent him on his ass, all of his lasers useless as she kept on throwing things and he struggled to get up and fight back.

The girl, at least, had a different power, trying to dodge and step closer to Pelter in order to do… something.

Flechette hit her. The bolt went straight into her knee and she went down with a scream, extra powers or no. Regent and Grue reached around back in time to swathe the retreating Vex in darkness, and then hurry ahead on Inka, who was angry enough to not even need commands to tear at Vex.

So, that was under control. And Reaver and Vex were both clearly trapped in the hideout, which meant that the only real threats left were the swarm of gangbangers running down the streets, or flying in… and of course the Butcher.

I grit my teeth and watched, as Rachel no doubt watched me. Codex, Citrine, and Arturas were keeping close, because they’d have roles to play if the Butcher attacked.

The enemies were massing together just three blocks away from us, almost thirty people (28, to be exact) with super-powers that left all of them, or at least enough of them to deal with, basically immune to my bugs.

This was it, this was basically all of the active Teeth besides the two areas under siege, and I looked down at the dogs. Then at where Parian had forced her way in, standing back and seeming to look intently at the door.

“Parian,” I said, raising my voice, “Let the dogs handle Spree! Move around to--”

“Got it!” Parian called.
Her dolls, when they stepped out of the building, were horrifying things, so thick with blood and
gore that they weren’t recognizable as anything except nightmares.

I stared for a moment, and then shook my head. I didn’t have time to dwell on it. My heart was
racing, stress and tension all building up, but without any release. The first line of defense was
Flechette… someone else, or our dogs. If none of them worked, we had plans involving Artificer, as
well as Pelter… and then after that? That’s when we started getting down to me just running up and
doing what I could to hurt her, to use her own powers against her.

It all flashed through my head, leaving brief blips of ideas like fireflies lighting up, only to die away.
I’d been through all this before, I thought, clenching tighter to Bentley, my hands shaking a little
from a sort of built-up stress.

“Taylor?” Rachel asked.

“Sorry, I’m just… trying to figure this out. Where is she?”

“We’ll find her,” Lisa reassured me.

I looked over at Rachel, glad that my mask was on. Because she didn’t need to see the look on my
face when she had to focus on the dogs.

“One sec,” Rachel said, and then she started yelling out orders to a few of her dogs, the ones she’d
made almost too big for the front entrance of the building we were camped in front of. The dogs
hurried forward to meet Spree’s clones, in a shower of blood.

I thought about how much work it’d be to clean them up after all of that, and I almost laughed at the
thought.

“Yes?” Rachel asked. I looked at the racing dogs, and checked that everything was going well.
Artificer and Kid Win had torn their way through the walls, so they were really firing inside, by now,
which meant that Reaver and Animos had to be hiding down low, away from the constant barrage of
lasers.

“Where would Butcher be?”

“Dunno. Behind us?” Rachel asked, but she was moving her dog closer to me, and I could imagine
her thoughts, if I could see her face. She had to think I was worrying, that I was getting panicked and
stressing out.

Maybe I was. I looked at her costume, and felt that possessive surge of pride that I assumed that
Parian felt, to look at Flechette. That same… control, or at least a little kind of control?

“If she doesn’t come, we’ll just have to capture all the Teeth, and--”

There she was. The Butcher was looping back around the long-way, through the Old Chinatown. I
just barely see her at all, because all my bugs were here. What was that direction was as much
tripwire as anything else.

But even from afar, I could tell. She smelled wrong. She was swaying a little bit as she ran, her body
temperature higher than it should be. There was a lot of data I was getting in that I wasn’t really
processing. It was like how you didn’t notice everything you noticed. It was only when I focused
that, ‘this is wrong’ became…

She smelled sick. She was moving stiffly. She was angry, her face twisted into a mask of rage,
wielding a hammer as she teleported through the city, in our general direction. She was alone, alone at last, her allies down or too far away to help her. We’d need that, I thought, as Parian’s dolls terrified and pushed back all but the flying capes.

Some of them could take a single doll, but could they take an army of them? And Spree was ahead, in the back of a hallway, as the dogs tore through to him. Was he going to keep it up, or was he going to die? Because I couldn’t imagine them being held back that easily, with all that blood and pain and chaos driving them to do just the wrong thing.

“The Butcher is coming,” I said, loudly, and then turned on the radio. “The butcher is coming!” I said, louder, and then turned to Rachel. “Alright, now…”

Grue and Regent emerged from the darkness carrying an unconscious Vex. That, plus, the two others meant… Spree, Animos, Reaver and Hemorrhagia, the latter locked deep in the building with a set of patches, clearly waiting to ambush someone who came in.

That was it.

The Butcher had almost reached us when I gave the order, “Rachel, turn on the radio.”

“Charlotte,” I added.

“Angelica! Sit! Bullet sit!” She started yelling out the commands through the radio, and the dogs complied. And for that, they gained regeneration, they gained just a little bit more speed, not enough to put them out of sync of orders, and they became tougher, stronger. Five dogs, ready to hound the Butcher.

*Beyond the sight of my eyes, Reaver stumbled up, trying to slash at Kid Win when he got close, only to be knocked down by a spray of lasers. He collapsed, and Kid Win moved in for the knockout, Animos’ screams still echoing through the building--*

The Butcher appeared in the distance, as Parian turned to hide behind a doll or two while the rest of them were pushing forward against the Teeth reinforcements.

I looked at her: this mad, strange woman, who smelled of sickness and blood, whose menace had driven me to do all this. Had driven me here. Yet, she meant nothing to me, and I was pretty sure I meant nothing to her. At least, nothing deeper than hatred.

“You,” the Butcher hissed, and however out of it she was, she was aware that I could hear her. “You!”

Rachel growled. “Angelica, kill.”

The Butcher didn’t bother dodging as Angelica raced forward. She slammed the hammer down on the dog. If it wasn’t for Amp, it probably would have done more… but even with Amp’s power, Angelica was knocked out of the way as Rachel ordered more dogs to charge her.

I knew it wouldn’t work, and that even refusing to move was just… showing off. But there was something about the way she moved that meant… what?

That meant that I didn’t think she’d be playing around much longer. And indeed, about two seconds after the fight really began, she disappeared in a loud pop of an explosion and appeared right next to me, swinging that hammer again. I blocked it with an arm, wincing.

Even with the extra strength, the hammer was a good weapon. My arm ached, and I knew I’d have a
horrible bruise in the morning as I lashed out at her with my fist, just to see what she did. She caught my arm and tossed me towards a wall like I was a sack of potatoes, and then exploded again as she teleported farther away from the dogs, who had turned around and were still going after her.

Rachel roared and charged her, as Flechette put herself into place.

Pelter was almost here too, and she was another possible way to really hurt the Butcher. It all came down to speed. We needed chances to hit her as hard as we could, because we wanted her hurt, we wanted her desperate and afraid, if we were going to get her in any fit state.

In theory, all we had to do was knock her out. Once that happened, well, I’m sure that the Heroes could hold her if they knew that it was that or start it all again…

But even as I thought that, the pain in my arm and the absence of the Protectorate made me think otherwise. The dogs were going after her, and she paused for moments to deploy one power after another. But all the pain in the world didn’t stop the fact that the dogs were regenerating from damage, and tougher than they seemed, and as she teleported around, the explosions merely knocked the five off their groove as I rose up, my bugs flying and surrounding her to provide a screen to keep her from seeing what was going on.

_Animos howled, but Kid Win kept on firing, tearing chunks out of the monstrous flesh of the creature._

_Spree was down, half-mauled, the dogs only refusing to kill him because of Bitch’s long training._

_The march of the Teeth was broken up as Parian’s golems and Phase rallied._

Codex and Citrine both backed up, faster than they should have. Both of them were trying to use their powers on the Butcher, but she was moving so fast it was hard to do much. But she wasn’t winning, either, I thought, as I tried to figure out what I could do.

She teleported, almost right into one of Flechette’s bolts, the girl up top such a blur that she had to be using the power, but the Butcher just barely managed to--

Wait.

No she hadn’t. When she next appeared in a huff of explosion, she had a bolt sticking into her leg. But she didn’t even seem troubled by it, as she slammed the hammer down into one of the unenhanced dogs. It went down in a scream of pain, and Rachel roared, running at it, her orders yelled louder as she tried to surround the Butcher.

Who lashed out at… nothing.

She just hit the air. I was dazed, and also somewhat superfluous at this point. There were things I could do, but only if everything went wrong.

This was at once too hard, too easy, too boring, too tense. My whole body was a set of nerves, the pain the least of my worries, even that fading as I started to regenerate. Lisa was besides me, Rachel stuck in the middle of the fight, Flechette trying to line up another shot…

“That was… someone!” Lisa said.

“What?” I asked, turning to her confused. “Who?”

“A team member. We need to get to… her? I think it’s a her,” Lisa said, frowning.
“Fine,” I said, gritting my teeth behind the mask as I looked around. Codex and Citrine were staying back, close enough to Arturas that he could defend them. They had enough of Amp’s power in them that they should be safe, I decided, and so, despite not knowing who this was that was being talked about, I moved forward on the dogs, towards the general area that the Butcher had hit.

She was still teleporting around, and Grue and Pelter were both trying to double-team her, the darkness closing in her options for where she could teleport, or at least whether she’d know what she’d find there, as Regent seemed to be keeping as far away as possible.

And Accord’s people were closing in behind, as I jumped off the dog, wishing I could just smell her the way a dog could. But… since I didn’t even know who ‘her’ was or if she was a her, maybe I was being too optimistic.

Lisa was crouching down, searching the half-broken streets by hand. Each explosion by the Butcher had only made the road worse, and I tried to watch the fight while I watched her search. Right now, things were going well… but I knew that with the Butcher, all it’d take is a few moments and it’d get worse. There were already dogs down, crippled by the pain that she was sending out in all directions. A few others had run wild, because of the rage she was giving off.

But even with all that… she wasn’t changing the fundamentals.

Animos was down. Hemophilia was running. So were the remains of the Teeth. Parian was vulnerable, yet another target that she could be going after.

But instead the woman was focusing on Grue and Pelter, as she teleported straight through the darkness that had built up in the middle of the road.

I blinked, as I saw Imp down there, in a pool of her own blood. I blinked, confused, shouldn’t she have regenerated? Or did Amp forget who she was and then… oh.

Oh fuck.

Had she had the power up at all? She had to have, or she’d be dead, but she was bleeding really badly, and she squirmed when Lisa tried to move her.

Lisa reached for her radio, and I could barely pay attention to the fight at all. Aisha was on the verge of passing out, the smell of the blood filling the air. The radio clicked on.

“Amp,” Lisa said, and I heard something in her voice that I’d never heard before. Terrified panic. It was a fear deeper than I had ever heard, fear enough to pass to me. “Order Imp to do something. Please. She needs healing.”

“Imp, please say something, anything,” Charlotte asked.

Imp didn’t speak, and I looked down at her, feeling as if the world was closing in, but I knew it wasn’t. There was an entire world, a world that was now just her and us.

That was the Teeth. They were done, and now… and now.

But I looked down at her, and she looked so young. Her mask had fallen off somewhere, and now… it was impossible not to realize how young we all were in that moment. We could still all die: she wouldn’t show any mercy if we gave her a chance.

“Please,” Lisa said, quietly, and her frown was deepening, her grip so tight that I could all but imagine…
I wondered who Lisa had, besides her team? She cared. She...

“Anything,” Imp groaned, looking up at us with her teeth bared in amusement and then something else. Fierce, desperate… something in her face made me ignore the amusement and see deeper, as her wounds began to knit themselves.

“You idiot,” Lisa said. “All of you. Of course Amp would…”

“I thought…” Imp began, and then she sniffled. “You came for me. You noticed me.”

“Of course I did,” Lisa said. “You’re an Undersider.”

“T-thanks.”

“Amp,” I ordered, a part of my mind watching the rest of the fight. “Give her some durability. She’s leaving. Get a few blocks away, as fast as you can, and then drop the invisibility and tell Amp to get rid of your enhancements. Amp, even if you don’t know why it’s invested, get rid of no power investment unless you have orders to do so.”

“I can still--”

“No, go,” Lisa said, her blue eyes hard.

The Butcher was swaying, retreating in the face of a truly vicious assault. She was covered in glass, and Pelter must have asked Amp for powers at some point, because otherwise the Butcher would have teleported away.

She doesn’t feel pain, I thought.

“Fine,” Imp said, standing up slowly and limping over towards the sidewalk.

When I forgot her this time, it wasn’t all the way. There was blood on my top, I was exhausted and glad that nobody had died yet.

*******

The Butcher was moving back towards us, teleporting quickly, not letting herself get pinned down. Another dog or two was knocked out, none of them dead, but injured enough that it’d take time to get them up. That’s when Flechette blurred by us all, and went straight for the Butcher.

I could barely see her, and yet I knew she was doing something. Her knife buried itself into the Butcher’s shoulder, and she drew another from her belt and seemed to have been stabbing for the other shoulder when she screamed.

At high speeds, the scream was odd, strange, barely human at all as the Butcher slammed her hammer into Flechette so hard it seemed to crack.

Flechette crumpled to the ground, clutching her arm as the Butcher prepared to bring it down again, only to have to teleport again to avoid a hail of Pelter’s shot… some of which hit Flechette, down, and her arm apparently so broken that even the regeneration was taking time to fix it up.

But Pelter was managing to force the Butcher away from Flechette, who seemed to have passed out from the pain, as overwhelming as it must have been. Shit, I thought. She’d done real damage, even if the Butcher wasn’t going to stop until her body literally gave out under her. But without her, who was the next hope? Pelter, and Codex. And then the rest of us for keeping her hustling, trying to find
a way to do something.

My bugs were spectacularly worthless, though they did tell me that Regent was kneeling over Spree, waving around that baton almost playfully. As if someone he cared for hadn’t almost died. He was speaking, in low, mocking tones. ‘Wake up, Mr. Spree. You and I could do wonderful…’

Just gabble. Just nonsense.

Citrine too, except the Butcher wasn’t staying still for long enough to actually do much. [Name] could be a good backup, with his powers, if he was strengthened and given the speed to really work the Butcher over.

It was amazing, how clearly I was thinking, considering the panic and stress the rest of my body was going through. But for all of it… what was I actually doing? I needed to get my bugs into those wounds, I thought. So I tried to position them, the better to expand them. Would the Butcher react to that? She didn’t feel pain, so maybe she wouldn’t.

I knew there was only so far I could take this. Because of course, if I killed her this way, then I’d be dead or in the Birdcage for the rest of my life soon. So I was going carefully as I backed up, and Pelter threw a few more stones, one of which hit her hard on the shoulder before she teleported… right into range of a blurring Codex, whose power made the Butcher’s eyes glow bright for a moment before she appeared across the street… bleeding from her nose.

Of course she was, I thought, as my bugs tried to expand the wounds. It was slow work, and the explosions were killing them off en masse, but we had her.

Rachel crowded close to me as Lisa and I retreated behind a sea of dogs, all of them ready and willing to go after her, barking angrily. A mass of flesh and muscle, ready to be enhanced if need be. Codex was retreating in a blur, trying to set up another situation where she did even more brain damage, while Arturas clicked his radio to get some more powers. Citrine was retreating, and I assumed her powers weren’t doing so hot.

Pelter advanced, a blur as well, and then…

I’d planned on this happening. Sort of.

But…

She pulled, from her ridiculous costume, right next to the sword, a patch and stuck it on her arm. One of the power patches. Her eyes glowed, and suddenly she was a blur herself, slamming her hammer into Pelter’s head so hard that--

I saw her almost blur out of the way at the least moment, but that wasn’t enough. She went down, and the hammer shattered at that, breaking into pieces as she kicked Pelter out of the way.

Stefanie hit the ground, and didn’t move. My bugs could tell she was still alive, but… she wasn’t moving.

The Butcher put another two patches on herself, and Codex tried to run away.

I clicked my radio. “Amp!”

The Butcher drew her sword in one motion, and slashed at Codex. But her skin was hard enough that only a little blood came up on the first swing.
On the backswing, though? Her sword glowed red as it went straight into Codex, ripping out the other side, disemboweling the woman. She gasped, and collapsed as the sword then sliced her in half.

Shit, shit.

Arturas slashed out of her two fast for her to dodge, because she seemed to need to deactivate the power she was using on the sword first. Another wound, combined with all the other ones inflicted… but it wasn’t enough to stop her, not even close.

She teleported away in an explosion, and then there she was in front of me.

“You fucking bitch!” she yelled, and then she reached up and grabbed me. I knew she was going to kill me then, but I had the radio on, and maybe…

Rachel growled and leapt at her, but that’s when she teleported away.

I looked down from the top of a building at the scene below me, clutched in her grasp.

Her face was twitching, running through dozens of emotions in the span of moments, as she looked at me. She was panting.

The sword pressed against my throat.

“Stand down, or I slit her throat!” she yelled. “You fucking… my Teeth… you! How did!” She was rambling, but… Lisa was backing off, and Citrine was staring at the corpse of her ally. Kid Win and Artificer were on their way, but not here yet. Parian was somewhat in the distance, Regent too, Grue backed off.

Rachel let out a loud sound and then took a step back as well. I could imagine her glare.

She whistled, and the dogs backed up from trying to find a way up to the Butcher.

They milled down below, though I hadn’t seen any ranged weapons on the Butcher at all.

She’d have to close in to kill everyone I ever cared for. But she had teleportation.

My heart was beating fast, faster, faster still.

She gripped me tighter, leaned in, and bared her teeth at me.

Chapter End Notes

I'll not leave you on the edge for long. I'll be updating tomorrow.
My world closed in on me. I was dangling, and while I knew that people were moving--Phase, below in the building--and that there were plans I could use, the truth was that I was even more helpless than I’d been in a long time.

My legs kicked, but there was nothing beneath me. The radio was on, which was a good thing, but I knew that no order I was given would be obeyed fast enough to save my life, at least as I was right now.

I looked at her, this psychopath in the knockoff samurai armor, ridiculous and deadly, her face flipping through emotions so fast they couldn’t be real.

“You hurt them,” the Butcher growled, and then glared down at the assembled throng. Bryce was slowly creeping up towards the third story, and Spree, somehow controlled by Regent, I had to guess--how?! Why hadn’t I heard about that power?--stepped out and looked up. “You hurt them!”

“And you hurt people I care about,” I said, feeling the sword against my neck. I couldn’t play some clever word-game with her and convince her not to kill me like that. I didn’t have witty dialogue like in some action movie starring fake parahumans. She’d kill me quicker if I said something mocking.

I also didn’t feel like doing so.

I felt vulnerable and trapped, and honestly exposed. The tension was just making my muscles, my whole body, jolt and shiver, and I was going to die in front of people I loved, in front of people who cared about me.

When I imagined my death, I imagined the locker, and usually as a dark sort of nightmare. But one with an odd sort of comfort, in a way: the same way that a dying animal finds somewhere small, dark, and warm, in an attempt to feel safe.

It didn’t feel safe… but neither did this public display.

The Butcher was holding me hostage, but I was entirely sure she intended to kill me, no matter what.

She was afraid, she was trapped, she was alone, at last… except for all the stupid voices in her head, who were no doubt urging her on to make a thousand and one mistakes. It took two, it took more than two, to actually not screw up everything.

“Butcher,” I said. “You want the Teeth? Let me go, take them. Leave.” I tried to sound quiet, I tried to not sound like I was begging.

I wanted to live. I wanted to hug Rachel and kiss her, I wanted… fuck. I was tired of this. I thought about how it’d been when I was first acting as a hero: that feeling had long since passed. Fights were routine or they were terrifying… or both, and there was nothing I could do but just try to do my best.

I wondered how she could be scared of me. But no, it was of us. I saw fear in those dark, ever-changing eyes. I saw a lot of things as she pressed me close.

I shouldn’t be thinking at all. I should have my life flashing before my eyes, I should have some
conception of what it all meant, or what I’d do. I should have a plan… other than to stall her as long as possible and see what happened.

“I think… not.”

“They… the Teeth matter to you. My people matter to me,” I said.

“If I--we-me- could… I’d make you watch them all die. I’d torture you to death. I’d eat you, bone, flesh, and fucking gristle. I’d throw you in that bay that is so beloved to your pitiful city, I’d--”

Each time she spoke, it was as if a different person was stepping up, their tone different, even their phrasing strange, and I realized that there was a weakness: decision-making was pretty hard when you had all those minds pulling together. Agreeing to murder someone was a lot easier than plotting out a method, or… things that actually mattered at all.

“You… are you--”

“You made me sick! You… you did something.”

I did. I’d given her diseases. Ones that I didn’t think she’d actually bothered to have treated, because of course she was the Butcher. They were one of the most powerful capes in the world, and they couldn’t even feel pain.

They were bleeding from dozens of wounds, there were knives here, there, and everywhere, bolts that surely reduced her mobility, but she didn’t seem to react to any of it.

“Butcher! It’s the vials you want, isn’t it?” Lisa asked, yelling up. I could imagine the look on her face.

Tattletale? She was one of the people who believed in comic-book banter. Though maybe she was stalling too. Because Kid Win was almost within line of sight of the Butcher, though I knew that if he fired, I’d die.

Artificer was a little behind him, and--

“Hey, fuck-face loser,” Spree yelled. “You failed to protect me, and now I’m a--”

“Regent,” Lisa said, her voice harsh, with a note of panic. “Stop it.”

“Regent?! You dare…”

She moved the sword just a little bit away from me. I realized what she was going to do.

I saw it, as if I were dreaming my way through the individual acts: she would teleport, the explosion throwing everyone off. She’d cripple Lisa and everyone around with pain, and kill Regent, and then me. Or me and then Regent. Then she’d start the slaughter. Those eyes, as she turned me around, the sword away from the back of my neck, but close enough that she’d be able to twitch to me if someone interrupted… unless.

Bryce was right below her.

I still didn’t know every specific of his power, but--

“Taylor, scream!” Amp yelled.

I opened my mouth wide, the Butcher’s sword about to gut me.
I wouldn’t have screamed in time. But then the ground collapsed. The Butcher half-tumbled, as it was shredded by… whatever Bryce was doing as the boy popped up, slamming his fist into the sword.

It was torn apart, shattering even more violently than the hammer had, but the handle of the katana and a bit of the blade were still there.

She slammed the remainder of the sword right into Bryce’s other arm, at the wrist.

That wasn’t glowing in his strange energy state.

He screamed and bled as he tumbled, and fell.

I screamed as well.

The world seemed almost to stop.

**********

I was strong, I had bugs. If I wanted to hurt her even more, I could have. But that’s not what I wanted at all.

In fact, from her perspective, what I wanted most of all was to help her.

This was the part of the plan where we probably all died.

Because this was a dumb idea. The Butcher’s danger sense was limited. Physical attacks and lasers were just about all it covered. Heck, as Bryce’s attack on the ground showed, it couldn’t even tell when someone was setting up an environmental hazard.

And more importantly, it thought that the patches were harmless. Harmless, when they did brain damage. We’d talked to Dose: it was slow for people without powers, and those with powers might need months or years to really face consequences… which is why Codex had hurt her, which was why we weren’t going to just put a patch on her once every few weeks when she felt like she needed the extra boost. She’d given herself several new powers already, doing even more damage to a brain already feverish, already in no fit condition.

In theory, considering she was already bleeding, considering… everything else. Consider all that, and that was our chance. Destroy her mind.

Or worse.

I pulled out two or three specially designed patches. As strong a concentration as was possible in such a small space, and I slapped them on her stomach as I leapt off the building as it crumbled.

Her first only just began to move towards me as I moved. I fell fast, just as fast as normal, hitting the ground and rolling, reaching down to click off the radio, briefly, a sign to take some of the excess power from me while she still could.

The world sped up again, and there Bryce was, screaming… and without a hand, as he writhed this way and that, half-phasing through the ground as the Butcher teleported, the explosion showering everyone in chunks of masonry.

Then she was near Spree, who spat out more and more clones.

Without her sword and the hammer, she was forced to punch them. Splatters of gore went
everywhere as she easily fought her way straight to the core spree.

“Fuck you, bitch! I’m not your subordinate anymo--”

A fist pulped Spree’s head.

Regent, standing a little ways back, clicked his own special radio and blurred away, clearly running for his life.

That little bit of time was all it took for Arturas to go back on the attack, everyone near him and Citrine seeming to slow down a little.

Citrine had to be manipulating the flow of time, to make it slower in the range of the attack. Just slightly, but it was enough that we were all able to back up as he went at her with a sword, slashing so fast that it was only on the second stab that she teleported away, close to Citrine, who was fast enough to duck a punch, only to get a knee to the stomach.

I was making my way over to Lisa and Rachel, trying to think about what to do next. The air seemed to be heating up, and the Butcher wreathed Citrine in fire as she stepped away, shaking her hands out and seeming to run through her powers. She… well fuck. She was floating slightly. Not flying, or at least she hadn’t done that yet, but of all the possible outcomes, it was flying that was most disastrous.

Only some sort of power that would let her heal the damage, or make her aware of what we were doing, were worse.

Of course, she could already move around at will, within a short-range.

I tensed, as Citrine burned, not healing fast enough to keep her skin from charring and beginning to crumble as the Butcher dodged some of the slashes by floating up, only to drift downward to continue hurting Citrine.

I stared, watching it all and trying to figure out what to do. “Rachel! We need to get some more dogs in there, and--!”

A laser blast caught the Butcher across the chest, though it seemed to basically do no damage as Kid Win came in, flying higher than he had the past few times I’d seen him.

Another blast caught her in the chest, killing the few bugs I had left working on making the wounds worse from the inside.

It charred her skin, slightly, which was when she threw some of that fire she was apparently able to conjure right up at his face. He turned, trying to dodge out of the way, and she caught his board as he did. She floated up relatively slowly, all things considered. But he hadn’t expected her to get up that high, and he groaned.

“Kid Win! Jump!” Amp ordered.

Her fist went straight through the board, and would have probably broken his leg, except he’d jumped first, his eyes wide as he screamed, hitting the ground and rolling.

The air cracked with the explosion of force as she appeared near him and punted him back, lazily, as if he were a football.

Amp started giving orders to the dogs as Rachel ordered others of them to go right at the Butcher.
I stood near her, trying to figure out what I was doing now. Rachel glanced at me, and then at Rachel, and as soon as the Butcher had teleported again, out of the way of Kid Win, I said, “I’m okay.”

“Taylor,” Rachel said, with a grunt.

“We’re almost out of people to throw at her,” Lisa said, with a frown. “I think she’s near the end, though. Look.”

The Butcher stood on another building, this one close to where Artificer was hiding and waiting with his own final weapon. The last trick we really had, if this all didn’t work.

I hoped it would, because the last thing we needed was to risk ourselves more than we had to.

Her neck was twitching, her eyes were narrowing and going wider, there was blood coming from both of her nostrils, and her arms were spasming a little bit. Her body was also warm, so much so that as the remainder of my bugs in the area swarmed around her, they could feel and register her body heat, coming off from her.

Then I had to duck, as she threw a fireball our way. Rachel mostly ignored it, and the spider silk actually managed to dampen most of the flames. I’d ducked out of habit, because I knew that if she had a long-range weapon, she could kill us all. Where was it, then?

Why was she… where had she even been? Just because she was afraid of us didn’t mean that she’d just run away. If anything, she’d be facing us, growling and trying to put on a show of not worrying about us at all. It was like dogs… it was like people, for that matter. Poses, poses and fronts, those were just as important as anything else.

So… here she was. Almost dying, and yet also triumphing. We were starting to run out of people who could hurt her, and every body that was down meant that there was another person she might be able to kill if she wanted.

All it’d take is a quick teleportation to slice up the survivors, to finish us off entirely.

My heart was like stone, my thoughts both focused and unfocused, as I tried to figure out how we were going to get out of this intact.

“Lisa!” I said. “Should we send out Artificer?”

“I don’t see what else we can do. Bitch’s dogs aren’t going to be able to reach her if she floats,” Lisa said, frowning. Grue was shrouding darkness near us, slowly trying to build up some in front of her, as the woman swayed and seemed to be considering her options.

She reached down and the brick of the building began to form into what looked like thick bolts. She lifted up one, and then another, and began hurling them through the darkness. The arrows should have missed, but of course they didn’t. They tumbled through the darkness, which kept her from aiming so well, and one of them caught the still-burning, still-healing Citrine in the shoulder.

Her shoulder tore clean off, and more blood soaked the ground. It was like a slaughterhouse here, and I grit my teeth as I clicked on my radio. We’d need something that’d let us stand up against her, and… I didn’t know what else we’d need to do. “Lisa, we--!”

A bolt slammed into her leg, but she seemed fortunately… not dead. That’s about all I could say as she doubled over with a scream. The bolt didn’t go clean through, probably thanks to Amp’s power, and I tried to think about who was left to work with.
“Parian!” I yelled. “Can any of your dolls climb?”

“They can try,” Parian said, speaking over the radio was we began to bunch up. Grue and Regent were hurrying over, blurring just enough to throw off the continual barrage of arrows, but I knew that us all getting together would just make it easier for her to enrage us, to fill us with pain… she had too many powers.

That was the problem. And Citrine was down, perhaps dead, so there was nobody we had access to who could get rid of her powers. We just needed to ride it out, I thought, tensing a little. I was in pain, I was exhausted.

Rachel was here, and hopefully if we died we’d die together… and even if we did die, the damage wasn’t going to go away.

“Can it be healed?” I’d asked, looking down at Dose, pacing in that tent.

“I suppose perhaps Panacea could… she can heal everything, right? But the damage itself seems to be caused by the stimulation of an area of the brain that’s already overactive… or the creation of a sort of temporary brain tumor that allows you to interface with the powers.”

“Interface?” Lisa asked, the look on her face thoughtful.

“Or… something. You have to grow the part of the brain that has powers to get them, and that implies that there’s a direct link. The way I thought of it, it must be almost like accessing a… fuck, are you going to let me go?”

“Of course we are,” I lied.

“Lisa!” I said, as one of the dolls blocked a shot that would have hit her. “How does Regent’s power work?”

“I need time to get control of people,” he said, sulkily, glaring over at where Spree’s corpse lay. :”I actually already had control of him. Earlier.”

“Can you try to take over Animos? He’s still unconscious.”

His power might be able to help now, even if it would be a bit of a trip. And I knew that Regent wouldn’t be able to do much good.

“I can--” he began, then paused, waving his scepter slightly as the Butcher teleported and slammed her fist down at one of the dogs. At the same time, her leg gave way, and the blow glanced off the dog, which reacted by snapping at her hand, and drawing a little more blood. “Yeah, let’s go.”

“Lisa, Regent. Get some speed before you do,” I said, tensing as she appeared again, this time even closer to us, still trying to take out all the dogs and the dolls which were going towards her. She’d rise up in the air briefly, and then slam back down to hurt them while they barked up at her and tried to leap.

She’d have to teleport out of the way every so often, but it was clear that with her new powers, she wasn’t going to be threatened, and even with the enhancements given to some of the dogs, there were still just… too many of them for her. They got in each other’s ways, and we didn’t have anyone who could fly.
Lisa and Regent both nodded, and soon they were blurring away, able to dodge when the Butcher exploded outwards after them briefly.

But the distraction was enough for yet another slash from Arturas to send her retreating away yet again, no doubt to pull more arrows out of the ground. She knelt, panting all the time, unable to keep from twitching, from panting, from falling apart at the seams, and yet she still threw the arrows with perfect accuracy.

But they bounced off him.

The fewer people Amp had to enhance, the less work it was, I thought. I tensed a little as I felt someone at the edge of my vision… and then I realized, it was reinforcements.

Shielder and Lady Photon were flying through the air, as Manpower and Brandish were continuing on foot, though I figured that they’d take a long time to actually reach the fight, as compared to their flying allies.

Panacea, on the other hand, was… distanced from the rest. She was moving on her own, carrying what looked like a medical bag. But that wasn’t the only change. Her clothing was darker, and she had what looked like a belt, filled with who knows what. But more importantly, it was just the grim look on her face as she looked at the bugs I sent her way. I couldn’t spend long concentrating on that, not when Rachel and I were retreating before another Butcher assault.

If she had a weapon, we might even be dead, I thought, as Panacea strode forward… alone. On her own. As if this were her own decision, rather than something done by a team. I didn’t know what to think about that, and the Butcher was closing in on us as Parian’s dolls threw themselves in suicidal charges that managed to force her back only temporarily.

I let out a breath, as Lady Photon rounded a building and sent blasts down at the Butcher, who teleported out of the way, appearing on a far building to grab some more stone arrows. She threw them perfectly, but then ran straight into the forcefield that Shielder had quickly put up, as they all began to float down towards us.

“Arachne!” Lady Photon yelled. “Is she all that’s left?”

“No,” I said. “Do you need… Amp?” I flipped on the radio and said, “Lady Photon, Shielder, can you distract her just a little bit longer?”

“Excuse me, can you touch your nose,” Amp said, as Shieder kept on blocking with his forcefield. The younger guy was floating this way and that, and the Butcher seemed almost paralyzed by the failure of the tactic, as if she couldn’t figure out what she should be doing instead.

If that was really so, then it was good news, and I wasn’t going to look it in the mouth.

Lady Photon did, and then blinked. “That feels… odd. The rest of the team is coming, what else can we do to help, besides that?”

“The… rest of the people. If someone could find a way to lift them up, that’d be great. I know you’re not going to really be able to hit them, though,” I said, as Rachel growled and gave another order for the dogs to attack.

“I can do that,” Lady Photon said, flying forward as fast as she could. The Butcher seemed to focus in on her, making a mistake that I knew she wouldn’t have if she was in a better state of mind, and a better way.
I was glad for even a moment where death wasn’t an option, or at least... the more she spasmed and made stupid mistakes, the better. I knew that it was just going to keep on going. Even if she won, she wasn’t going to last that long, not with all of the damage she had.

It wasn’t going to go away, but... I wondered who’d get the power if she survived only to die. I didn’t know, but I knew what I’d have to do if I somehow got it, or if it went to Greg, or--

What was that music?

It was loud and tinny, and sounded like something out of a video game, triumphant and full of brass, but repetitive enough that it was probably looping.

And it was coming from Artificer.

...fucking hell.

I wanted to yell at that little idiot, but to his credit, the music started at the same time as the slop started pouring on her. It was a green liquid, the pure and concentrated results of a power patch, one chosen... to hopefully not lead to all of us dying?

It was basically just a firehose, and it soaked her as her eyes started glowing, because the refinement was the part that'd turned it into a usable product, so this was still working like the old version.

She shuddered, and turned to throw fire at Artificer, who barely dodged it, only to be hit with another stone arrow.

His armor held up to it, bending slightly at the point of impact, and he kept up the spray, as the Butcher didn’t dodge, and just kept on throwing more and more arrows.

It was madness... and madness that allowed Flechette and Stefanie to be picked up, along with a few of the others.

“Holy fuck,” Arturas said. “Is that...”

“Our last idea,” I said. “Yes, it is.”

Regent and Lisa were finally at Animos, waking him up and trying to get him under control, but it remained to be seen whether they’d return in time for it to matter.

I took a step back, closer to Rachel.

I didn’t want her dogs to get into it, and Parian was glancing at Flechette as she was brought back up.

The Butcher finally teleported out of the way, and then zoomed from behind Artificer, slamming into him.

He tumbled out of the sky, and hit the ground with a crunch.

Then she was blurring again, moving in a straight line, shredding Parian’s dolls as she went.

The fluff mixed with the blood on the streets as Parian dove out of the way, just enough of a blur that the Butcher roared past only to slam into the wall.

She’d clipped a dog on the way, and torn him apart. Rachel stared, and then I could feel the decision building in her, to advance on the Butcher. Thus far... she had maybe not killed any of the dogs.
Maybe, just maybe.

Now she had. I didn’t know which one it was, but… it might have been Nancy. I wasn’t sure.

But she started seizing up.

The Butcher was shaking as she collapsed. “Amp! Get here, now!”

*****

The Butcher died alone. The Butcher was reborn alone.

I surveyed the battlefield as Dad drove up in the van.

Dad, Amp…

And Dose.

Dose stumbled out, under command of Amp, and walked over to sit on the dying Butcher’s chest. She was still breathing, but her brain was so clearly bleeding, and her continued seizures were enough. And if they weren’t, Dose had patches, more and more patches that he could put down on her.

Because of course, he was going to be the killer. He was the Butcher, his legs already probably unable to get up, dosed with a paralytic. Even if the Butcher somehow became immune to mind-control, ‘he’ wouldn’t be able to do much.

I finally felt the Protectorate arriving, right on schedule, as Dad gripped the wheel of the van and stared out at the endless carnage.

At the deaths. Bryce, whose hand was just plain gone, the two Ambassadors, both of them dead… and all the others who were at best knocked out and badly hurt.

It was an absolute slaughter that lie before me.

But… we were alive. I looked over at Rachel, and I wanted to throw myself into her arms, even though she was absolutely soaked in blood.

This wasn’t a pretty fight, but then fights weren’t. I didn’t like them, and I didn’t think I ever would, no matter how willing I was to use vicious tactics.

But… there it was.

The end.

...Now all that was left were the Undersiders.

And I could deal with them later, I decided, feeling faint already. My arms were starting to shake, all of the excess stress and energy just pouring into me as I said, “Rachel… we did it.”

“Yeah,” she said.

I reached out, and I held her hand tight, and waited for the ‘proper authorities’ to arrive.

Chapter End Notes
Tune in for the copious epilogues, but this is the end of the main conflict!
July 12th

She woke slowly, her memories and thoughts swirling and mixing together, and yet never quite coming together, like a recipe that was started and then left half-finished. Her memories felt... she didn’t know how she’d gotten here or why she was here, but mornings were like that, sometimes.

Stefanie didn’t like them, even as she did try to get up early enough to get one over on them. She felt hungry, her stomach hurt, her head felt like cotton, and there was something wrong that she couldn’t quite place.

Besides this, there was the beeping up something. A monitor? It was the sort of sound that made her think of the silly hospital dramas her mother watched, back before...

There it came. Memories, though they felt like dreams. She’d... gotten powers. She’d hesitated, she’d gone out.

She’d almost been killed.

Stefanie had been saved, had taken up a name, Pelter.

Then there was the camp, Arachne and Bitch, the rest of the team, Cassie coming and suddenly making everything better, and then things getting...

That’s where the memories seemed to make less sense. She tried to open her eyes, but she wasn’t strong enough for that. The Butcher had been a threat. She remembered that. But after that.

The strange woman with the endless supply of powers had been their greatest enemy. Or it’d been hers. She remembered a fight between Rachel and Taylor, as she’d stood off to the side and tried not to feel out of place worrying about the love life of two of her teammates.

Stefanie tried to open her eyes once more, and then gave up, sinking back down into the sheets.

When she again became aware of the world, it was a little less heavy. A little less absurd. She was still hungry, though, but also tired, in that drowsy way a person got when they’d had too much food.

...she had far too little experience of being sick to really have the right comparisons. Groaning, she opened her eyes.

The beeping seemed only louder, and there in front of her were--

She blinked.

White walls, check.

Maybe she should make a list of what she was expecting and what she wasn’t, because one of the things was a dog.

In the corner, Taylor Hebert and Rachel Lindt were sitting, neither of them in costume, though Taylor had on a black domino mask that hid nothing. And at their feet was a dog. She didn’t know
She liked dogs. Dogs were nice, but that wasn’t the same as being as obsessive as Taylor and Rachel were.

Then there were her parents, right next to the bed. Mom, round and soft, her eyes brimming with tears. “Honey, are you okay?”

Mom pressed herself up against Stefanie, and Stefanie wanted to hug her back. But she was too tired, still.

“Let her have some space, dear.”

And then there was… Amy Dallon. The memory took a moment to pull up. A moment too long. “Can you understand me, Pelter?”

“Yes,” she said, and then she realized she was thirsty, her voice a rasp.

“What do you last remember?”

“I… think we were going to fight the Butcher?” Her head hurt, and her memories seemed to dance away from her when she tried to reach them, like they were kids at school, playing some cruel prank.

“Your short-term memory might be negatively impacted. I was able to get your brain back working, but there’s only so much brain mass,” Panacea said, defensively. “I think that’s all. Bad short term memory, but if there are any changes to emotional affect, or how you feel in any way, that’s something you need to tell me, so I can figure out how to fix it. I’m still working on this.”

“Still working on this?” Cassie asked.

Because there was Cassie as well, her bright, energetic blue eyes rounding on Amy was she bounced forward, towards the bed.

“I didn’t do brains,” Amy said.

“We’ve agreed not to pry,” Taylor said, in this soft chiding voice that almost made Stefanie want to laugh.

“Ah, right, sorry,” Cassie said, frowning and looking away.

“What happened?”

“We won,” Rachel said, bluntly. As if that was the only answer needed. Stefanie frowned and sat up slightly, though it took up far too much of her strength, and she almost felt faint after that.

“We defeated the Butcher. They’re in the Birdcage now, or on the way, and being kept unconscious on the way. Which is probably not…” Taylor hesitated, and clearly meant something about legality.

Well, it did seem pretty sketchy, but at the same time it was the Butcher. Stefanie nodded her head. “And?”

“You were hurt. Brain damage,” Cassie said, and there was a note of panic in her voice at even the thought of that.

“Who else was hurt?”
“Too many people,” Taylor said, stepping closer. She felt as if she were being pressed in from all sides, as if they were going to lift her up and carry her away. “But… all of us are alive. And that’s what matters. Even B… Phase is alive, as is Kid Win. Though—”

“Bryce?” Stefanie asked, then realized she shouldn’t have blurted it out. She shifted a little, and said, “Oh. I… who’s watching the camp?”

“We can do that, sweet-pea,” Dad said.

She blushed. The idea of him using that nickname in front of all her friends, it was enough that she wanted to disappear, or go back to sleep.

“I can help too,” Cassie said, eagerly, leaning forward. “I was really worried about you. Everyone else is already out of the hospital, though Flechette is being watched.”

“Oh,” Stefanie said, looking over at Cassie, and thinking about what she should say. “Thank you for helping.”

“It’s the least I can do,” Cassie said.

Stefanie remembered the crush that Cassie so clearly had on Rachel, and the way that she’d devoted all of her time and energy to the team and making sure that things worked out. The way she invested so much. It was brave. And sorta foolish. But mostly brave. “No, it’s the most you can do,” Stefanie said, shaking her head.

“Well, maybe.”

“I’m… tired,” Stefanie said.

“Well, it’s the evening,” Panacea said, thoughtfully. “Maybe tomorrow?”

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“What can you remember?”

Stefanie’s head hurt, and she hated how the hospital gown looked on her. “Green… twenty-something, blue, red, two…”

“Green, twenty four, purple, red, two,” Panacea said, frowning. “I think that the damage isn’t as bad as I thought it could be. But you’ll definitely need to find a way to deal with the memory problems. I would, at least.”

Cassie wasn’t there, because of course there was a camp to look after, there was so much to do. She needed to be strong. She couldn’t stop now. She was a hero, and… she had a camp to look after, for as long as it remained.

As long as it took before the world to go back to normal.

“Thank you for what you’ve been doing.”

“I can help you, even if I can’t help others,” Panacea said, frowning.

“What?”

“I held myself back, I didn’t do brains because I was afraid of what I was,” Panacea said, absently. “It was stupid.”
Stefanie didn’t say the truth, which was that she understood the idea of limiting yourself. But of course she couldn’t, she was too weak to ever survive if she did that. She was just a child, and she wondered if she’d ever stop feeling that way. Feel like she was in control. “I… couldn’t ever afford to hold back.”

“Neither could I,” Panacea said, bitterly. “It’s not your problem, though.”

It wasn’t, it really wasn’t. But Stefanie felt like she should ask, like she should get to know. But… how to bridge the gap?

There was a new recipe and no room in the oven. She bit her lip. “If you ever want to talk…”

“No. Thank you,” Panacea said, though she didn’t sound like she meant it. She said thank you and meant buzz off.

That was all that she could do.

******

She got only one hospital meal before she went home, and staring down at it she really was curious about the weird dichotomy.

The stereotype she’d always heard was that hospital food was horrible and dull. But her Mom had friends who worked in that field, and so she wasn’t surprised when she was able to get meatloaf, potatoes, collard greens, and even some cornbread.

They had to have food for basically any sort of dietary requirements, and so what was in front of her was quite edible, and it reminded her of some of the meals her Mom would have whipped up for her when she couldn’t afford to put in a lot of mental effort… but did have time to spare.

Most of the time, what her Mom fed her was always so fine, food that, like taking your child to art galleries and letting them explore their tastes, allowed them to develop her own… understanding, she supposed.

Of course, the fact that she had developed a taste for food, and good food at that, probably had something to do with the fact that she, as some ‘friends’ had remarked, ‘Could stand to lose a few pounds, you’d be so much prettier if--’

Leaving all of that behind was certainly one of the more welcome parts of becoming a hero.

So here was food. She ate it, frowning, almost wishing she’d ordered a desert. Because it wasn’t bad… it just was made in a bit of a hurry. She thought that maybe it sounded sentimental: but food made with passion just tasted differently. Some of it was just ingredients, of course. Some of it was flair. But she kept up the eating, her parents downstairs finishing up the paperwork to take her out of here… out of here, but back to her job.

That’s the way she needed to see it. It was her job. That made it easier to go back to, to continue doing. If it ever stopped feeling like her job, helping people…

The door opened.

Cassie, humming, wearing a cute pair of jeans and a T-shirt for… Deadguy, some band that Stefanie had never even heard of, stepped in. She moved with a sort of rhythm, as if she were in a musical, as if her every movement was blessed.
Maybe it was. The Deadguy logo was a skull, and it was such an odd choice.

“Hey, Stefanie. I thought you’d want to know how things were going. Things are going great in the camp. With the Teeth collapsing, we’re sorta… going out. Well, not me. Going out and reclaiming the territory there. Some people who want it are going home, but most of them are staying in the camp.”

“You need to find a third apartment building,” Stefanie said. It’d been on the list of things that she’d needed to do. But of course, most of them weren’t safe. Perhaps the lower floors could be safe enough for temporary habitation?

“Yeah, we do. I was going to ask for your help with that, since you’re so much better at me than--”

Stefanie was surprised at the flattery that came so easily to Cassie. She let her talk for a little, and then said, “I’ll do what I can do. But I’m sure you have it in hand.”

“Well, I mean. Rachel and Arachne aren’t much help. They’re busy getting the dogs back to the shelter, and dealing with… all of those problems. And with each other,” Cassie said, though the look on her face wasn’t exasperated.

“Oh.”

“I even brought a bribe so that you’d help!” She pulled a sea-salt caramel chocolate bar from her pocket. “What do you say you add some desert to this boring hospital food.”

“It’s not boring, it’s functional,” Stefanie said. But she held out her hand to take it anyways. She always loved good chocolate. “How did you know I’d like this?”

“I asked your Mom. If you don’t mind me doing so?”

“You did. But… I… thanks.” She didn’t know what to say. She’d never had a friend who would do something like that. They’d always been… distant. School friends.

Stefanie looked down at the chocolate bar, and then opened it up slowly, smelling it like she was a wine connoisseur.

A good brand.

Then she split it in half. “Here you go. Let’s share the duties.”

“Yeah. That’d be nice.”

So, there it was. “So, the third apartment. Besides the lower stories of the buildings, there are other options, because I’ve noticed that Arachne’s range is only getting better. Plus, with the collapse of the Teeth, there doesn’t exist a major threat, especially not one that we can’t just deal with if it shows up. We have to mass-produce more of those radios, is G… Artificer able to work? If he is, then…”

Chapter End Notes

The first three Packs were originally together. I'm formatting it like this because the a03 formatting is messing things up and so I'm trying to make it simpler.
July 15th

They met in one of the apartments, this time. There were bugs there, of course, but Charlotte had long since gotten used to being seen. Most of the time. She didn’t know if she’d ever really be completely used to it, but was she supposed to complain?

Would she always be marked by her experiences, and by her powers? That’s the way it worked, she thought, looking around at the circle of people ready to talk. When she imagined eyes on her, looking at her, naked and helpless, when she pictured all of the things she could be, and all of the things she was, she could feel very helpless.

Even groups unnerved her: groups like these reminded her of her trigger, of her power.

Yet she gathered them together anyways, because she was a glutton for punishment, someone whose suffering had always been indirect. She hadn’t been touched but briefly, but she’d watched others suffer, her eyes hard, her heart dead.

Weigh it on the scales in the afterlife, and some dark God would declare that she deserved damnation. Weigh her inaction, her words when actions were all that would suffice.

Weigh that she’d watched as Taylor had been pulled from the locker, hadn’t done anything then, hadn’t been able to do anything until it was almost too late.

And when she did?

It was an act of hubris, an act of controlling others when you couldn’t even control yourself.

She didn’t understand how Taylor forgave her, and more than that, seemed to forget everything. Not just the use of powers, but the inaction, the failures so deep and broad that they seemed like they could dominate her life.

Her life. Taylor’s life.

But they apparently didn’t? Charlotte didn’t know how to feel about that. Surely it was wrong to feel like you should be punished more?

They began to talk, and she was caught up in the cadence of people to talk to, people to help. This support group had problems. Cynthia clearly had untreated mental illness, and there were problems that a therapist could help with.

Charlotte had even looked through the list of registered psychotherapists in Brockton Bay. There was a long list, apparently even after the Endbringer came. They went all up and down the alphabet, from Ayers to Vane, and ranged the gamut. Sex therapists, gender therapists, therapists dealing in married couples exclusively… there were so many options, and she wasn’t sure how she was supposed to choose just one.

She wasn’t sure if she liked being in charge, even of herself. But if she wasn’t going to take charge with her powers, she…
Rachel was right there.

“I’ve had a tough time, lately,” Charlotte said when it was her turn to talk. “I’ve worried that maybe I’m not going to be… content again.”

“Content?” Beat asked. She looked as if she was always on the verge of objecting to something, but that was the mystery of faces. A person could look disagreeable, and just look it. How did you read eyes and see souls?

“There was the fight with Butcher, and everything else, I’ve told you about that, the failure, the…”

She’d been forgiven. But who wants to be forgiven so easily? So many people, but none of them worth much to Charlotte. “I don’t know what to do, there.”

“What about… you’ve talked about your trigger before,” Beat stated. “What about your life is… replicating that? That’s the terminology right?”

“I know what it is,” Charlotte said. “Being watched. Being judged… or not judged.”

“Not judged?”

Charlotte laughed. “Isn’t it silly?”

It was, wasn’t it? It was the kind of absurd mindset that she’d thought she was past. She was helping people, she was a hero, so now. Now why was she still not satisfied.

******

Another woman would have been embarrassed by absurdity of her actions, but Taylor Hebert was so oddly confident, so oddly composed for someone who’d gone through what she did.

Some people would have balked at the hypocrisy of confronting someone who had expressed distaste at being watched… based on information that had been gained from surveillance.

But there she was, blank-faced, but with her eyes conveying something. She smelled of dogs, but she always did. Sometimes even after baths. It was just a constant… aroma. Charlotte had learned to get used to it, mostly, and she wondered if Taylor even noticed it, except when it got too strong and she bathed it off. Very temporarily.

Taylor had been over by the Shelter, and yet here she was.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been making you uncomfortable.”

“You’re sorry? You’re sorry, and I’m never guilty.” Charlotte said, and then blinked, stunned by the bitterness of her own words, which seemed to choke in her throat.

“You’re very guilty, at times. But so am I. I can’t fucking judge you like you want me to,” Taylor said, with a smile. “I don’t think it’s very fair, but the world isn’t fair. But I’ll stop watching you if it helps.”

“…but there’s security concerns, aren’t there?” Charlotte asked.

“Of course there are. The Undersiders are still out there, including… Imp. Yes. Though we might not remember her, come time.” Taylor shook her head.

Charlotte didn’t know what had changed, but Taylor seemed different ever since she’d killed the
Butcher. More decisive, more incisive, vicious but tempered with something strange and a little bit threatening. She worked harder, and faster. She stared off into space, and yet her body was watchful.

It was bizarre, really. “Come time? Are we going to fight them too?”

“Eventually we’ll have to. They have their vials, they have a small gang, and they’re going to be expanding some. We know all this. But at the same time, you’re right. I don’t want to fight them if I don’t have to.” Taylor shook her head and crossed her arms.

Another difference. She was finally stopping with the long-sleeves, which she’d worn basically anytime she wasn’t in costume. So Charlotte could see the tan already building up on her arms. It was hard to know what it all meant.

Though what it definitely meant was that Charlotte would probably be remiss in commenting on, say, Taylor’s bare legs, and the virtues of a spa treatment.

“You might have to. They’re going to be just as hard as Coil… or they’ll be overthrown, won’t they?”

“Maybe. You don’t think villains can do any good?”

“I do, but… is she one of them? Are they going to be part of something that can last?”

“How would I know? But I’m going to at least give her a chance not to disappoint us all.”

“Ah,” Charlotte said, “Like you…”

“Yeah. Like I gave Rachel a chance.”

That wasn’t what Charlotte meant, but she knew a dismissal of the topic when she heard it, and she knew that there was only so much you could argue about.

So she nodded, and tried to tell herself that things were still good.

The world moved on. She needed to do so too.

Chapter End Notes

This is short, I know, but sometimes brevity works. Maybe this is one of those times.
July 14th

The Director’s desk was clear, as if she had no paperwork at all, and yet her eyes seemed to say the opposite. That she’d cleared a mountain just to have room to deal with Flechette. Lily tried not to be nervous, but she was very aware that Piggot could do any number of things to completely ruin her life.

And what could she do in return? All she could do was, perhaps, quit. But then would she be allowed to? And she certainly didn’t want to. She imagined what her parents would say, their disapproval that wouldn’t need words to be expressed.

Just a cold look, a shake of their heads. She wondered whether it was their thoughts that she was needy, and worthless. She licked her lips, a nervous habit, and tried not to look away as Piggot looked onward.

Those grey eyes seemed to pierce straight through Lily.

Piggot knew. Knew that she was selfish, and even though she couldn’t, Lily wondered what else she might know.

“You might well have died. Phase has lost his hand, and Kid Win almost died as well. If you had merely waited a day or two more, we would have dealt with her, and without having to kill someone while we were at it. Though the outcome is positive… or at least, there were worse outcomes possible, that doesn’t excuse fully what you did. If it had failed and you’d lived, I would have suspended you as soon as the Butcher crisis was done with.”

“Instead, you’ve captured all of the Teeth--”

“Except Animos,” Piggot interrupted, and her eyes told Lily that Piggot had an idea of where
“Yes, except Animos,” Flechette said. “I did good work.”

“So, you’re not suspended, or on probation. But you’re going to be taken temporarily off the roster of patrols, until we can figure out how best to use you, despite…”

“Despite, ma’am?” Lily asked, as if she were the long-suffering and dutiful Ward, rather than the one who’d abandoned it all for love and a dangerous fight.

“Despite your compromised state.”

“Compromised?”

“The Undersiders and the… Pack worked together. The Pack is not a villainous group, but they’ve clearly accepted certain biases towards Hellhound—”

“Bitch,” Flechette said, and then she blinked, startled at her own insistent phrase. Arachne was getting to her.

Piggot’s expression seemed to be almost amused. After all, Lily had just proven her point. “Be whoever she wants to be, that doesn’t matter.”

“They’ll stand against the Undersiders,” Lily insisted. “Please don’t worry, Director.”

“It’s my job to worry. Do you want to be suspended? Would that help you understand where your priorities lie?”

“I know where they lie,” Lily said. “We’ve beaten the Teeth, Coil’s gone. Dinah’s rescued, and they’re not exactly calling you out on the fact that you hesitated.”

She realized that she’d raised her voice slightly.
“It was proper caution, approved of by all of our analysts. If you had waited, we could have coordinated with the… Pack.”

“It worked,” Lily said weakly.

“So, in addition to the Undersiders, there are still a few small gangs that have popped up, not necessarily Parahuman. I could assign you specifically to patrol the docks.”

Lily tensed, and tried not to object. Because if she did, that meant she’d definitely get sent there, as far from Sabah as possible.

“You could,” Lily said.

“But I will not. Perhaps a closer relationship with the Pack is needed in order to encourage them to stand against the last major villain threat in Brockton Bay. Or perhaps they aren’t a threat. If so, you could return to New York.”

She hated this feeling. It was bizarre, because it wasn’t like she did anything good with power and control over her life, but this sort of helplessness wasn’t welcome at all, it was the kind of feeling that didn’t make her…

Just another way she was broken, just another way she was imperfect. That the same emotion could feel right and wrong in different circumstances.

“I think there is work we could still do. For now we need to restore order in the rest of the city, and… the Pack isn’t taking credit.”

Which was a mistake. Or rather, they weren’t insistently pointing out the truth, which is that the Protectorate had tried their hardest, but they hadn’t been able to beat the Butcher, while the Pack had. It was that simple. But… instead, from what she’d seen of her online followers, it seemed split fifty-fifty. It was controversial, it was an argument, and if it was like that online, then the average person of Brockton Bay probably thanked the Protectorate and only the Pack as an afterthought.

And whereas before she would have thought that’s just how it worked… now she didn’t think it was
fair. It was wrong, even.

But… what could she do?

“This is good,” Piggot said. “You are dismissed. Consider your loyalties, and try to convince them to end the Undersiders, and we can finally have a city free of villains.”

Her eyes sparked with ambition. With a drive that no doubt would end in ashes.

Lily didn’t shudder, except on the inside.

*******

*Lily shuddered at the feelings in her stomach as she stumbled into her house. She’d said yes!*

*She licked her lips, her tongue brushing against the braces she still wore. In six months, she’d have powers. But for now, she just felt giddy and light.*

*Emi was lovely, Emi was kind, Emi’s Mom was an Asian-American activist, someone likely to understand, maybe, the fact that Lily and Emi were a couple. She opened the door to her house and went to the couch. Latchkey for Life, she thought, grinning so broad that her face actually hurt.*

*She was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, her clothing comfortable… nothing like what she’d thought she’d needed in order to impress girls. She’d only been out to herself for a few weeks, by now, and she’d read her way through a lot of media, especially online. It was amazing, how much you could find.*

*Articles about Legend, articles about New York and its gay history, it seemed as if there was just all of the affirmation in the world. Her parents weren’t… great, but they’d come around eventually, right? Surely they’d understand, if she put it the right way.*

*She was reading a lot, and she knew how to do relationships by now. There was a way you could have fair, healthy relationships among equals, and she’d do that. They’d split the bills, and hug, and give each other gifts, but never ones that either of them couldn’t afford, though… Lily was poorer*
than Emi. Solidly middle-class, rather than part of a family that could have sent her to a private school if they felt like it.

But that wasn’t a big deal. She’d find a way to pay her own way, even if she had to… she giggled at the thought of paper routes and all the things you saw in old stories. It wasn’t that way, she was fourteen, she’d just have to ask for an allowance. Her parents wouldn’t like it, but maybe they’d give in if she…

She didn’t know what to say, biting her lip and thinking giddily. There is a magic to the past, but it’s a twisted, broken magic.

It’s the magic of knowing you didn’t know the future, and yet wanting to do so. She had to remember this moment in the context of what came.

The way that she kept on hoping that Emi would treat her to a meal, or that she’d give some gift, some token that proved they were real once it turned out that Emi wasn’t out to her Mom. Wouldn’t be. But would be out with the world, in at least a few ways.

They kissed. They kissed a lot. She had that going for her. But Emi always leaned back, as if… as if Lily should be ravaging her.

Things grew stale, they stopped working. Lily got needy, she felt as if she were the one who was in the wrong. On their four-month anniversary, Emi got her nothing at all, and Lily should have broken up with her then.

Instead, she’d just frowned and pouted, aware that she was to blame, that there was something wrong with her. People shouldn’t need gifts, shouldn’t want to be passive. They should want to be equals. It was sexism of some strange sort that even with another women, she expected to be the one that…

She disgusted herself, and if even she was disgusted, then how was it possible for anyone else not to hate herself. Maybe she deserved it. Her body was… well, she wondered. Was she just falling into some other type, when she tried to exercise? Or…

It was hard to see herself through the recriminations, to see what others saw in her, and harder still when Emi was so beautiful, with the kind of dark eyes that…
That was another problem: her feelings weren't pure. Though that was okay, right? Maybe.

Maybe not.

Instead of breaking up with her, Lily held on. Two weeks later, Emi broke up with her. "You’re so… passive, like you need me to rescue you. I’m fourteen, Lily. I can’t rescue you, and I can’t afford to waste--"

Waste what? Her time, her money, her everything? On someone not worth it.

A week later, Lily triggered.

*******

July 20th

Bryce looked at her, “Where are you going? You going to see the Pack?”

“Why?” Lily asked, frowning at him. His leg was in the floor, and he was holding himself up a little awkwardly. He still didn’t have a hand, though there was talk about convincing Panacea to work with that. She’d been a little busy, and while he’d lost a hand, he was otherwise intact, a young boy that no doubt just wanted things back to normal.

“I just wanted to, you know. I saved her, you know that, right?”

“I was unconscious,” Lily said, uncertainty, not sure where this was going. There was definitely a sacrifice made. She’d heard the story… twice now, actually, of him attacking the Butcher. He’d saved lives, yes, but that wasn’t enough. She’d learned that long ago in her own relationships. You couldn’t just have a single amazing moment and go home. You had to keep on providing, keep on proving that you weren’t some vulnerable freak, some stupid, stupid…

You had to smile as much as possible and make posts online, you had to be perfect and you had to be seen being perfect. She had a social media presence, she had duties, she had obligations, and so did he.
“...well, I did,” Bryce said. “I want to, I should talk to them.”

He sounded desperate, and Lily wondered again, frowning a bit. “Do you have a patrol coming up soon?”

“No. While I don’t have a hand, they’re not going to let me. But... I can’t just sit around here.”

“You can’t?” Lily asked, not sure if this was true. “Do you really want to go out there and fight again?”

“No! But... I need to do something,” Bryce said. “Can you tell her that I’m, uh. That I’m alright.”

“I can do that,” Lily said, though a part of her suspected that what she was actually trying to pass on was something coded and strange, something that that couldn’t provide. Respect, perhaps. But she couldn’t promise that. She was pretty sure she didn’t want to promise it, either. But... respect was certainly something hard to come by.

*******

Ten days before she fought Behemoth, she stared at the tall, blonde-haired girl who she’d been dating. Christine was beautiful, and so totally and completely out of her league that it was absurd. Christine was also... like. Probably the girliest person Lily had ever dated, not that that was a bad thing.

But they both wanted to be treated, and they both expected the other person to make it equal, so there was always this odd balance. This imperfection.

“This isn’t working,” Christine said. “I don’t know what... you’ve told me what you do, but that’s not enough, is it?”

“What isn’t?”
“You come to our dates exhausted and… it’s just. You…” Christine wrung her hands in the air, in a gesture of frustration that she knew she’d caused.

Lily had let down a girl who was smart and funny, popular with everyone. Her first, and thus far only, white girlfriend, her skin pale, her features fine.

Lily wondered if it was that or the fact that she was a she that most offended her parents, who knew but didn’t approve. That was the story of their life and her: knew but didn’t approve.

But of course, there were things they didn’t know, but they’d approve of none of them.

She’d started having dreams, fantasies. She’d been kneeling, and there’d been orders, there’d been… there’d been a lot of fantasies, and it was… it was all just a symptom of some larger disease, some larger perversion.

Lily said, “I what?”

“You’re just not right for me. You’re a great girl, but you can’t… I don’t know. You’re weird. You’re a freak. You want… more than I can give. And you aren’t giving me anything in return. I don’t think I can keep on dating you.”

“Okay.”

“And that’s another thing, you don’t fight. You don’t fight anything, anywhere, anytime.”

*******

‘You have to understand,’ Legend said to her, to everyone there, ‘That there’s a reputation that Wards have. You’re all exemplars. Obviously, we’re not going to be revealing your family background, but people see you and they picture themselves as you.’

He was pale too, with perfect teeth, handsome, if Lily was even remotely attracted to guys. He seemed like the kind of person… well, she knew plenty of her friends who’d gone through crushes on Legend, which of course was probably the most futile thing a person could do.
‘So, you’re young kids, you’re women, you’re men, you’re Japanese-American, Chinese-American, African-American… you’re gay, you’re straight. You’re a model, and what matters most of all is demonstrating to the world what that means. There’s a limit to this: nobody expects you to be perfect, at least nobody who matters, but you need to understand where you are and what you’re doing. You can’t mutilate a gang-banger just because his boss nearly beat you up in a fight. You can’t harass other Wards, or other civilians. If you use slurs against people, you will be on notice.’

Even by then, she’d realized that there were things you could do and things you couldn’t. That was to say: some evils could be ignored, while others would be punished. She’d seen it already. People could do a lot… until they got caught. Until they were seen the wrong way. Everything could be forgiven, until… nothing could be forgiven.

She watched, frowning, and knew that nobody should ever know the things she dreamed at night, the things she could call her partners, the things she could be. The things she wanted to do: or rather, the things that she dreamed of, were wrong.

She deserved everything. Maybe she’d just never fall in love again. It’d make things easier.

Even at the time she’d known it would fail, but.

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“I… stop this. Just, go. If you’re leaving me.”

“I am,” Christine said. “I don’t know what you need, but I’m not going to keep on trying to get it for you. Good luck.”

She turned, she left. Like someone who had a life ahead of her, which was more than could be said for Lily.

When the call came for people to go fight Behemoth, she almost didn’t go. It’d been the plan for her to fight in at least one Endbringer fight, after she’d agreed to do so, because her power seemed like it could be effective.
But it was her choice. She could have said no.

She almost did.

When she said yes, she left and hoped things would be alright.

...and saw golden hair. Another white girl, but beautiful, even without seeing her face, just... just. Lily couldn’t help but be drawn to her. But she knew it wouldn’t work.

******

She still knew that, five nights later. Five different acts, and yet no commitment. She wasn’t brave enough to ask to share in Sabah’s life. She didn’t deserve it: Sabah had a future, and she was a nice girl, a good girl... if a very, very beautiful girl who truly knew how to--

Lily wasn’t going to hope for the future, or hope for someone to save her. The world didn’t work like that. But while she was here, she wasn’t going to give it up. She was needy, she was pathetic, she ached with thoughts and ideas that she couldn’t express, because she knew how Sabah would view her fantasies, her thoughts.

She’d understand that Lily was unacceptable.

But even so, she found herself loving Sabah and she couldn’t help it. The way she shook her head a little when she was clearing away a thought, such a little physical gesture. The slight smile she had when she was thinking of some idea while working on costumes. The care, and yet the obvious... power of the costumes she tried out on Flechette. ‘They’re just test-costumes’ she said, and yet, Lily felt as if they were a mark, a badge.

She hated that she felt that way, because it’d just disappoint her.

She loved Sabah’s hair, her laugh, her smile, she loved the philosophy she occasionally talked, that one time when she’d... uh. Drank a little bit. Because she was older than Lily. She was smart as a whip, and people just saw that she was short and missed that too. They thought she was just a kid.
She wasn’t.

Lily didn’t know how to say this, that Sabah was the most amazing person she’d ever met: or at least, that’s what she’d say if she could say it.

But she knew she couldn’t. She knew it was doomed.

So she held her love tight in her chest, as well as her doubts, her fears… and Bryce’s words.

All equally hopeless.

Chapter End Notes

So, if anyone's still reading (and it's odd how the comments cluster), what do you think of Lily's backstory?
4--Artificer

July 25th

When they finally got limited internet back, slow and wireless and not up for downloading anything, the first thing Greg did was get on PHO.

And delete his account.

Artificer made a new one, because that was the best move. The past was a series of pratfalls, a life best to be forgotten, and Artificer planned on doing that! If he wanted to meditate on people humiliating themselves and being nothing more than a burden, he could rewatch one of those harem animes. The guy pratfalled and made an idiot of himself, and he was never cool and never valued, and then eventually he happened to stumble into dating one of them.

It’d felt… well, at least some elements of it had seemed familiar. But he wasn’t a child anymore! He was a hero!

So he got a new account and started posting. It was amazing, online, how much recognition they had. They were now at the same level as New Wave, and even that was something of a deception, because of course they were bigger than anyone but the Protectorate.

For the first time in his life, Greg felt important, really important. He’d fought the baddies and won the day for the forces of good. And they needed to appreciate the Pack. He had his work, and he had a world online: it wasn’t that different from how the world had been before. He wasn’t going to go back to school, not if he could help it. He knew it’d be coming, eventually, the days when August would come. Time passes, and time keeps on passing.

Taylor doesn’t smile anymore, but he’s not that dumb: he can see how happy she is. He knows that it’s silly to still crush over her, when she’s so clearly not that into him. So he tries to feel good for her, flitting around, pausing and stopping with such gravity. Writing again, something he’d never seen her do.

Not really? Not as part of her day to day. She’d changed, she’d broken free, and it was awesome and cool, and he wasn’t as afraid as he was before of where he’d fit into all of this. Because online, he was one of the Pack, and people talked to him like that: and he knew that all of the haters were going to get owned.

The lawsuits would pass away, the problems would be vanquished. He didn’t know how to describe it, this certainty, but he was enthusiastic about what he saw coming.

Artificer bought CD players, and listened to music on headphones all night as he worked, and woke up in the morning to go online. He drank energy drinks and watched the world, the slowly unfolding friendship of Cassie and Stefanie, he watched the way that Rachel seemed… nicer.

And she was finally getting decent at playing video games. It took her long enough, but she was
really starting to get into it. Her life was changing, and to Artificer’s amazement, she didn’t seem to realize how different she was already. It just happened, as her life expanded, like a fart in an empty room, to fill all the space.

When he thought of that simile, he giggled and told Taylor, who didn’t smile, but seemed amused despite that.

The camp itself was… not as important as the very act of pacing this way and that, living this way and that. He was saving people, but they were there so that he could be a hero to them. It was a little selfish, but… a selfless sort of selfish.

His next work was better hover-boots, and working on the next generation of armor and weapons. He had to level up everything, but especially the power pack, and that’d take… maybe even months for all of the work. But once he did, he’d be able to keep up with some real heavy hitters.

His next level of armor was supposed to be able to at least hang-tough against the likes of Purity, of Lung. He wasn’t sure if it’d manage, but he did know that if it didn’t, there would be generation three.

There were always more evolutions, always more extra levels or stat improvements. In real life, there was no sword that hit the maximum the game allowed. He’d find a way to get stronger, because he wasn’t going to stop here. The Pack was going to save Brockton Bay, and that included from the Undersiders.

Though he sometimes saw one of them, slipping in--they he forgot he had, but he was starting to get keen about that.

He sometimes wondered what they were plotting, but he couldn’t ask. It wasn’t his business. Being a hero was his business, playing video games with Rachel was his business, tinkering was his business.

His Mom was dead, and yet for some reason it didn’t feel as if he’d lost nearly as much as it should have. He was pretty sure it made him a horrible person.

But then, all sorts of heroes lost their family.

He’d read books. He was sure he was going to be fine.

It was just a guess, but everything could work out, in the end.

The past was dead. The future was now.

5--Cassie

When she was a girl, she had a childhood that was certainly a little odd. Despite being poor, despite growing up worse-off than Stefanie ever did, she read a lot of books, and watched a lot of movies. If there was anything she shared with Taylor Hebert that wasn’t physical, it was that.

She’d transported herself away and ignored her cokehead mother, her absent father. She’d been given a gift, and only one, from him. Her eyes were so blue that people looked twice. People blinked. Her skin was actually darker than Stefanie’s, but the brightness of her eye made it all look like nothing at all. It made every other feature pale in comparison and drop away. Pale was the right
That was all she had from him, and all she wanted from him. Those eyes, they stared at screens and books, at groups of people, imagining how she might slip among them, might become part of their crowd.

So of course, her favorite movie, her favorite book, growing up was Peter Pan. He was the only boy she’d ever had a crush on. There was just something about him promising to make it all not happen, something about the Lost Boys that made it feel to Cassie as if she could slip among them, cut her hair a little, smile a bit, and make herself useful enough that she wouldn’t be thrown out.

She tried sports eventually, after that. She had the hustle, she just didn’t have the skill. But the idea of being part of a team, of doing basketball or… volleyball, or football or something, of going through the motions and being part of a team of friends, that was so intoxicating that she kept on trying with different sports, even though she had to scrape and borrow and beg for equipment as she grew up.

But she didn’t fit there either. There were the girls who painted their nails, and gossiped, and she could fit in there for a while, but it was pretend. She loved pretend, of course, but there was a limit, a point at which it started being silly instead of anything else. But she tried it anyways, even though she hated makeup, hated all the little twists and turns of culture and humanity that had plopped her down here.

She was bitter, for a child. That’s what she’d been, just a kid watching the rundown elementary games, the music--well, that was alright--the shows, the cares, the concerns. Yet if anyone had asked, she made sure they’d see a happy girl who was friends with everyone. It was easy… and that didn’t mean it was a lie. It’s just that it passed.

Then, at twelve and a half, a year and a half before she finally met her, Cassie discovered Bitch.

Just a picture of her face and some online descriptions in a PHO article. Cassie didn’t even like capes, had just gotten on because she was curious, and it was a new community to look into.

She didn’t know what it was. She didn’t know what she was looking for, that Rachel fulfilled it. There was something rough about her, in the stories, something unvarnished. Cassie was curious, but not fascinated. This changed, slowly. Rachel was like that, as Cassie would learn: she wasn’t going to present herself differently.

If you met her and you didn’t like her, either you’d grow to like who she was or that was it. She wasn’t going to dress as a Lost Boy, she wasn’t going to pretend to care about makeup, or debates about which Parahuman was stronger. This was so fundamental that when Taylor lost her way, Cassie didn’t quite understand it, couldn’t quite be offended by the ideas. Of course Rachel liked the reading. Of course she liked the games.

Cassie had seen Rachel, and the more she’d seen of her online, the more she’d liked it. The more she’d wished she was as capable of setting the world aside as Bitch was. As capable of that act of defiance that seemed so like her. And the care. She picked what she cared for, she didn’t hate the whole world.

Cassie wasn’t some nihilistic punk falling for neo-nazis or Jack Slash, for this ideology or that raging monster.

No, Rachel was someone who moved in her own direction, and if that was headlong, right at a
threat, that didn’t matter. And she’d admired that, and watched it, and felt the deep dark secret longings grow, but also simpler desires.

Yes, she wanted to kiss Rachel, she was curious what it’d be like to kiss someone--and she couldn’t imagine much beyond that--but she also just… admired Rachel. Wanted to help her. She started volunteering at animal shelters, fantasizing about meeting her all of a sudden.

Yet, from what she knew, somehow she’d missed Bitch when she’d been doing the same. Then she got the chance.

She didn’t need romance, she didn’t need anything but people she could help and fit in with, and she leapt on it with both feet.

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“Sports, nah,” Rachel said, softly, but in a good mood. They were cleaning all the dogs, with some of the new volunteers. More and more animal lovers were stepping up to help the shelter, now that the worst of the warfare seemed over, and so life had begun to slip into a rut. A routine. But a good routine.

Cassie would never stop thinking that Rachel was oddly… attractive. It was like Peter Pan, though if anyone looked less like Peter Pan…

It was the lack of care, and yet the care too. She was in a group, but she was not of a group, and that was something that Cassie never thought she’d have managed.

“They can be pretty fun to watch. Especially women’s,” Cassie said. Both because athletic women were cute, and because they were an aspirational goal.

“Huh. Taylor doesn’t like sports,” Rachel said, as if that was the end of the conversation. So firm as she glanced at some of the other volunteers as they worked. “Rinse the suds!”

“Yes ma’am,” one of the guys said, cheerfully, and he smiled slightly, without even realizing it. Rachel tensed for a moment, and then turned her lips up very briefly, in what clearly was an awkward attempt at a smile.

“Well, you could check them out,” she said. “But if not, I was just wondering. We have internet now, we have options. There are things we can do that we can’t do before.”

“Ah,” Rachel said, and there was a look that almost knocked Cassie off her feet. It was almost goopy. The expression on Rachel’s face was like the times when she’d been almost crying, when Taylor had betrayed herself, had doubted things that she should never had doubted. Of course, it was true that Rachel was bad at expressing her doubts, but…

Ultimately, Cassie would always take Rachel’s side, but that didn’t mean the two of them weren’t adorable together.

“Wonder what she likes,” Rachel said.

Cassie managed not to grin, but it was hard, because the truth was. She knew that Rachel’d watch it, and keep on watching different stuff that Taylor liked until she found some common ground. She wasn’t going to let the differences pop up.
“You should ask,” Cassie said, just to push it along.

“Yeah,” Rachel said, glancing down at the dogs, and saying. “Later.”

She had work to do, and Cassie had work to do with her. Even if she wasn’t going to ever stop taking little peeks. Little glances at Rachel’s body when she could get away with it. Perhaps she was too young to see the harm, but as long as she didn’t assume that it meant anything, that was fine, right?

She’d get to know these helpers, and the shelter-workers, and she’d… make something here. And Rachel was part of that, the lynchpin, the woman who’d made her own transformation, her own understanding of herself so possible.

If she could one day be as resolute and solid, as steady in what she wanted and how to get it (even if it was simply through direct attack) then she’d be happy and everything she’d done would be worth it.

*****

She’d never eaten enough as a kid. She’d always been hungry, a void down which food went, without seeming to touch her body, from the way she stayed stick thin. Of course she missed one meal or of eight, probably, on average. So that certainly didn’t help. But even then she seemed to have a knack for staying thin, one that was definitely helpful for fitting in.

She had a knack for not being at the wrong place at the wrong time, a knack for making ‘friends’ who knew nothing about her.

She didn’t know when she had pulled up a wall, but the best walls were the ones that were true. Cassie wasn’t secretly cool and collected, she wasn’t secretly a dog-hater. What she was, she was, but you could use your nature as a weapon… or as a shield.

She tried both, and wondered why anyone could really, really like that if it was revealed for what it was. What was she shielding?

Cassie inhaled, and she could smell the cooking chicken as Stefanie bustled in the kitchen. Stefanie was someone who seemed so different than her. She was solid, she was thoughtful, even with a notepad that she filled with notes to read over, her mind was sharp enough that her memory problems seemed so unimportant.

Her parents… they were amazing.

“You’re here for dinner?” Stefanie’s Mom, Ms. Lamana, asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Stefanie said she’s going to be cooking this time. She wanted to show me how,” Cassie said, with a smile.

“She is,” Mr. Lamana said, stretching a little on the couch he occupied like a throne as he flipped through what seemed like a file. He had a strong frame, one similar to Stefanie’s, and she also had his nose, his walk.

Mrs. Lamana, though, she’s the one who gave Stefanie her soft eyes, her soft smile, her skin.
The room smelled of oregano and onions. There were mushrooms, there was alfredo in the air, and she was really working when Stefanie glanced into the half-kitchen. There she was, wearing a white apron, moving with a purpose and a solidity that made it impossible to see her as anything but… Pretty wasn’t the word. She was too solid for pretty, for something ephemeral and passing. Cassie realized that she was stumbling into another helpless crush, into another silly… thing. But she didn’t care as she stepped into the kitchen and spread her arms wide.

“How can I help?” Cassie asked, smiling wide as she couldn’t around Rachel, unwinding with her hungers, her needs, the desires that drove her. She felt as if she was revealed at last, and Stefanie smiled. It was quite a smile.

“Well, the pasta’s cooking, but I think we should do some garlic toast. How about it?” Stefanie asked.

“Of course! I think I know how to make that.”

Her Mom had never taught her to make anything. She’d made her own food or eaten junk food or burnt her way through reduced fare lunches, and that itself had not been enough, because eventually what you wanted was good food, something that would stick in your stomach, solid and powerful, and just…

Make you happy.

Cassie smiled and began slicing the fresh bread, which Stefanie had baked.

“I was afraid I’d lost my touch for a while,” Stefanie admitted. “Because you have to remember things for the best recipes. You can write it down, and I’m going to have to from now on, but it mostly seems like it’s my new memories?”

“New memories? Like you can remember two years ago just fine?” Cassie asked, thoughtfully.

“Yes. So any new recipes need to be written down,” Stefanie said. “But the old stuff, I remember. And writing it down’s better. I know the old classic standby is that you’re supposed to just know how to make it, but… recipes are important. And I can write down plenty of details.”

“That’s fine. You shouldn’t feel like there’s a problem,” Cassie said, as she kept on slicing the bread.

“A little bit thick, please,” Stefanie said.

Cassie tried not to giggle, because a sense of humor that was about her age was the last thing she wanted to reveal as she kept on chopping, this time cutting the pieces of bread a little thicker. “Do you want to be a chef when you grow up?”

“Maybe. I’m good at it, but I don’t know. I’m a cape now, and that’s its own thing,” Stefanie said. “Even if I’m not the most powerful cape on the team.”

“Well, you can do more than one thing,” Cassie said.
“You can. I’m a little bit… methodical,” Stefanie said, turning around, hands on her hips. “Oh, and great cutting technique.”

Then she turned back, in a hurry, to keep on working on the pasta. She was so bustling, so… something.

Cassie smiled and got back to cutting, and when she ate she was filled, when she drank (water) she was nourished, and when she sat around the table and laughed, it was deep and genuine.

6--Sabah

July 22nd

Sometimes Sabah wondered what exactly she had in the first place. It had become almost a pastime, almost something done just for its own sake. She felt closed up, and each time she stepped forward, each time she had Lily dress in another hero costume she’d made for her, she felt as if she were slowly opening.

The sex was… it wasn’t all she was hoping for, she was holding herself back, because she was aware of how things could go wrong. She was in control, and that was enough to make do, that was enough that Sabah couldn’t dream but dream of future and past acts, couldn’t see the world except transformed by those facts.

She wondered what that made her, that she thought of the sex, of the bodies, of the movements. That when she sewed a stitch, she imagined how it’d look on Lily. Certainly, she was older than Lily, she had power and influence and enough experience that she wondered sometimes.

Seventeen and Twenty-One.

Lily, at least, respected her. She knew that she wasn’t imposing, that when people thought of the Pack, they thought of everyone but her. Pelter was a leader, a better person than she thought, Rachel and Taylor were the couple at the center of everything, Artificer had apparently thrown himself into online debates, which meant that at the very least a lot of people saw him, Amp’s power was the reason why the Pack were so…

She tried to think through just how dangerous her team actually was, and she was pretty sure that they could fight and beat the entire local Protectorate if they actually went all-out. And New Wave too, for that matter. She didn’t care about fights and she didn’t want to become some sort of hero.

Yet she’d argued with Taylor in favor of using the vials. More team members would be good, and if they picked the right people, it could really be a big deal. Besides, there was the fact that then she’d be able to make their costumes.

She wanted to do something. She’d been a Rogue, she didn’t want to have to hurt other people. Well.

She shouldn’t want to.

Arachne and Bitch weren’t going to have costumes she could make, and she’d already worked on Amp and Pelter, and now that Artificer had his little… suit, she figured that that was that.
Which brought up the question of how useful she was. How could she be of use?

She knew that plenty of people didn’t respect her, didn’t fear her as a hero who would bring them to justice, or like her as someone who could protect them. She thought about how many people had left her. She talked to her family, and didn’t know what to say to them. How was she supposed to figure out how to get what she wanted?

Sabah frowned, and pondered, and questioned, but she didn’t know what she had to offer, and what she wanted to take. It was as if her every movement was carefully circumscribed, as if she were walking towards doom.

******

“You should ask that girl over for dinner, then,” her mother said, a little dismissively. She was short, a plump woman with curves that…

Sabah remembered the way her father looked at her mother, with ownership, with a sort of possession that perhaps she’d inherited. Except it wasn’t a good thing. He’d not been interested in his wife pursuing a college degree in her thirties, and Aygül had resisted, had hesitated, and then had eventually complied.

She’d bent herself to the will of others, and perhaps it should have broken her. It would have broken Sabah.

But instead she stared out through dark eyes, as if losing everything was just something that happened to some women, as if her dead husband, her gay daughter, and a thousand other woes were merely the inscrutable will of Allah, to be accepted and transformed.

“I’m not sure,” Sabah admitted.

“Is it your piercings? You’ve told me that she is a thoughtful girl. And I’ve seen her online. She’s an activist,” Aygül said, as if she were speaking of some hideous piece of clothing to be discarded, but then she added, “But she seemed positive and wholesome.”

Sabah looked away, feeling the guilt. Lily was seventeen, and they were having sex. Each time it happened, she felt as if she might be corrupting something. It was clear that she was the broken one, the one who wanted things she couldn’t have. “She does,” Sabah said, with a frown. “Maybe I could invite her over, I don’t know. I have work, you know?”

“I know,” Aygül said, “And I hope you make everyone proud with the clothing lines you’re working on.”

Sabah almost winced at that too, because it wasn’t a clothing line. If so, it’d be a lot more respectable. She owed the world something, she owed her people, her race, her religion… she owed a lot of people a lot, and these obligations were a tie, a tie that she didn’t know if she could stand. Or sever.

“Yeah,” Sabah said. “And of course, by the fall the university should be open again. Maybe I’ll bring her in a few weeks. She’s still in high school, I hope…”

“I was only eighteen, and your father twenty-six, when we first met, and I wasn’t a year older than that when we married,” Aygül said, with a fond shake of her head. “It’s… not the problem.”
The problem of course was what she felt and what she was, what was expected and what wasn’t.

Her Mom had to know what she was doing with Lily, and yet she couldn’t feel too sorry, there was only so far that her guilt could go. Her Mom had to suspect, and yet she hadn’t said anything like she could have, against it.

“I know,” Sabah said, softly. “I’ll be careful. I’ll invite her to dinner.” Eventually.

A long time from now, if need be.

*******

*It was an elaborate dream. There was a proud and brave heroine trying to overthrow an evil sorceress. She failed, and was enslaved, broken before her, crawling and mewling like some sort of animal, servile and willing to do anything, the Sorceress a monster, dark-eyed and dark-hearted, licking her lips at the perversions done to a champion of justice.*

*She, of course, was the Sorceress, Lily the Champion, brave and heroic, a model that people could look up to. Sabah had always wanted to be that too, at least a little. She wanted to at least prove that she could live up to that.*

*But in the darkness of her strange dreams, this one so lucid she woke and had to write it down and then burn it, and then throw away ruined sheets, and try to forget ever having it, she wanted to do worse. She wanted to destroy Lily. She wanted to possess her the way a person, male or female, should never possess someone.*

*Sabah wanted to take this vibrant, beautiful…*

*Disgust sounded a lot like Lust under the right circumstances, if you say it right. The dream was the sort of dream that continued into the light, that embroidered itself and stitched up an entire product line around it. She could picture the fake, silly armor, good for nothing but aesthetics, the costumes, she could feel for a moment as if she was some child reading fantasy novels, or something like that.*

*She could keep on dreaming and even sketching dreams while hating it at the same time, because why should her heart do that?*

*Why should it want what was so clearly a bad idea?*

*Sabah shuddered, and buried this too.*

******

*July 25th*

“A lawyer?” Sabah asked.

“Yes,” Taylor said. “We’re going to be talking to a lawyer for a while, and that means… could you find a way to occupy Flechette?”

“Why?” Taylor asked.
“Because he’s a lawyer paid in part by… she just needs to say away for a little bit. I’m sure you can find something to do.” Taylor said it with such self-assurance.

“I… should break up with her.”

Taylor blinked. “Why?”

“I can’t give her what she needs, she can’t give me what I need,” Sabah said.

“What? How can’t she?”

“If I told you, you’d hate me.”

“Try me,” Taylor said, with a fierce sort of pride.

She choked on the words as she told them, spoke them in a jumble she could barely remember, and then Taylor looked at her, eyes wide in surprise.

“Oh,” Taylor said.

“Yeah, you see what I mean?”

“Then ask her,” Taylor said. “Or at least, mention it. If she wants to do that kind of thing… then do it!” Taylor shrugged, and Sabah could see from her eyes that she didn’t really get it. Or at least, she didn’t feel the same things. Taylor’s… physicality with Rachel was pretty typical, in that way. Or… Sabah couldn’t help but envy Taylor, even though she knew about the argument, about the fact that it hadn’t run smooth and true. Her heart just told her that Taylor had had it easier, and all of her head couldn’t actually fix that. She just was envious, and so she looked at Taylor and almost said no because it couldn’t be that easy for her.

“But it’s wrong—”

“My Mom’s books would say that nothing’s wrong if it’s consensual with both parties and doesn’t actually hurt someone?” Taylor said. She sounded as if she were asking her mother herself, or her mother’s ghost, as if she wasn’t sure herself but was going to trust the ancient wisdom that she was apparently invoking.

“Maybe,” Sabah said.

“Try it.”

*****

Lily opened the door to her apartment hesitantly. She wasn’t Flechette, or rather she’d changed out of those clothes. Sabah had insisted, and had felt the odd thrill of power when she did. It wasn’t right, but it wasn’t… it didn’t have to be wrong.

Lily was so beautiful in the long skirt she was wearing, in the T-shirt. Sabah smiled and considered opening gambits. “How was your day?”

“Fine, so far. I, uh.”
Sabah took a breath and tried again to speak, tried again to let out the words she couldn’t give. “I want you.”

Lily blushed. “Uh… um. Yeah, I’d love to…”

“No. I want to date you. I want to touch you. I want you to be mine,” Sabah said, the words spilling out in a torrent. “I… I don’t even know if I can describe what I want, because it makes me seem horrible.”

“What? What do you mean, horrible?”

“I want to control you. I want to take advantage, I want… I like you too. I love you too,” Sabah admitted. “But I have these dreams, these--”

“What dreams?”

Sabah stared at Lily. If she hadn’t said it to Taylor, she wouldn’t have been able to say it. But instead the words came, slowly and haltingly. She was glad that Taylor’s bugs weren’t listening, that the door was closed, because she was baring herself, and it wasn’t pretty, it wasn’t simple and easy.

It wasn’t a fairytale romance, not even in the Sorceress-Knight sense. It was instead something else. And she sat down and talked to Lily, and Lily stood by the door, and Sabah knew what would happen.

She could picture the door turning, she could picture it closing. She couldn’t read Lily’s face, couldn’t read the mask that it’d become.

She finished, and stared, exhausted by the weight of her words, by the weight of what she’d revealed.

“What do you want me to do?” Lily asked.

Sabah blinked, confused. “I…”

Lily’s eyes met hers, and Sabah almost stood up then and there, shocked by the energy in them. “What do you want me to do?”

She was asking for orders, she was staring Sabah down, her own desires seeming to unfold. Sabah looked around at the dolls, at the room, and slowly she smiled. Slowly she wanted to start crying.

“Be my girlfriend. Be mine. Crawl to me,” Sabah said each through a veil of tears, her heart bursting.

Lily got on her knees, and smiled, incredulous and confused and obedient.

*******

If she was broken, if she was wrong, at least she wasn’t alone.

Sabah had found Lily.
Chapter End Notes

Yes, in which there is a happy ending for Lily and Sabah, at last.
“Tell me, what can you remember of that particular attack?” the man asked. He wasn’t smiling, which was good. Had Taylor told him? Rachel didn’t want to think through it. There were things she could do with her brain that were more important. Really, this was just annoying. But Taylor was right: Taylor knew what she was talking about.

Of course Rachel trusted her. “I was hungry. One of the dogs had gotten sick,” she said, aware that her sentences came off gruff.

The man was a blocky, tall sort of man, with a wart on his chin. He smelled of cologne and his eyes were hard and brown, like nuts. If he were a dog, he’d be a Pit-Bull. “And?”

Taylor was right nearby, standing with an intent look on her face. She was very pretty, then. Rachel thought makeup was a bunch of shit. But there was something about those lips, the soft red. Taylor was just pretending: dressing up respectable, not even in her costume. But it was a kind of pretend that Rachel found was sort of fun.

It was like video games. The stories were dumb, but it was a little amusing, and she was alright at them.

It was something new that Taylor had shown her. Rachel didn’t usually like new things, but when they were things Taylor had brought, it was okay.

“And so I broke into the store. I began gathering up cash from the register. I grabbed some food bars. Fucking things last forever.” Rachel snorted. “Then…”

“Then? Did you at any point attack him before he fired? I’ll need you to be willing to swear this in court,” the man said. Rachel had heard a name, but it didn’t matter. He didn’t matter. So she’d
forgotten it.

“Nah. I didn’t attack him. Little growling, but he shot at me. Fucker coulda killed me. I didn’t kill him back,” Rachel said. She felt sorry for most of the things she did. Guilt wasn’t something she was good at, unlike video games, but that didn’t mean she didn’t feel it.

If she could survive without doing shit like that, she’d prefer she didn’t. Except, that one asshole? She didn’t feel sorry for him at all.

“Ah, very well. So next, I have to ask you a few more questions, about…”

******

It took an hour for that to finish, and by the end Rachel was hungry and grumpy. Which meant that Taylor went and made her some food, while she sat around and played video games and calmed down, watching the dogs.

Watching dogs was very calming, and her shoulders slumped slightly, the tension falling from them.

_Her first memory was of standing in front of a door, looking up at it. Almost scratching at it, like a dog that wanted to be let in._

_She couldn’t even remember what door it was. Just that it was a door._

It was before she’d been taken away the first time. She thought? She wasn’t sure. The past was not a place she wanted to live. Not when there was Taylor.

Taylor sashayed into the room, and the dogs barked for her, eager and happy. It was easy to tell one sort of bark from another: it was far easier than reading faces. But she had practice with Taylor. Taylor was happy, her hips swaying a little, as if she were showing off her clothes, her body.

She smelled faintly of the slightest bit of perfume, and that Rachel didn’t like as she sat down. “You did really well, Rachel.”
“Thanks,” Rachel said, looking at one of the volunteers… Kyle? She thought it was Kyle. But he was going in to play with the dogs.

“Another one of your adoring fans,” Taylor said, sticking out her tongue and leaning in. Her lips looked so soft, and the lipstick…

Rachel’s thoughts were stuck on it, on the sensations, even though she was hungry. “I guess,” Rachel said.

She didn’t understand why it was that people looked up to her, just that by now it was impossible not to think that they must have their reasons. It confused her. She was… she knew how people looked at her. They could bare their teeth at each other and it wasn’t bad, they could read each other, they…

She grit her teeth and dismissed the doubts.

“C’mon, eat up. It’s roast beef,” Taylor said.

“We have internet,” Rachel said, and to her it made sense that this was all connected.

“Yes. And roast beef sandwiches and chips. And some carrots. I know you might not like them, but I figured we need at least a little greenery. Balanced diet, you know?” Taylor’s voice was breathy, and a little excited. But most of all, it was right in Rachel’s ear. That made it even better, because…

Well duh.

“You wanna watch anything together?” Rachel asked.

“Well, I definitely could. We don’t have a laptop, though. And I know they’re a valuable--”

Rachel snorted. “Ask. They’ll give us one.”
People looked up to Rachel: people looked up to Taylor. One of those made sense, the other was a little odd. Everyone should look up to Taylor.

“Well… I suppose they would,” Taylor said. “So maybe we could see what we can find online sometime. Though the internet’s going to be pretty shaky.”

More than pretty shaky. But Rachel didn’t really care. It was another thing she could do. She even thought it might be fun. Though… she wasn’t good at reading faces. She’d have to ask for Taylor to explain things to her.

She’d look like a moron, and in front of anyone else, that’d be enough that it’d make her set her shoulders, hunch up, and try to scare them into backing up. She wasn’t smart: in fact, she knew she was stupid. She knew people made fun of her, and she couldn’t help it. But Taylor never would.

Taylor was hers. And she was Taylor’s. It was really that simple to her, she didn’t need complex feelings, though she knew that Taylor was writing and reading a lot more, and that usually involved complex… stuff.

Rachel wasn’t much of one for reading. She was glad she was figuring it all out cause it could be helpful, and some of the things were pretty alright, but… she wasn’t Taylor.

Before Taylor, she would have resented everything she now admired. Rachel found things cute that she’d never have found cute before, she… she didn’t know what to do about the way she’d felt.

She hadn’t then, at least.

“Oh, Rachel,” Taylor said, picking up her sandwich and starting to eat.

Taylor ate as well, and they spent the time in silence. But it was comfortable silence. Rachel wasn’t against silence, and after they ate, she kissed Taylor.

Taylor tasted a little like chips, but her lipstick left smudges on Rachel’s face that she didn’t want to wipe off. She liked the marks. She liked the proof. Rachel had never felt for another human being the way she did for Taylor.
The oddest part was... Taylor felt like the start of something, rather than the end? She felt as if she were giving Rachel a reason to try other people. Cassie, the various shelter workers, Greg, Stefanie... even Charlotte wasn’t horrible. She just needed to be watched. Very closely.

Some of them could have been laughing at her, but she knew that if they did, Taylor would see that they were, and she’d sting them with her bugs. It was that simple: Taylor was good at this shit, and she wasn’t weak either, the way apparently at least one asshole online said.

Emma, if Taylor was to be believed. Taylor sometimes muttered things like, “I almost want to go back to school just to fuck her up.”

But she didn’t mean it. She even said fuck as if it were a foreign word. Rachel could understand that. Even if it wasn’t how she dealt with problems.

Emma didn’t matter.

*******

At first, it was an annoyance. Who was this person and why was she tagging along? Yet she had bugs.

Rachel had always thought bugs were alright. A little annoying when they buzzed around her head, but she hadn’t even thought about how dangerous they’d be until Taylor followed along. She hadn’t known the name then, but she’d looked at the other girl and wondered.

A part of her was curious. A part of her wouldn’t acknowledge was lonely. She only realized it, of course, later. She only realized it in context, and so she grit her teeth and saved the dogs. Coil’d come through once, at least. That was something.

Then she’d come again. Rachel could remember the moment, could picture it just as much as her reading to Rachel, could picture it so vividly that she knew it’d be a little ridiculous if she told the story.

Because of course, Taylor had worried about her wanting Taylor for just her body. She’d worried...
about it a lot.

But Taylor had shown up to help Rachel in running shorts.

Running shorts.

Rachel had spent half her time when she was supposed to be caring for the dogs keeping one eye on the long, lean legs. They were toned, but not bulky, thin and built to get her places. Rachel pictured those legs wrapped around her, she imagined—with rather more vivid imagery than she could imagine anything else—her naked body and Taylor's twined together.

Taylor was tall, and her features striking, if sorta normal. The glasses made her look smart, but not distant. They made her seem as if she was right there, always looking at Rachel. But Rachel couldn’t be sure, not until later.

And there was the swell of her chest, subtle in a T-shirt, but still there. There were her hands, her fingers. There was a lot to look at, a lot to take in.

Rachel knew what it was like to lust after someone who liked only guys: she always wanted to wait for a sign, for a moment where she could know for sure that Taylor would at least have a chance to say yes. And this drive only increased later. Tension came into the picture, because she liked Taylor even without her body.

But that first day?

She watched Taylor, made her into an object of lust whose… it didn’t matter whether or not she was friendly. That changed, but the view didn’t.

Especially those few times when Taylor had to bend down to pick something up, the shorts riding up a little bit.

Rachel was not someone who could be shamed, and she liked Taylor’s butt. She liked all of Taylor, for that matter. She liked her laugh, her eyes, her words, her quick wit, her tits, her arms, her lips, the way she seemed to care about people, the strength and determination that she carried, her odd habits, her thighs, her hands, her inventiveness, her driven nature, her cunt, her fingers, her…
It was a litany that she wouldn’t have thought possible then.

*It was an odd feeling, really. It was almost like she was sick. But she knew it wasn’t that at all.*

*She wasn’t smart, but she wasn’t that dumb.*

*She knew that was love.*

*******

*July 30th*

They patrolled farther out now. Sometimes for no other reason than to explore. Taylor could see so far with those bugs of hers, and Rachel liked the exercise. She almost wanted to run with her. She knew that Taylor appreciated that about her, so she did want to exercise more.

She’d liked it when she realized that Taylor was staring at her.

So they were ambling along, when Taylor said, “Huh, that’s interesting.”

“What?” Rachel asked. Their dogs were at their side. So really, it was just taking the dogs for a walk.

“I’d noticed it before, but there’s a park over there.” Taylor pointed down a street that had been ruined a month ago when they’d last been this far out. “And someone’s started to care for it. Replace the park bench that a Merchant… or someone, I guess, stole.”

In Rachel’s experience, blaming everything petty and stupid on Merchants was usually right. “Huh. Wanna go there?”
“What about tomorrow? With everyone. There’s no real threats around, and…” Taylor smiled a little. “I had an idea. Or a thought. I guess, something to remember?” Taylor had that look, and Rachel knew she was also thinking about the first. Which she’d decided was close enough to her birthday. Rachel didn’t do birthdays. But.

“Oh?”

“There’s a camera. We should take a picture. I bet it’d look nice,” Taylor said, tilting her head thoughtfully.

“Yeah. Let’s do it,” Rachel said, firmly.

Sometimes Taylor needed a little encouragement. Her voice sounded like she clearly wanted to do it. And that was enough for Rachel.

The sun was shining. The dogs were happy. So was she.

8--Taylor

_July 31st, 2011_

I felt like something had changed. I knew it wasn’t Amp, and that left only a few things it could be. A few things it had to be. Me, the world, and Rachel. The feeling was like when you woke up on a Saturday morning and knew from the first moment that it was Saturday: no panic, no worry about another day of school, and more bullying to come.

It was freedom, that’s what I thought at first, and the more I considered it, the more I couldn’t help but think I was completely right.

Things weren’t perfect, but I didn’t need them to be. I just needed to be out of the cages, out of the lies and doubt. I was getting help, sure, and I knew that alone I wasn’t ever going to break through, but…

I wasn’t quite secure enough, even almost a month later, to want to go to an apartment. But I knew
the day would come. In the meantime, it felt as much like a camping trip as a refugee camp. The image of us in our own apartment, a real apartment, with amenities, with a working bathroom, with baths, with vases…

It tempted me. We’d been living together forever, I knew that Rachel and I wouldn’t have too many problems on that front. I cherished every sign of our closeness, because something had broken, the shackles of doubt were torn apart on the floor.

I could picture a future.

Of course in some ways it looked like the past, or the present. Waking up together, getting dressed, doing work, kissing, reading, fucking… there was a pattern to our lives already. But it felt as if it were mutating, as if it was growing in strength.

Certainly, I was. My range wasn’t as large now as it had been right before the final fight with the Butcher, but that was because I was happy and free, and even with all of that, it seemed to be increasing.

I filled more and more notebooks with details. I could tell people apart by senses that I hadn’t fully possessed before, and the world seemed to open up into a riot of colors and shades, smells and vibrations of the voice.

It wasn’t magic: I couldn’t tell when someone was lying. But I could tell when their heart was racing, I could read a lot of emotions with my bugs. I could smell sweat, so at the very least… nervousness was no longer beyond me to read.

And of course, with free time, I was gathering bugs from all over, and starting to breed them, to figure out what I wanted to do with it. For instance, if there weren’t gangs pressing in on every side, I could create some sort of bug box for bugs blocks and blocks out, and have at least some reason to assume they wouldn’t just be smashed and destroyed.

From the details I saw with my bugs, I began to build up something I hadn’t expected: ideas. I could imagine poems and short-stories based on the struggles and arguments, the little details. I could imagine it, and maybe I could write it. I started writing, I started unbending.

Even talking to Dad didn’t feel so stressful, as if we’d both reached a point of real acceptance. This wasn’t temporary. This was going to last.
I’d written one short story and a half-dozen poems within the month, and it was so odd, because I’d been more of a reader than a writer. I didn’t want to share them, this wasn’t a career I wanted to choose. It wasn’t like that. I just wanted to express certain things. I wanted to try to capture who I was and what I was doing.

I kept the love-poems bottled in, though. I needed to figure how I felt. I was selfish, I really was. I didn’t want to share Rachel with the world; not the Rachel I knew.

I didn’t want to write about the mornings entwined in each other’s arms, the way she got up. I didn’t want to write about the strong muscles of her legs, the way she’d bend and stretch around, flexing a little. The way that once I’d seen her eyes and I realized that at least a little of this was a show for me.

There’s a feeling of accomplishment when someone lusts after you so much that they go out of their way to be lusted after. It was the feeling of someone dressing up to impress, of someone saying just the right words. It was that taste in your mouth where you don’t know where the sweetness came from, only that it was real and surprising. Sometimes things happened and you didn’t understand what you’d done to deserve it.

You’d call it grace if you were religious.

I’d been with her for months, now. It was so bizarre, in a way, because I still marveled at her body, at those muscles, at her hair, especially when I ran my fingers through it. She was tanned at places, but not with intent, and I loved rubbing those areas, just thinking about her. Her mouth was hard, and strong, but I’d felt her melt beneath me before, I’d felt it soften with happiness, if not with smiles.

Her hands were rough, but she wasn’t clumsy, and if they were bigger than mine, our hands still seemed to fit together just fine. And she was there. I’d gone through stages, through waves of thought and opinion on her and how physical our relationship was.

But now moments crept in, without even being forced, that seemed to break my heart.

Edna was my puppy, Rachel’s gift. She was adorably small, and rather… honestly, adventurous was the word for it. I was playing with her as I was thinking.

She was small enough that everything seemed new to her. She rolled over as I rubbed at her belly, and thought about the difference.
I’d told a lot to Rachel now that I hadn’t before. Things I hadn’t really trusted her in some deep place with. Because the worst part about trusting someone was that if they turned against you, they knew all your secrets.

But that no longer really seemed possible.

There were things that scared me, and things that didn’t.

I could hear what all the gossip was, I knew what it was like to be attacked, I wasn’t going to give a shit anymore. I was getting a GED, moving on, and never seeing Emma again. And when I pictured all of this, when I pictured the life I could live, Rachel was there in every image, she was the one who haunted not just my dreams--and that, truly, was easy for someone as alluring as Rachel, and I’d had crushes before--but my waking hours, but the moments when I was doing nothing but breathing.

That’s what startled me. That it didn’t feel like a heightened realm, and it didn’t need to. I’d been unable to believe that it wouldn’t feel special: the way I’d not known for sure we were dating until I confirmed it.

It was just there. I needed to quit playing with the puppy, I thought to myself. I had to go see Rachel. I needed to plan her birthday. Maybe she’d show off some lifting just for fun. Maybe I could find a show that she’d like. Maybe something that didn’t focus too much on human emotions? I wasn’t sure what would fit that.

She was right that a laptop was easy to get, and…

I blinked, and glanced in the corner as Edna started barking.

Ah, it was Imp. Also known as Aisha.

“Yo,” she said. She was dressed in ragged jeans. She had the mask on, but it hid very little, compared to her clothes. “You know, your clothes are a little boring. I bet that you’d love it if Rachel wore more short-sleeves, wouldn’t you?”

I blushed slightly--I blushed easily, really. It was true, but I didn’t care that much. Clothes didn’t
matter: Rachel was right, Emma was wrong. That was a fact that should surprise nobody.

“Clothes aren’t that important,” I said.

“Well, yeah. With the way you’re going at it, from what I can tell? Like, I’ve noticed,” Aisha said. “That when you are, the bugs all cling to the walls and stuff. It’s weird.” Aisha shook her head. “It’s a good thing you can’t make babies.”

I snorted, and said, “So, word from Tattletale?”

We had a deal. A sort of truce, a ceasefire that I knew wouldn’t last forever. But I could at least wait for things to settle down. Of course, the Undersiders were now the big threat, but with Imp able to slip into our camp, and with our two vials under threat… it was best to try to find a way to hold off any full-scale war.

They were keeping away from the dock, and they were focusing more on protection and smuggling, rather than drug dealing. I hadn’t exactly gone around peeing on street corners, but it was obvious to Lisa that I had areas I cared about. Where my old home was, where my new home was, the docks in general.

Then there were areas where I didn’t mind if someone sold bootleg DVDs or… I should have, but there was only so far my compassion stretched. It was a limit of mine, and despite all of that I’d need to push them back.

They were villains, after all, and I doubted that Lisa could ever leave well enough alone for too long. But she’d paid for a lawyer, she was covering the debt she owed, and for the moment I’d just trust her.

“Yeah,” Aisha said. “She says that Skidmark’s somehow alive, and he has his own little gang. It’s very small. But reports are, he has about a dozen or two dozen patches left, and that he’s trying to trade them to… anyone.”

“Such as the Undersiders?” I asked, frowning.

“Well, us too. But he’s also apparently talking to someone else, and we don’t know who it is.”
“That’s… interesting,” I said, uncertainty.

“Also, there’s this new gang in town. The Travelers. She’s, uh, not sure what’s up with them. But they’ve holed up at the edge of the city.”

“What else? There’s the Neo-Merchants, with how many capes?”

“Squealer’s gone. So it’s just two. Skidmark and this new guy. Booger.”

I laughed. “Of course. What else?”

“There’s… well. Two other small gangs we think have one parahuman ringer? A Japanese and Chinese Gang.”

“I’ve seen them. They tried to move in a little on up, and… it didn’t work.”

That was the word for them being forced to flee in terror from a swarm of hornets, right? I remembered it fondly. It had been the only fight I’d been in in the last month, besides warding off a few gang members. The world had changed a little from the constant tension I’d been facing before.

So there it was. My enemies right now.

Travelers. Neo-Merchants with two members. And two other pathetic and pitiful gangs. At least, they were pathetic now. I wasn’t going to attack the Travelers either. That’d be doing the Undersiders work for them.

“Oh, huh. Good to know,” Aisha said. “One of them has a power that I thought would threaten you.”

“What power?” I asked.
“Flames. But I guess they didn’t bring him out? Gah, how many dumb things are you gonna be telling me Lisa.” Aisha shook her head.

“Earbud?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s annoying.”

“No, they didn’t bring him out. And I assume they’re fighting a lot among each other,” I said. Lung’s bizarre nightmare-fantasy of a Pan-Asian gang was long dead, I thought. I’d go after the Merchants when I had time. I didn’t fear Skidmark, and I didn’t fear groups that were still smaller combined than the… Pack. I didn’t love the name, but what else was I going to use?

“Yes. It’s funny,” Aisha said. “So, yeah, at the moment we’re just checking in and stuff.”

“As long as we all keep to our promises, then we should be good.” I nodded at her. I was still playing with Edna even as I spoke. “But tell her I’m going to be watching her. Rather literally.”

My bugs could see a long way. And I was already trying to think of ways around Aisha. She had to have weaknesses. Obviously, any trap or trick that didn’t have a brain to fool was a good start. But were there other ways around her? I was getting better at noticing… not when she was there, but that she existed. That Lisa had a cape that people couldn’t remember, and that this cape was a… she. It wasn’t enough to save me in case of a fight, though.

But perhaps we could make some sort of remote video system?

It didn’t matter for the moment.

“TT hopes things are going well with the lawsuit,” Aisha said.

“They are.” I bared in teeth at the world for a moment. Aisha had come with news that Emma’s father was the lawyer of most of the people suing us. It was a petty bit of trickery, but not that unexpected.

“Well… that’s good. You know, you’re really sorta terrifying when you grin like that. What next?
Are you gonna start working out?"

I shook my head.

“God, she’s shaking her head now. Yes, like a… yes.” Aisha bared her teeth at me, almost playfully. Smiled, smiled rather. But I was just a little bit on edge now, just because… she was a villain, after all. So it was easy to interpret it the wrong way. Or maybe the right way, considering the lopsided, teasing nature of the smile.

“What is it?”

“Well, nothing,” Aisha said.

Yeah, I knew that some of the mannerisms were Rachel’s. But that happened. It wasn’t a big deal, and certainly not something worth mocking. But I didn’t jump down her throat. “I know what you’re thinking. It doesn’t matter, and I don’t care. Now, is there anything else you wanna run by me?”

“No,” Imp said, with a formal nod.

She disappeared.

I shook my head, still sorta-kindá remembering that she existed.

It was annoying when she did it, but I had a puppy to pet, and I had more important things to worry about.

*****

We went in domino masks and nothing else, as a group. All of us. We weren’t giving any hints of this little plan, and Artificer had apparently built some sort of clumsy looking turret that he had set up, and he’d know when it was set off. If it came down to it, we’d have plenty of warning.

And people knew what would happen if we caught them.
We walked through still recovering neighborhoods. My new home wasn’t bad, just a little rundown.

And it wasn’t a bad neighborhood, especially now that I was watching over it. It was somewhere I could imagine living long-term, besides the fact that it probably would be cheap.

I carried a camera and a tripod, and looked around at the rest of the group. Lily was coming along too, and I wondered at how she’d managed to figure out… but of course I didn’t need to wonder.

Cassie was coming too, talking excitedly with Stefanie. And of course, Lily and Sabah were practically in each other’s arms… and whatever they were doing, it seemed to be working?

So I wasn’t going to judge.

These people were as much family in one sense as my Dad were. They were my team. They weren’t bad family either, if you liked at it that way. We worked hard, we’d fought and killed the Butcher together, and we had each other’s backs.

It was a bit of a walk, but soon enough, there was the slightly soggy, broad park. It was closed in by open gates, and there was nobody else there, not this time in the morning.

But there were benches, there were places to sit down. I had an idea of what I wanted to do, and I smiled and smoothed down my skirt.

It was time to take a photo. Something to remember us by, just in case: the world could be dangerous, after all.

Rachel reached her hand out, and I grabbed it, imagining sitting in her lap, imagining posing. Imagining all sorts of things.

I was still thinking about Rachel when the picture was taken. I was still thinking about her when I looked at the assembled group, relaxing after the photograph.
The sun shone in the sky, beating down on the team, the breeze came in from the bay, though it was far from the ocean. The group of teenagers didn’t look like much, from above.

Certainly, it didn’t seem as if they were the heroes that Brockton Bay deserved. Some of them were rough, people who looked nothing like what was expected. Others weren’t. Still others seemed shy, seen from above, edging away from each other, smiling awkwardly.

The photo didn’t show something pristine, that could be put on the cover of a magazine. They weren’t, any photojournalist would attest, the next New Wave. They didn’t look like the heroes that the people demanded, nor the ones that could save the day with a smile. Yet they were smiling.

There would be words, if someone knew a Ward was among a bunch of vigilantes, kissing one of them right on the mouth, passionately.

From above, once couldn’t hear the words that one of them, blocky and muscular, whispered to another, tall and brown-haired. They could hear the laughter, and nothing else.

From above, the gossip wasn’t there, the teasing, the words that one of the boys was typing, even though the park didn’t have reception.

The words didn’t matter.

Chapter End Notes

And so it concludes. Thank you NemoMarx for being my friend, editor, and person I bounced ideas off of.

There might be future one-shots in this universe, but this was the ending I'd always imagined, and been working to from the start. It's a romance, ultimately, and so it ends here.

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